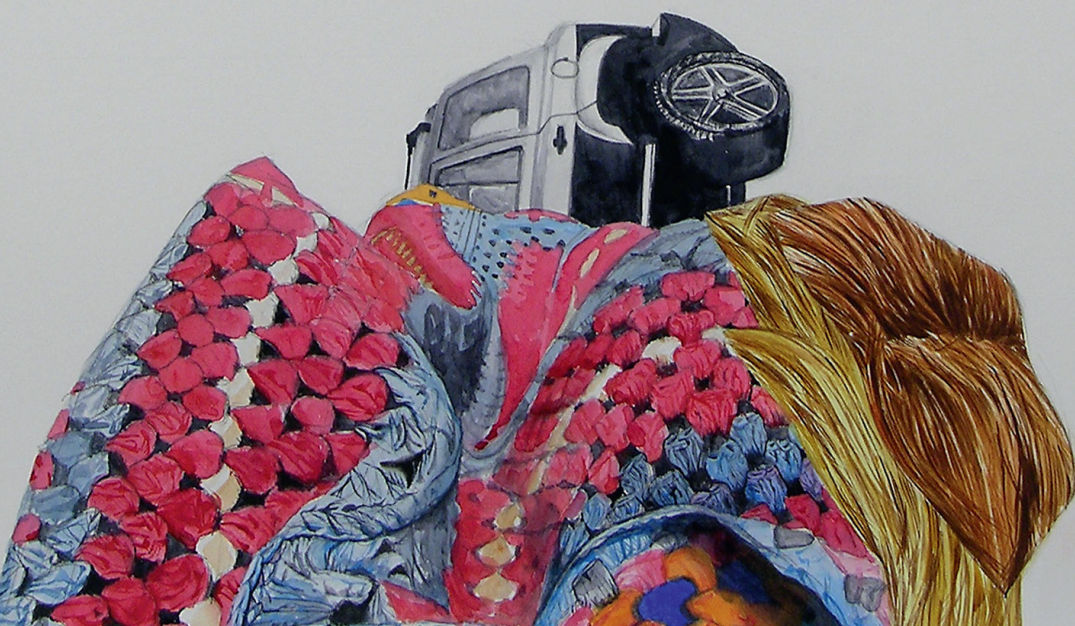


f u g u e



f u g u e

The Play Issue

Fugue (ISSN 1054-6014) is a journal of new literature edited by graduate students of the University of Idaho's English and Creative Writing programs. *Fugue* is made possible by funding from the University of Idaho English Department and Creative Writing Program and is published biannually in the winter and summer.

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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.

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f u g u e

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ABOUT THE ISSUE

Issue 40 of *Fugue* has been designed to show how writers are beautifully and smartly playing with genre, form, content and idea. Lyric essay, collage, prose poem, micro fiction, the panharmonicon and the experiment are not new terms, but the evolution of these terms, relevant to the evolution of our culture, has caused writers to create new forms of writing that are as inventive as they are accessible. And we just want to say we like it. We want to celebrate it. We want it to stick around. And we look forward to seeing much much more.

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PLAY DATE

H i Dinty,

While working (playing?) on a piece for the FUGUE issue, I wondered about partnering with another writer to create a sort of table tennis volley in words. If you'd like to try this, let me know and we could try it for a week or so, see what happens. I have some triggering subjects that might get us started. I've never done this before, and thought it would be fun.

Rebecca

Rebecca,

1) I think we need a 'subject,' some precipitating idea or question that we then play with, wander away from, take to unexpected places. How about this one: do we play as writers as we once played as children, or are we too constricted by grammar, narrative, syntax, Strunk & White, and other forms of 'correctness'? That sounds kind of dry, but it allows us to a) talk about writing, b) memoir about play as a child, and c) practice wordplay, sentenceplay, storyplay, whatever.

2) Rules: We take turns, but we each have the right to reposition the others' blocks if we want to stack them a little differently. I need your block over

here for a tower, though I don't want to destroy your doorway. I think they call it cooperative play ;-)

Did you play with blocks as a kid? Does any of this make sense?

Hi, Dinty:

Let the games begin!

R

Do we play as writers as we once played as children?

But no one is more serious than a child at play. Didn't Einstein say something about this? About how we are at our best when we're able to recapture the seriousness of a child at play? True play engages us wholly. Once, on my only trip to France, I was so exhausted from working at trying to be a tourist that my husband agreed to sit with me, just sit, at a little city park in Paris. We found a bench beside a child's playground, where we sat for an hour watching one little girl. She had a little shovel in her hands – well, of course, a little shovel, as she was a little girl – and was so engaged in her play/work that she never once looked up, never noticed the haggard couple watching her. Her task? Moving all the sand from one end of the playground to the other end. Little Sister, Little Sisyphian, stooping to conquer, scooping up the playground one shovelful at a time, packing it down tightly with her little French hands so as not to dislodge one single grain. Then rising on the heels of her black-buckle shoes and commencing her journey to the other side of the playground. She was still shoveling when we left. I wonder what the playground looks like now. I wonder if she's still shoveling.

As for me, I came to writing through another art form, modern dance, and for that reason, play has always been at the center of what I do as an artist. (Okay. That's not entirely correct. More accurate would be to say that play is at the center of what I hope to do as an artist, or at the very center what I do during my more productive artistic moments.) Modern dance performers work very hard, no two ways about it, but the inception of much of what is eventually presented as concert dance is some form of playfulness: improvisation to a piece of music, "noodling" around the studio with a chair and a rubber ball, experimenting with certain peculiar movement sequences just to see where they lead. The direct connection between the running, and leaping, and rolling down hills that most of us enjoyed at age five and what dancers do in a spartan New York City dance studio at the very beginning of the choreographic process is easy to see, especially if you are there in person. But where is that for the writer? When we write, we are still, hunched over a keyboard, and most of us are up in our brains somewhere. That seems the opposite of play to me, sometimes. Yes, we play with words. But is it really play?

Scene: Suburban living room, circa 1958. Spinnet piano downstage right. (Note to set design folks: place piano on turntable for rotation in later scene. And while you're at it, rig up one of those flying harnesses like Mary Martin wore in Peter Pan. I have a feeling we might need it.) Family photos arranged atop piano, beside small plastic busts of composers. (Of course the audience can't see this far, can't see that they are busts of composers, except those audience members who took piano lessons circa 1958 and thus see the three plastic B's – Bach, Brahms, Beethoven – in their child's eye memory.)

Two characters, backs to the audience, sit on the piano bench. A tall, gangly 30-something Man composed mostly of bone (think Ichabod Crane) and a small Girl with reddish-brown hair and a

pronounced cowlick, her feet in scuffed Oxfords dangling several inches above the floor. She swings her feet back and forth, as if in delight.

Man: (Leaning forward to tap the sheet music with a bony, outstretched pointer finger) Rebecca? (Piano rotates 180 degrees on turntable, to the strains of “Für Elise.” (Note to script typist: Please insert umlaut on Für, as I cannot find the proper key on my keyboard. In a way, I’m happy I don’t have a key for the umlaut, as it is a diacritical mark, and the world is critical enough without such a mark. Turntable stops. Now the audience can see the faces of Man and Girl facing them, for that is what faces do best: face) Rebecca?

Girl: (Smiling, obviously pleased with herself). Yes sir.

Man: Who was Beethoven?

Girl: (Still smiling). A famous composer, sir.

Man: Do you believe you can improve on Beethoven?

Girl: (Smile disappears, flush on cheeks appears. Feet stop swinging.) Improve?

Man: Improve. Do you believe you can improve on Beethoven? Because it certainly sounds as if you believed that you could. (Girl shrugs, looks toward the plastic bust of Beethoven as if searching for a hint.) You. Are. Not. Playing. What. He. Wrote. You’re making something UP.

(Man and Girl freeze in position. A Woman appears from above, suspended in a harness that the audience should not notice. The effect should be natural, as if Woman floated in on a cloud of thought, the little Girl’s thought, a kind of humongous human

thought bubble. The Woman is middle-aged, perhaps as old as sixty though she would never admit this. She still has a girlish quality, evidenced by the pronounced cowlick in her reddish-brown hair and the scuffed Oxfords on her feet, which dangle over Man, Girl, and piano.)

Woman: (Addressing audience, in a stage whisper) Rebecca was indeed making something up. She thought that was the whole point. The point of playing. Ever since she was eyelevel to a keyboard, she'd dreamed of playing the piano. Her friend Marilyn played the flute. Her friend Christy played the violin. A strange girl named Lois who was not a friend but would do in a pinch, played the accordion. Well, not exactly played, she WORKED the accordion and you could tell Lois was not enjoying it, but she kept at it, yes she did, worked that one song—"Lady of Spain"—until every note was right. Every note. Rebecca didn't want to work the piano. She wanted to play it. Especially once she discovered that Fur Elise (Typist: Please insert umlaut again. Or don't. It doesn't matter at this point), once Rebecca discovered that Fur Elise meant For Elise, she imagined that her name was Elise and that Beethoven had written this beautiful song just for her. Fur Rebecca. And it was hers now. Wholly and fully hers.

Well clearly, the play's the thing. Hamlet said that, didn't he? Or was it Freud?

So now this essay is most definitely playing, and playing on the word 'play,' and playing with plays, which sounds enormously playful. (Note to script typist: Please insert umlaut here.)

(No, I meant here.)

But I'm going to get deadly serious about play for a moment, which is a ridiculous thing to do, I know. Did someone just call me an academic?

For the longest time, I've been a fan of the composer John Cage. Yet I'll be honest and confess that his music, his strange catalog of compositions – much of it, anyway – is not enjoyable to the ear. I can't even listen for more than a minute at a stretch. What is fascinating to me are his explanations, the conceptual theory, the way he explodes our sense of what is music, what is not, and what is just noise. And the way his ideas propel us into areas of thought that we hadn't seen coming. And yes, the sheer playfulness. I love the 'idea' behind his work, not so much the work itself.

Well, I've always felt that way about highly experimental forms of writing, as well. The Oulipu movement of Dadaist writers. The extreme L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E poets. Even some of Virginia Woolf. Good Golly Miss Molly, I'm glad someone is doing these experiments, but please don't make me read them. (Or worse, attend a reading.)

Which makes me a hypocrite.

Which makes me human.

What does it mean to truly play with words?

Well, for instance, Rebecca, your closing line above, "Fur Rebecca. And it was hers now. Wholly and fully hers," is beautiful, because it extends our understanding of that girl at the piano, and because it has rhyme and slant rhyme ("Hers/fur, wholly/fully"), and because it gives us hope.

But if I were to truly play with it, I'd end up doing this:

Rebecca was hers now, wholly and fully. Her furs.

Or

Wholly Rebecca, fully hers. And it was hers. Fur now.

Or

Now fur hers was it and hers fully. Rebecca wholly.

And suddenly, it means nothing, and I'm bored, and the reader is bored, and the little French girl playing in the sandbox is bored. There is not

enough sense left, not enough narrative or character truth to hang an idea upon. It does not move me.

Children – very, very, very young children – will sometimes play with nonsense sounds, reveling in just the noise that ensues, the musicality of each syllable. Baa baa blah blah boo boo bung.

But then we get that sense of how syllables can combine to achieve significance, the idea that these words can mean something, can signify and alter and convince, and it becomes like a drug. We can't get enough of it. We can't let go.

Words are serious business. How can we play with words?

I think we writers can and do play with words, all the time. But at some point, at least for me, the playing leads to something attached to meaning. And I believe this also happens with children, even the youngest ones. I have 24 nephews and nieces, and I've observed their play over several decades; also, I taught young children for many years. Yes, you're right that little children play with nonsense sounds, but after a while, if you listen carefully, you'll observe a pattern to their nonsense, a grammar of nonsense. At least this has been my experience. They begin to repeat certain words in a particular pattern. They emphasize – through intonation, gesture, facial expression – what is important to their interaction. Most children, like most adults, work, or play, toward meaning.

Well, that's my story and I'm sticking with it. Which means that I must agree with you about word play that does not at some point morph into meaning. After a point, I stop reading such experiments. (As for John Cage, I commend you for being able to listen for a full minute. I too love the idea behind his experiments. But *Woman* does not live on idea alone.) As someone who attends many poetry readings – poetry being the other hat I wear, besides nonfiction and the occasional fiction – I admit to playing elaborate mind games during L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E readings. Which is not to

say that I don't often play with words myself. When a poem begins bubbling up from wherever it is poems bubble up, I listen to the sounds and write them down, even if I have no idea where the sounds will lead. Eventually, they usually lead somewhere, if not to meaning than to some sort of harmony or melody line that I can follow. And I then work with that melody or harmony line (work, the dreaded "W" word again) until I feel fairly certain that an intelligent, open-hearted reader will be able to follow the line as well.

So maybe we play in the early stages of our work. You said earlier, regarding modern dance, "the inception of much of what is eventually presented as concert dance is some form of playfulness." Maybe playful work begins in play and moves toward work? We work the play. But not too hard. When we're stuck, mired in work that goes nowhere, maybe we play again, until we become unstuck, until play opens something new inside us, inside the words. Then we work the play some more.

Scene: Faculty office, an unnamed State University. A middle-aged Man is hunched over a computer keyboard, staring at a white screen. He needs to lose some weight but seems a friendly enough sort. He intermittently leans back, as if thinking deeply about what he should have for lunch, then lurches forward to type a few words. (Note to set design folks: He would like a MacBook Air, if at all possible.)

He is the only character onstage, but inside the computer, there are wires, and somehow these wires run into the wall, out of the building, across campus, to the end of town, and then downstate somewhere, where these wires somehow – magically – cross a number of other states as well – most of this is a mystery to the man at the keyboard – and eventually the wires connect with another writer's computer. There is a Woman associated with that other computer. She and the Man before the screen are collaborating on an essay about writing and play.

MAN: *(muttering to self)* We should wrap this up soon.

No one answers.

MAN: *(muttering to self)* Now what?

Silence. The man picks up a pencil. He stares at the pencil as if an answer of some sort might be written on the side.

MAN: *(muttering to self)* Ticonderoga.

No one answers.

Man scrolls back on his computer screen to read something he had written earlier, nods, leans back, burps.

MAN: *(loudly, to no one)* Wholly Rebecca, fully hers. And it was hers. Fur now. **f**

²³MM directing the attention of her colleagues at the Scuola Ortofrenica to observe the “unhappy little one” as he sweeps sand into a dusty pile on the floor says, “A child’s play is his work.”

ANNE PANNING

ON PERSONAL FRICTIONS &
DISCONTINUITIES, OR, HOW READING
MONTAIGNE TEMPORARILY MESSED WITH
MY MIND

Postnasal drip: chronic

Frequent shortage: optimism

Chewing style: rapid, right-leaning

Gamble: PhD English, Creative Writing

Number of false teeth: 1

Vitriolic proclivity: “motherfucker”

Annual waste: eggnog

Danger: Volunteers of America thrift store

Prayer: *please may I never be paralyzed*

Sob level: 8

Deodorant: Lady Speed Stick, powder fresh

Drudgery: coffeemaker duty

What’s overboard: bacon-wrapped scallops

Collectibles: miniature Japanese food erasers

Inevitable spiel: *I hate when you invite someone to an event and they say they will ‘try’ to come. Have the balls to say, I won’t be there. Sorry. Jesus Christ!*

Reservations: for 2 at The Madison Hotel, Washington D.C.

Frequency of eyebrow plucking: approximately every 3 weeks

Good luck: frequent (though seldom monetary)

Dubious ambition: to live in the apartment above Rexall Drug in my hometown

Head circumference: 22 inches
Abomination: flavored coffees
Emotional terrorism: Salvation Army bell ringers
Cottage industry: haircuts in the kitchen
A steal: nude racer back bra from JCPenney (pre security cameras)
Perpetual revenge: running on treadmill
Number of Levi's worn so far in this lifetime: 24
Lament: mechanical pencil, empty
Heartache: Shriner's circus
Vanishing act: The Philippines, circa 1989, Caba Beach
Dying wish: Mom

meditation on the chipped mosaic of a clay augur, in the form of a fountain
alexandra ghaly

A man is walking by on his cell phone. He is black and he is speaking in French. "JE NE SAIS PAS," he bellows into the phone. But he isn't actually bellowing, and his words aren't actually in capital letters or in Charlemagne standard font (though Charlemagne would understand, being French). Maybe he isn't actually black. He is just passing through. If he takes a right, he will be confronted by the end of the world. But I lose interest. I do not watch long enough to know.

What is going on is above all a transformation of a mental state.

I remember cardboard lunches stacked by nameless advisors (perhaps the troll) against the wall as we devoured mayonnaise-covered ham and cheese sandwiches in the once-wild

^ ↑ ↓ ↔ → ▽ built a house beneath the bridge and it is the chimney of this house that we see. Sitting on green metal benches oddly designed to match the trash cans (boiled the chicken and the egg scenario) we would look at at least some do. Others misperceive it. Some strange contraction for the fountain, we

grove. The trash would later litter the space—there would be no hope of recycling. It was here that they tore down the greenhouse and made this place unwild. It is here that our gluttony now thrives. It is an insatiable lion roaming tarmac plains.

I no longer eat meat. I saw too many bovines and camels and lambs slaughtered on the sides of roads half a world away.

We could have given our cat a flea bath in this fountain.

The Metropolitan Drinking Fountain and Cattle Trough Association was established in 1859 in the United Kingdom. They were charged with providing safe water for animals of all types, whether or not they possessed a clavicle or had not yet shed the freeness of neck allowing for brachiation.

In the house with the chimney there is a fireplace. It isn't smoking right now because the mantle of the Earth has been keeping it pretty

toasty thus far. Besides, the troll doesn't like to announce his presence with smoke signals unless there is the threat of worms. He keeps a box of matches next to his bed when he sleeps. The worms don't like matches because the worms don't like fire. Their five hearts make them especially vulnerable to heat: the flame of love burns strong, after all. Last week a worm tried to break into his house at night. The troll immediately lit a match, and the worm began to thrive in a pleasure so sick and twisted that it exploded. No joke. Right then and there, in the throes of orgasm after orgasm after orgasm, a five-hearted earthworm splattered into four thousand bits. Despite resorting to paint thinner and thin-bladed metal scrapers, the troll has been unable to fully remove the worm goo from the exterior of his house. It baked on, like cheese on a crusty quiche pan.

WHEN I SIT HERE EVERYTHING FEELS ALL WRONG. MY HEAD IS FLUFFY, STUFFY, MUFFY. MAYBE EVEN MUZZY. THAT WAS HOW I FIRST LEARNED FRENCH. MY MOTHER MAY HAVE DISSOLVED MY COLLEGE FUND WHEN I WAS NINE YEARS OLD, BUT I KNEW SHE HAD HER HEART IN THE RIGHT PLACE WHEN SHE STRESSED THE IMPORTANCE OF BILINGUALISM ON HER FIVE-YEAR OLD DAUGHTER. SO MUCH SO THAT SHE PURCHASED VHS TAPES.

TOO
MANY POTS //
NOT ENOUGH
PANS
TOO

MANY SHOES // NOT ENOUGH SOCKS
TOO MANY HENS // BUT // NOT ENOUGH COCKS
TOO MANY CRONES // AND // NOT ENOUGH BONES
TOO MUCH FAT // IN ALL THE WRONG VATS
TOO MANY GREEKS // NOT ENOUGH MEATS

When you are working in terms of what is not happening, all you are doing is fiddling with transformations of elements. Everything is in flux. Everything is impermanent.

The troll keeps two ovens in his kitchen. He “keeps” them because they are always trying to run away. He has to lash them to the counters and floors and sometimes he has to spank them to keep them from bucking. They claim that it is the natural gas that is getting their panties all up in a bunch, but this claim is straight farce. Ovens don't wear panties.

One oven is for baking things. It might be called convectional. The other oven stores bones.

Things come into being and pass away in the same instant. Rather than being, we have becoming. Things are constantly becoming. There is no one moment in time that is the same as any other moment in time.

YOU have already tired of the journey and forgotten why YOU began it in the first place when YOU reach the troll's home. He is not happy to see YOU. YOU do not know it, but the troll lives inside me. In fact, he *is* me. And YOU do not know it, but the troll hates YOU.

She is writing beside me now.

Her fingers may be colder than mine, but whether or not they are is wholly irrelevant, just like the lavishly described dog on the cemetery path. She is wearing a rust-colored coat. I will later sit next to a man wearing the very same coat. She will have given him the coat. We will be gorging ourselves at an All-You-Can-Eat Sunday morning Indian buffet. I will dip my seventh piece of *naan* into the *mutter paneer*. I will spill and potatoes and peas everywhere. And I mean everywhere.

She is playing word games. She is rearranging syllables as if that will help her unlock riddles.

But the secret is that there are no riddles. There is only fractal-bounded emptiness. We are creation caught in a continuous feedback loop. We do not exist: we are constantly coming into and out of being.

Fountains were originally designed to be purely functional. Perhaps the remains of the first Mesopotamian fountains can still be found in Iraq, assuming that we haven't by now bombed them all to shit and smithereens. It would be three thousand years before the first decorative fountains were introduced into Ancient Rome. Three thousand years: by then, surely, *homo sapiens sapiens* would have driven all of the Neanderthals out of Europe. The creepy crawlies of the prehistoric world were rapidly being exterminated. The lotus-eaters and the sea monsters had no choice but to flee underground.

out this
id of the

Only by dealing with what is happening can you really change things for the better. Because if you aren't dealing with what's really going on, all you're changing are your ideas about what's going on. You can't change the situation itself.

A man walks by and he says into his cell phone:
"JE NE SAIS PAS."

YOU crawl into the pipe and up the chimney. But in fact YOU are really crawling down the chimney. YOU are somehow shrinking in order to accomplish this feat, although YOU will insist that the world around YOU is simply expanding. YOU are wrong. Infinity is reached through infinite division, not infinite multiplication. And there is no hope of escape.

Something does not simply come into being, hang around for a while, and then go out of being. You must not think of life in terms of being, but in terms of becoming.

I stare at the motor and the motor is me. I am covered in rotting leaves. I am abandoned. I am so seasonally unfunctional that I am not even worthy of being properly stored. My blood is drained and I am refilled with antifreeze. These are the only precautions made. Heaven forbid that come spring, or summer if the budget cuts are severe, they find that I am beyond resuscitation. If this is the case, will you be there to blow life into my butterfly-clay head?

You must think of becoming as a fountain.

Water is being shot up and falling down simultaneously.

Things come into being and they pass out of being as it were simultaneously.

In order to really live, and to live creatively, we must live at the point of becoming: the very top of the fountain.

The more we can live at this point, the more we can direct and change our reality.

It is at this point that we are constantly being reborn.

*In the dream
we are always strangers*

The troll wants to put YOU in the oven of bones, but it is bucking once again and causing a racket. Furthermore, he cannot decide how to dispose of YOU. He wants nothing more than for an entourage of worms to swarm by so he can light them on fire. YOU, the innocent bystander, will be caught in the crossfire. YOUR bones will never return to the surface. They will be simply

*She tells me that she is terrified of the end of the
introwable.*

I climb the hill and feel your heartbeat. I lie on the grass that is you and curl onto your stomach and listening to those noises in that darkness I tell you that I feel as if I have returned to the womb. With a sleeping finger I trace dozens and perhaps hundreds of the stretch marks running across your entire body. Some are thin, some thick, some raised, and some are barely visible. Some resemble scars, as if deep gouges have been rent on the surface above the mantle of your kidneys. You tell me that it took you six years to step seeing them and by extension yourself as hideous. I want to tell you that I love all of you and that includes all of your flaws; but I do not want to frighten you away from me and I am already drifting into the dreamland of the womb. I listen to your heart beat and beat and beat. These too soothing pulsations are finite, and every one of them expended brings you one heartbeat closer to death. You are my second womb and

She finds an isolated place and stays there. The place is such that she cannot see anything else—no trees, no grass, no flowers or bees or other bipedal things. She just looks up and up. Not a single cloud dares smear such perfect blueness. She lies so perfectly, perfectly still that she feels as if her body is beginning to fall away. She slowly

deconstructs the concept of time. Then the concept of space. Then the concept of mind. She loses herself. All that is and all that was and all that ever will be is blue.

A REDUNDANT TURN OF PHRASE IN THE SYNTAX OF LOVE

Alphonse Brownmeister liked punctuality and Samuel Beckett. He was — as occurs so frequently between teachers and students — the object of desire for at least one undergraduate, though I doubt he picked up on the subtle hints offered by this twenty-three-year-old English major, who was always on time and read (with exclamations of approval and interest) all the assigned Samuel Beckett, though the latter caused her to question modern existence and resulted in a crisis of faith in solid things like buildings and amorphous things like love, and would become the Main Reason she left the academy and her boyfriend at the end of what she would come to think of as The Breakdown Semester at UCLA.

Dressed in dark suits and somber ties, Alphonse Brownmeister was oblivious to the inner life of this young woman, a girl still, really, *as emotionally complicated as a cat*, he might have thought (*he doesn't know cats*, she might have counterthought). Besides, he was more interested in proper grammar, clean syntax, and cogent analyses of the plays he taught in his upper-division Modern Drama. With thinning hair and boyish^h dimples, he was not what you would call handsome, and it was even a stretch to say he was attractive. But his eyes — oh, they were sharp and bright as his mind! Those eyes and that mind transfixed the girl into getting straight A's, which Alphonse Brownmeister rarely gave to anyone.

^hMM peels through the pages of his raft, the spell book, looking for an incantation in the vortex of the flood brought on by a phalanx of brooms.

She thought of those A's as secret-language communiqués. He did, after all, write them with a fountain pen — *real ink*, she noted — in a practiced, straight-edged cursive, comments bereft of emotion (a ploy, she imagined, to hide his real feelings, which, as he was a married man, he could hardly declare on paper; hence she interpreted his neatly penned *awkwards* and *be more specifics* as code for *I can't tell you how I feel* and *we have to carry on in a secret place*. What a silly girl she was. Intoxicated on *Endgame* and *Waiting for Godot*, hair cut short and growing out, brown eyes ambered into hazel, convinced that the Great God Brownmeister was going to slip out of character, invite her for coffee at some under-the-radar diner, drive her there in his reliable but ugly American-made car while she looked out the window at miles and miles of strip malls punctuated by signs for Pep Boys and IHOPs and listen to her talk about her ambitions to become something other than a lowly undergraduate in a sea of thousands, and there, in a red vinyl booth, reach across the table, take her hand, and declare his amorous intentions.

No matter how many complex sentences she wrote, how fresh her language or sharp her explication, how revealing her blouse or trousers, nothing would happen between them save the ordinary exchange of professor and student, a masque, she'd think anon, in the drama of learning, a redundant turn of phrase in the syntax of love sentenced to the imagination. The torch she carried, she'd realize once she recovered from her youth, was merely another cliché in the dictionary of her experience.

Twenty-five years later, the girl is now a middle-aged woman living in a rural community far from the south of California, a place she associates with her various failures — in school, at driving on complicated freeways, with a man who adored her. She looks up Alphonse Brownmeister — how apt, she thinks as she Googles his name, that the Internet collects our recollections and how we shape them — and learns that not only is he still teaching, he's won

awards for his scholarship, and most students consider him the most brilliant professor they've ever had. He does not resemble in any way the photograph her memory had taken and stored of him. The dimples still dent his face and there remains something puckish in the way his mouth is set, but the man in the picture she beholds a quarter century after she sat in his class listening to him talk about Beckett (and Pirandello, Pinter, and O'Neill), is almost unrecognizable; if she were to pass this man on the street, she would most likely keep walking.

Back then, in the throes of her yearning, she suffered the indignity of all twenty three year olds when faced with the reality that not every thing they desire shall come to pass. Now, she finds it difficult to summon how it felt to *believe* that anything was possible, including a romance with a married professor whose moral compass would never point in such a direction.

These days (and perhaps this would please Alphonse Brownmeister), she is more interested in the sharp-light, azure-temperature weather of Indian summer and her perennial contemplation of the lives of mice and other small, wild creatures who must store food and find warmth for the oncoming season of silence and cold. In the russet of late autumn and the sepia-toned fields peppered with crows — all that melancholy and impossibility! — she tries to conjure the Alphonse Brownmeister she once desired. Of course, she fails. He no longer exists, and neither does she. **f**

KYLE DARGAN

THE VENUS OF SLAP BOXING

~for Nikeysha

My sister expressed her disapproval
with a certain contrappasto—
her neck cricked to the side,
chin tucked as if to say “Oh, really?”
Then followed the soft-sculpting
of her frame. From collarbone through
right leg, she cured like a brick arch.
Her arms raised into brimming Vs
set for mantis snaps. Suddenly,
you didn’t have a name
or your name became “punk” or “heifer,”
neither a good thing. I seldom risked
the stupidity of faux-fighting with her,
and I never witness her storied bouts.
Did she even need to fight? I wondered
if her mere stance forecasted a cyclone
of open fist none wished to dance within.
It did that, the *city*-spun girls
into forces of nature. Furious, short-lived.

In my new city, I watch a man and woman
slap box under the auspices of stop signs.
I remember my sister and measure that familiar
distance the man keeps between himself
and the woman, between his jaw
and her yet thrown blows.

TWO HOMES, TWO ORACLES

Cleaving through Newark and D.C.,
cross-town buses that flash
a shared route number:
ninety-six. Seeing the pixels'
ardent augury, the instinct
engaged, I know to buy a lotto ticket
or call my uncle, the Pick-4 prophet,

who'd seat me at the dinner table
and make me beep like a magic
machine, grumbling "Give me a number, boy."
Sometimes, I'd spit full sequences.
Other times, I had only
lone integers he'd couple
with the two or three
given to him in prior night dreams.

At seven o'clock, the state's number
machines line across the TV screen,
stirring their ping-pong guts
until each gurgled a digit-
tattooed ball. "Son of a gun," or "Shucks,
I knew I should've played . . ." Uncle snapped
when we were wrong, but never did he blame
my numbers. When we were right,

he'd say nothing and simply nod
the silent nod of a man who'd solved
fortune's puzzle an umpteenth time.

KENDALL SAND

AN INTERVIEW WITH BERNARD COOPER

February 2011

Bernard Cooper was born and raised in Los Angeles, California. He is the author of *Maps to Anywhere*, *A Year in Rhymes*, *Truth Serum*, *Guess Again*, and *The Bill From My Father*, a memoir about his relationship with a father who, in his declining years, sent his son an invoice itemizing every expense of the younger Cooper's upbringing. In his work, Cooper is able to evoke the mystery at the heart of relationships – a mystery that often conflicts with our longing to know others, and be known by them. He kindly agreed to sit down with former *Fugue* editor, Kendall Sand, in their shared city of Los Angeles, to discuss Oprah's Book Club, Caravaggio, the fallibility of memory, and the joys of wordplay. In the process, they completely bored Bernard's dog, Alice.

KENDALL SAND

I was surprised, in reading your work, how little the tropes of Hollywood feature into your writing. But one story where that culture does really stand out is "Intro to Acting," where it seems like you must've had some insider information into how the studio system works. It is a pretty accurate, and damning, representation.

BERNARD COOPER

There are friends of mine who are involved in Hollywood, and I've certainly lived here long enough to have heard a lot of stories. Oddly, I think when I wrote that, I was only half aware. It wasn't until I had the experience of selling the movie rights to a book, and observing how that whole system operated, that I really thought, "Wow, this is a different universe." I really saw how complicated it is, in different ways, than literature. But I grew up in Hollywood. I've always been aware of the omnipresence of acting and the studios.

SAND

Have you ever been tempted to try your hand at a screenplay, or television development?

COOPER

I haven't. When I say that, I worry that I'm giving the impression that I somehow think I'm too literary, or art is too precious, to stoop to that level. It is nothing of the kind. I think it is just another kind of skill, talent. There are people who are brilliant at it. The problem is that I love prose. I love description. Of course, dialogue would transfer over to a play or screenplay, but there is something in the nature of prose writing that forces you to put everything — the setting, the intonations, everything — on that page somehow. That is the challenge I like taking on. It is hard for me to think in terms of the bare bones of dialogue with some notations about setting or behavior. I don't think that way. It's a matter of sensibility. The only reason I wouldn't do it is because I don't think I'd be any good at it.

SAND

How did you decide “the bill” would feature so prominently in *The Bill From My Father*? Your story about the actual invoice that your father sent you doesn’t come until late in the book. And by that point, it’s not even the strangest thing your father does. Why did that become the title for the memoir?

COOPER

I’d thought a little bit about writing about my father before, and I was sitting around a dinner table with a group of friends. We got into a conversation about our parents, and about strange things that have happened to us. I hadn’t thought about the bill for a long time. I remembered it, and it struck me when I was retelling the story as both one of the funniest and most unsettling things that I remembered about my father. I had that experience that sometimes happens, that writers sort of trade in, where you’re talking about something, and suddenly you realize the metaphorical or narrative potential of it.

The reason it is the title, which I didn’t arrive at until I started writing various parts of the book, is that it seemed like a metaphor for something the book was really about. The question I had, and continue to have, and probably share with a lot of people, which is, what do we owe our parents? Can a parent rightfully expect something – whether that is devotion, or money, or concern – in return? That became the larger aspect of the book, and I was really trying to answer, which involved a lot of lead up to the bill, which was the very essence of the story. I honestly don’t know the answer to that question, which is why it was such an absorbing experience for me to write the book.

I think that those experiences and recollections that keep sort of growing in ones imagination and that are not resolved are often the most interesting things to write about, more than something you've come to a conclusion about. There is this great quote by the writer Bruno Schulz, who said memories are like filaments around which our sense of the world has crystallized. Like if you drop a string in water, the crystals kind of gather around it. I thought it was the most beautiful metaphor for the way memories can haunt you and take on increasing degrees of weight, and become more compelling — not less — as time goes by.

SAND

Kim Barnes, who writes memoir and teaches at the University of Idaho, has a sign on her office door that says, “Memory knows no chronology.” I walked by that sign for three years, and I never really grasped what it meant, because when I think of my memories, I think, “Oh, I know I was ten when this happened.”

COOPER

I do have a general sense of a chronology of things. But memory is really fluid, as is imagination. I think it is important that one be really clear on the fact that, as Patricia Hampl says, “Memory and imagination go hand in hand.” So, recollection isn't a passive experience. It's active. In the activity of trying to remember, of gathering memories, remembered evidence, of working things out on the page by creating the setting which brings you to further recollections, there is a kind of hazy area where the truth of being ten, for example, can be omnipresent until you're twenty-five. It does not mean that that sense of the world belongs specifically to a year when you were ten. There are a lot of ways in which the significance

of memory spills over, or is not so neatly contained, and memory is absolutely fallible. One of the things I really like about reading memoir is that I don't feel I'm drawn to it because I'm reading an absolutely accurate account of something verifiable that happened to a person. What I love is the idea that it is an attempt by that writer to remember, and to remember with some honesty and imagination, and to know there are deeper meanings than just the circumstances or what was said or done. All of that makes it hazier and cloudier a process.

SAND

So would you say that every memoir is ultimately about memory?

COOPER

I think it has to be, in the same way that every painting is about paint.

SAND

Is every painting about paint?

COOPER

Absolutely. To some degree. Let's take Caravaggio. It's about what he's painting, but there is absolutely a sense of the sensual life of paint. The medium is paint. The way the reality¹² is brought about

¹² MM in the Pyrenees, banished by Mussolini, walking the *Camino de Santiago de Compostela*, toys with the scallop shell in her pocket still gritty with some sand of Anzio.

is through his brushstrokes. Abstract expressionism was almost entirely about the medium. How paint reacted to gravity. How it was an extension of the artist's body. Whether the work is realistic or abstract, a person who paints is acutely aware of their medium. And a memoirist is using language, which requires imagination and is not always absolutely accurate, because you're choosing words for their sometimes subjective resonance. Memoirists are very aware of memory. The best memoirs often call memory into question, and understand that what is being written is one version of truth. Hopefully the most compelling and persuasive version one can possibly make. A good example would be Mary McCarthy's *A Catholic Girlhood*, where there are passages of absolutely concrete, almost tangible accounts of her childhood. And in between, there are italicized passages that call into doubt some of the details of what preceded it, and what's coming next. It is so much fun to see someone make such poetic use of doubt, of the shadings that occur when something is recollected. The hidden motives and wishes and misrepresentations. I love all that stuff. And I don't think it compromises a writer's obligation to tell the truth as best they can.

SAND

Do you think this question of what makes fiction versus nonfiction is a necessary conversation or a tired one? Do we need to keep having it?

COOPER

There are a lot of things about writing that I love to talk about, and love to hear other people talk about, like do they use a computer or a piece of paper? That's really tired, but sometimes it is really fun and interesting to hear those kinds of basic questions addressed, and

how that changes how a person writes or lives as a writer. So I don't think it is tired in the sense that one can entirely dismiss it. And I think it is an issue that every writer, and actually, every reader, has to grapple with and come to their own conclusions about.

I do think, especially a few years ago, the ramifications of the James Frey incident were really chilling. For example, someone on one of the many *Oprah* shows about it said they thought there should be a kind of percentage rating on books that would say "This is 74% true." That scares me. Would you go to a movie and say, "This was 45% autobiographical"? I don't know if those sorts of evaluations really help. What you talk about is the created thing, and how that touches on the way people live. The idea that you could make those sorts of discernments so accurately is weird. It almost presumes that you would know absolutely what is truth and what is not. I don't. There are a lot of things I've misunderstood or believed that weren't true. And that's okay, I'd like to think.

SAND

When you were talking about the bill earlier, you mentioned the question you haven't been able to answer, about what a child owes his parents. What makes that question so difficult to answer in the book is the fact that your father, at the same time that he sent you this invoice, refused your help again and again.

COOPER

The waves of that relationship, the tidal nature of those rapprochements and estrangements, kept me on my toes. It seemed that just when I got comfortable with some kind of consistency, I really thought "Wow, good for him, good for me, we've put

our differences aside, there's some harmony, we may not be best friends, but we have an absolutely fine, workable relationship that involves having dinner together," something would happen. And when things were going poorly, and he became inaccessible, clearly angry about something, just when I started to think, "That's it. Get over it. You can't expect anything from him anymore. How much proof do you need?" then he would make himself available. It was the absolute essence of my relationship with him, and something that has always been puzzling to me. There were a lot of questions, including my own culpability. There is a lot of doubt, even after writing the book. I hope I've been fair, I hope I have not been unnecessarily harsh. I asked one of my sisters in law if she thought I'd been too hard on him in the book. And her response was, "Not nearly hard enough."

SAND

Willa Cather said, "The heart of another is a dark forest always, no matter how close it has been to one's own." Which is pretty depressing, but it seems like it's the case with your father. You knew him as well as anyone could. You went to great lengths to try and get inside his head. And ultimately, there's a distance you can't cross.

COOPER

Absolutely. I think that is one of the motivating factors for writing the book. And I don't know if I knew him any better after I wrote it. There is a line in the book where I talk about the best that happened: which is that I understood his mystery by finer degrees. But there was not a sense of resolution. Or, there was no sense of a single answer or a primary cause. I was very conscious of writing a book that didn't follow one of the expectations one has with

memoir in its more popular, Oprah’s Book Club-like iterations, which is that a mystery will be uncovered, the child will understand everything, and because of this resolution, will move on knowing something they never did before. That probably does happen. But this was really about the opposite – about one mystery leading to another leading to another.

SAND

You pose the question in the memoir, “How could I write a book about a man whose mystery was ever present, whose mystery confirmed his being as a shadow confirms the person who cast it?” It sounds like maybe you started out thinking it could be a memoir in the vein of these others you just described, and then had to renegotiate. Or did you know going in that this was going to be a game changer?

COOPER

After I wrote the entire book – and I write very slowly, and try to finish the sentences, the paragraphs, the chapters before I go on, and then I go back and reevaluate – that was a line I came back and added at the end. Because I saw it only after several years of trying to write the book. I think it was a way that I could frame the whole endeavor, which I only discovered toward the end of writing the book. I’m one of those writers, of whom I think there are many, where you start writing and you’re floundering. You don’t know. It’s almost like trying to find your way through a dark room. You don’t know exactly what you’re doing. You don’t know how it’s going to work out, even if it is memoir. You think there is a kind of given structure, but to a large extent that’s not true. You’re finding your way through memory. You’re trying to find a shape. I started writing different sections of this book, then I realized I had more.

Then I realized I had a book. Then I realized I had to order them in a certain way. Then I realized that there was a through line. It really came about in a jerry-rigged way. That's how it felt. I hope the end product feels like it has a greater structure and unity. But all my writing kind of feels like I'm just trying to figure out what I'm doing at every step. Which is one of the things that makes writing so hard.

SAND

I'd like to talk about your first book, *Maps to Anywhere*. What is it like to talk about a book that you wrote a little while ago?

COOPER

You said, I think very politely, “a little while ago.” It was actually 250 years ago. It was my first book, and it was influenced by a number of eclectic, contradictory things. I became an absolutely diehard fan of the prose poem. It was a form I hadn't really known about before. I stumbled on the world of prose poetry, and anthologies filled with both American and International prose poems. I loved the indefinable area that it fell into — that it was neither fish nor fowl. My background is in the visual arts, and with contemporary art there was a certain amount of fun and mischief in making things that were neither quite a sculpture, nor a painting. Then there are all these other areas, like installation and performance, that don't fit into the standard categories. I loved that about the prose poem form. I have also remained a complete short story junkie. I loved the short-short story, the micro story.

I was really fascinated, at the time, to almost treat writing like a photograph. Not in the sense that it could be done that quickly, but that it was about this instantaneous impression. The fact that it

could exist in only a few pages made it more like an object — like a painting or a sculpture, something more contained and evident at a relatively brief glance. What I loved was the idea that I could just try something new all the time. And I can't be the first writer to say this, but I think what happens is you write a book, and by the time you finish it you think, "why on earth did I do it that way? Why didn't I do this?" So you kind of shed a book, too. And you move onto something hopefully different in approach, or in form, or in content.

SAND

How do you feel about that book now?

COOPER

It was a very, very long time ago. I was a different person, and I don't have as much of a connection to my first couple books as I do to my later books, because I do something now that is so different. My concerns have shifted. Here's another thing, which is sort of complicated to explain. Although I'm very flattered when people like my work, part of what I've learned I need to do as a writer is kind of protect myself. I show my work to friends, I value many people's responses to what I do, but I need to protect it a little bit. From both compliments and negative criticisms. It's a deal I've struck with myself. When people compliment a book I wrote decades ago, it's fantastic, but it's like somebody saying, "God, I loved that house you grew up in. That was a great place." It seems remote to me. I don't have either a lot of hope that people will love it, or fear that they won't. It's just something that seems very much of the past to me.

SAND

I was just about to tell you how much I loved *Maps to Anywhere*.

COOPER

Well, thanks! I do appreciate it. I really do.

SAND

We have to talk a little bit about the catchword for this issue of *Fugue*, which is “Play.” In terms of your writing life, where do you feel playful?

COOPER

I can tell you immediately. The thing I love is when I’m able to be playful with language. Whether the net result of that playfulness is a paragraph or passage that is sad, detached and observant, or I’m just having a high old time thinking of strange combinations of words that bring something ordinary to life again, putting words together is, once in awhile, boy, it is the most fun thing ever. No matter what the subject is. Even when it doesn’t work and you end up throwing something out or starting again. It’s really fun. It’s like clay. It’s malleable. It’s sensuous. You can surprise even yourself. That is the level of spontaneity that I think happens whether you’re experimenting in genre or doing something extremely conventional form-wise; there is still all this room for play, and to surprise yourself. And surprise a reader hopefully.

SAND

I got out my copy of *The Bill From My Father*, so we could talk about a passage where it seemed like maybe that happened for you. It's a description of your father's bed: "Microscopic colonies of mites wait for the falling manna of our skin. Dreams sweep across the surface like seasons. Fever and night sweats drench the sheets. A bed is a lectern, a pedestal, an altar, a rack, a boxing ring, a cavern of blankets, a spotlight stage, a trampoline, a nest, a grave."

COOPER

That was a place where I got close to that prose poem playfulness. There are parts in a narrative where you feel like you fall into them. Like a trapdoor opens and you're suddenly in this strange world where you can be inventive and playful, and really dig deeply. What's hard is trying to determine whether that is self-indulgent, and needs to be edited down or taken out completely, and when it is permissible to have a wild tangent. There are a lot of writers who are extremely tangential: David Foster Wallace, and the British writer Geoff Dyer. You think you know where you're going, and suddenly for a few pages, you veer off on a wild ride. I like that, both as a reader and as a writer, because it gives me elbow room and shakes things up a little bit.

Sometimes I get the sense that something more lyrical than narrative is happening, and I will absolutely, wholeheartedly go for it. But it is usually not planned. It's almost like a metabolic shift. Because in a sense, I'm observing what I'm writing about. There's a sense like watching a movie, when you get immersed or carried away in a scene, or a tangent, or a line of development. That keeps me going. I

just love that. I don't want to write work that really requires the lion share of attention going to the language. The story is always more important to me: the narrative, the people, the incidences. But I like when they get close, just like I do in painting. Not to liken myself to Cezanne, but when you look at a Cezanne, you're really aware of what he's doing as a painter — how he's breaking up space, how he's applying paint. But you also know it's this bowl of ripe fruit. And it's beautiful for both reasons. **f**

'MM at a table in the middle of nowhere with Whitey where Michael Martone's father finds him and asks him for an autograph for his son who is named Mick too.

GUY JEAN

Translated from the French by Kathryn Farris and Ilya Kaminsky

IF I WERE BORN IN PRAGUE

I'd become a streetcar driver, riding around the city of puppets locked up in closets.

I'd become a Jew and sing the Kaddish to the walls. I'd whistle a lullaby to the children born in Prague and drink every morning, like a poet.

IF I WERE BORN IN FLORENCE

I'd become a painter of the massacre of the holy innocents – their slaughtered bodies at their mothers' feet in Iraq.

I'd draw the Virgin's silent hands without a face.

I'd abandon the city and its Vespas for country life where the breeze steals the smell of fresh pasta and olive oil from the trattorias.

I'd pay a woman to paint a girl forgotten by God; I'd love her to the sound of the bells for Angelus.

IF I WERE BORN IN NICE

I'd become a bather, breasts in the sun pretending indifference to
stares of those who pretend to be looking at the sea

I'd drink a wine from the nearby hills with the women, a mute
pleasure.

And after that, I'd die.

FINALLYFAST.COM AND PLAYING THE BOOK

I don't know about you, but as a human I find myself wanting to participate more and more often in the media I consume. Wait, I don't just consume that media. I muck around in it. I DVR it. I PDF it. I MP3 it. I collage it. I save it. I download it. I pirate it. I transcript it. I quote it. I own it. I copy it. I surround myself in it. Find myself in it. If I look long enough at it I begin to think I am it, iPod playlist golem, Amazon golem, iPad golem, experimental novel golem, chapbook golem.

This happens with music most obviously. I want it fast and loud and oh! and now. I want to use it to soundtrack my now. To understand my now. To remake my mood, my approach to now. To make some memories. Maybe some memoirs. I want to make virtual (or actual) mix tapes, playlists, and share them with others. I want to remix it, to mash it up. To Rock Band it up. To Guitar Hero it up. To sing the hell out of some karaoke. To air guitar it up. To make crazy, crappy Youtube videos of myself dancing or singing or fucking or miming to the songs I love.

Wait. I'm not talking about me; I'm talking about us. And music's not the only locus of this playfulness. We television and film viewers have been getting more involved with our media too. On the Internet you can find a ton of different unofficial amateur edits of the *Star Wars* prequels. You can find a homemade trailer for *The Shining* reconceptualizing it as an uplifting family film. You can find the news, Auto-Tuned, remixed by hipsters.

My favorite iteration of this participatory instinct is the user response to a particularly wack late-night TV commercial for the website *FinallyFast.com* that promises to clear your Internet Explorer caches, clean your machine of spyware, tune it up, slick it up, speed it up.

If you find yourself watching a lot of late night cable like I do, then you know what I'm talking about. Lines like "My computer used to be fast. Really fast. But now it's only kinda fast..." and "Mom! The Internet is SO SLOW!!!!," are delivered woodenly by stock photo actors in a way that would seem to be a mockery of a commercial. The badness is wonderful, like the movie *Troll 2* which sucks so badly that it becomes great, and which features a total of zero trolls. Or the film *The Room*, another cult classic revered for its total badness. Our admiration increases in proportion to the film's failure as a film, as a product of the studio system which is designed to weed out just this sort of amateurness, as long as the film or show or commercial is funnily bad, and seems authentically the product of an individual brain and heart. When the *Finallyfast.com* commercial comes on, and that's more and more rarely, it appears, my wife and I mouth the lines in tandem sunk down on the couch. Either we possess it or it possesses us; I'm not sure which.

I checked Youtube, checked Wikipedia, because that's what you do when you watch television nostalgically on the sectional. There I found dozens of amateur remakes of the *FinallyFast.com* commercial on Youtube. By the time this is published there might be hundreds. The ease of making and manipulating video has opened the door to these amateur fan-filmmakers. We are bored⁹. We are drunk. We like to show it off, to shake it for the masturbators on chatroulette. We like to mock things, to make things, to shock things into understanding, as long as we can share what we (re)make with others.

⁹ MM, out after curfew, looks up through the crisscrossing wrought iron of the fire escape latticed on the backside of the Hotel Cadillac and sees the zipper of his initials.

Same goes for video games, MMPORPGs, and other online communities. We like to get involved. We like to *play*. Which is a way of saying that all these things – like much in our lives (Weight Watchers anyone? Collecting Credit Card miles and points, anyone? Doritos The Quest, anyone?) are becoming more gamelike and plastic, manipulable.

I think I know what this means for the film, the television show, the commercial, the song, the video, the video game, the album, the EP. The sorts of media and media-makers that make or find or at least tacitly allow space for audience participation are going to get more viewers, listeners and gamers involved in their collective making meaning.

But what does this mean for the book? The writer? It seems we are concerned. We should be. But we're concerned about the wrong things.

The book – the *story* in particular, more than film, more than music – has always been a participatory medium. Recent studies of reading suggest that we *actually experience* what we read about, and that reading is not just simulation but *experience* which we as readers participate in with whatever we bring to the table already. But there are more obvious ways in which we participate with books, with stories. Take for instance book clubs, *Harry Potter* parties, author readings and signings. The promised and never-really delivered hypertext revolution. The fun witch hunts for increasingly outlandish fake memoirs that we insist on believing in until we don't. Take the tourist attraction of Emily Dickinson's home. The invention of the LongPen, Margaret Atwood's telesigning robot hand.

It should be obvious by now that many readers, particularly those younger readers, we giggling younger readers, want to find ways of

interacting with stories. We want to inhabit them, consume them. We want to change them, add to them, expand and continue to populate their universe. We want to *play* them. We want to be ourselves in them. We want to makeover ourselves through them. Take for instance the collaborative mass fiction of Dungeons & Dragons. Take for instance MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons). Take for instance *House of Leaves*. Take for instance fan fiction.

I wouldn't worry about the future of story. Story is inescapable. We can't *not* perceive our lives as stories, even if we know that stories — even the ones we tell ourselves about ourselves and who we are — are fiction. That's how the brain works. In this dissolving, data-fragmented world we desire narrative and connection (as opposed to the actual lived experience of unsatisfying fragments, random monster encounters, one-night stands, and passing, regretful glances). We will continue to consume it. And we will continue to create it.

And if this means we need to redefine the definition of *writer*, that's okay with me. If we are all participating, then we are all writers, contributors, content-creators, storytellers. We live in an increasingly simulated, mediated world where we want to interact with stories, where we all imagine we have our own stories to tell. We tell ourselves these stories every day. Isn't that what memory is for? What Facebook is for? Twitter? Our blogs? Tumblrs? Flickr photo streams? Our comment threads? Our instant messaging? Our course evaluations? We like story — we like making stories — a lot. We like *I* a lot, like to talk about our experiences a lot. We say *like* a lot, too. The ascendancy of the memoir, the genre of *I* and of the moment, cashes in on this desire.

Only a few of us who call ourselves writers are publicly excited about these developments. Some of us are worried. Others know we're supposed to be worried about our dwindling advances and our

splintering fame, but we don't care. We can't imagine not reading and writing books. But we should be excited. Writers have been stuck in that old technology, that old but shockingly versatile and durable technology of the codex, the bound book, for a long time. Maybe that's our problem, that we've relaxed too much into the ease of the form. We've taken it for granted. Many of us grew up only knowing composition on word processing programs, never even feeling the physical mechanism of the carriage return which still gives that *return* key on the keyboard its anachronistic name. We never felt the physical exertion that typing on a manual typewriter required. We never handwrote after grade school, all those forgotten exercises in learning cursive returned to the dustbin of memory, at least until we're asked to sign an auto title transfer using cursive, please. We perch our hands above the paper, hoping in vain for muscle memory to do its thing. Only a few of us have ever printed or bound a book, or even printed a thing not using Microsoft Word or the defunct technology of Print Shop Pro on our dot matrix printers

What I'm saying is that we've forgotten how it can *feel* to *make* a book. I don't mean just how it feels to *write* a book, but how it feels to *make one*. Our experience with the codex has been so long and lately mediated – through programs designed to process words like Microsoft Word through which we are able to apparently produce virtual words on virtual pages with virtual drop shadows suggesting the depth of a physical page, which are then saved in ones and zeroes encoded magnetically or optically on hard drives or flash media. We would do well to reconnect⁷ with what books feel like in the hands, what they smell like, what the pages sound like when they flex, friction, and turn, what they are or can be. We've allowed our publishers to do the thinking about a lot of this. We've let our editors do the editing; our word processors, the word processing;

⁷ MM sweeps in the corners of the kitchen after dislodging a green plastic sniper draped in a ghillie suit of cobwebs.

designers, the designing; production managers, the production; marketers, the marketing; eight maids-a-milking, a typewriter lodged high in a dead tree. The bad news is that many, if not all of these roles are devolving back to writers.

The good news is that a lot of these formerly forbidden spaces are opening up to writers.

We would be wise to remember that we writers are first *makers*. That we can make paper, any size we like, not just the 8.5" x 11" American default of the "letter size," out of wood pulp. That we can hand mix our inks. That we can physically letterpress those inks into that paper and feel the physical impression. That we can hand-bind and stitch. That we can photocopy. Cut the pages how we like. Handprint on whatever part of the book we like. That we can do whatever we want with design. That we aren't stuck with the default margins, the double-spacing, the Times New Roman, the Lulu or iUniverse presets. The standard English. The standard syntax. The realist, prose-transparent third-person stories featuring timely epiphanies. The autocapitalized first letters of sentences, or lines. The autocorrected grammar. The sort of narrative or lyric in style at the time.

These defaults, these shortcuts are useful. They save time. They reduce the number of variables. They speak to certain readerships, certain genres. They are required by some standard book formats, convenient technologies of printing and binding and distribution. We are after all in a world of near-paralyzing capability thanks to technology. But if every shortcut goes unexamined, if we think our only job as writers is to write nice sentences and hand them off to someone else, we risk not knowing what makes our sentences nice or how to pry apart *nice* into the risky energy of *new*. We risk obsolescence or, at the least, irrelevance.

Are we providing content? Or are we writing books?

If we expect readers to participate with our texts, our sentences, our lines, our books (or our ebooks), we must participate more fully in the making of our books. We must make space for them to participate in the physical artifact of the book, to think about its form, the pacing of the page turning, the leading between lines, the smell of paper, to understand why this book, this object, is the best form to experience and participate in the story we're telling.

The future writer's job is to hack into any available space, to test the limits of the system, to think about the variables, to challenge their own assumptions and the assumptions of others. Are writers going to be marginalized? We already have been. We always have been. We need to inhabit the margin, to be on the edge of a culture, a place, a story. It's the best vantage point to see it anew. This has always been the job of the artist—not just to repeat the received wisdom about whatever world is in question but to make and push and test whatever boundaries we can find. Some of those boundaries are going to be increasingly technological. Just this morning Apple announced that individual writers are now allowed to publish and distribute electronic texts in its iBookstore app. Of course that will come with constraints, what we're told we're allowed to do. But constraints are good, and they are not absolute. Form creates tension, and we want tension, elasticity, electricity.

So for the writer willing to play with and look seriously at her own medium (or media) the news is good. Are we going to have to find new ways to get noticed? Yes. Do we *get* to find new ways to get noticed? Yes. Is it trouble? Yes. But trouble is the stuff of writing and creation. Time to shut up and get to the making, get back to that sense of play where everything interesting, including the future, finally fast and soon to be here, starts. **f**

MARVIN BELL

THE BOOK OF THE DEAD MAN (PLAY)

Live as if you were already dead.
Zen admonition

1. About the Dead Man and Play

Wordplay is the dead man's special talent, some say *condition*.
He believes the contrapuntal, contradictory and oxymoronic to be
symptomatic of incurable wit.
He regards staring at the ceiling an example of play, blinking too.
See him bundle the harder crosswords for a trip to the window.
Play is like candy after they wash your mouth out with soap.
The dead man looks to the rabbi who is playful, for a laughing rabbi
has understood the grand metaphor.
The dead man has little use for those who play at solemnity.
He waits for the day we sack the corrupt senators, it will be fun.
He needles the political toadies with inventive insults, for they, too, are
laughable.
If only play were always playful.
Soldiers sent to die in war play poker to make it go away.
It's just play when the generals crunch the numbers, they have battle
groups to die for.
It's only play money for those who have a lot of it.
It's vaudeville when the Tea Party pulls its hair out in public.

2. *More About the Dead Man and Play*

The dead man has a new wrinkle in his demeanor, it's age^w.
The dead man's country is dying, it will be a long last act.
Now his play flag is a prayer flag symbolized by straw and sugar.
It takes but a freckle or flame to meditate on this, a pillow if he closes
his eyes, a splinter left in a finger, but why.
The dead man's playfulness is, even now, a survival skill.
Professional play killed bona fide play, no one remembers it.
It was only a gasp and a hop to the world of play-for-pay.
The dead man makes up rules to break, his games are countercultural.
He imbibes music, he can gas for hours about words.
The arc of a ball is still sublime, the planks of the old gymnasium still
shine from the skidding of cheap sneakers.
Death is easy, comedy is hard, and play is for keeps.
The dead man's play is not a performance.
He is not mucking about or fooling around, his play is the pivot between
means and ends.
He means to end with a laugh.

^wMM looks up sheepishly at the sorcerer, shrugs, his shoulders making valleys and peaks, edges by his master who then swats MM on his backside, sliding him to the door.

A BURNING THING

for JCC and BW

The neighbors' flags say it all: a red, white and blue kind of day. Sun. Early summer green before leaves start curling in on themselves. You'll finish shopping and have plenty of time to prepare tonight's picnic: green salad, grilled vegetables, cous cous, smoked trout, fresh fruit salad.

God, you love Fourth of July. You're no patriot, but you pay taxes. You think the Declaration of Independence was a fine idea. And you love fireworks, legal or otherwise. Although not in the hands of children.

You hop in the car with a shopping list plus cloth carrier bags. The kids insist on a green home and it's fun saving trees paper-bag-by-paper-bag. If you live long enough, you could rack up two trees. That's something.

Dropping the bags on Aunt Kay's afghan you think how everyone in the family has one of her *pieces*, as she calls them. *Fabric Art*, Aunt Kay learns these phrases in evening class. Paul, who hates afghans — of the lower case variety — says it's karma that Kay's only child is fighting in Kandahar. Terrible pun, you scold. Anyway, who ever heard of the National Guard defending another country? Not Jeremy. Tonight Aunt Kay will celebrate Jeremy's patriotism. You'll be praying for his safe return.

At the crosswalk, a yellow goose with a red beak waddles to the other side of the street. You're patient, sending loving kindness to the goose and its owner, Sherriff Moe, an eccentric, but effective lawman.

"I fell into a burning thing."

June Carter wrote this song. Johnny sang it and the music held them together, helped him get straight. You're lucky with Paul; his

only addiction is outwitting the jackrabbit noshing the herb garden. As inner demons go, it could be worse.

Your jeans are loose this morning. A good feeling. And you don't really miss eating ice cream. Not much. Given the holiday, Aunt Kay will bring that killer pecan pie. No point thinking about it now. Just enjoy *breathing* in the loose jeans, designers, practically new. You have to know where to shop; some thrift stores are dumpsters of scruffy garbage. Or worse. But Wilka's Wardrobe is a notch above.

You smile now, remembering that posh benefit in Charlottesville. Semi-formal. You snag the perfect frock at Wilka's for \$3.00 — a lime green raw silk sheath that makes you look like Parker Posey. It's a steal for three bucks, so you check with Wilka, who shrugs, "Once it's on the rack, I don't re-price. That's my philosophy. Guess you scored a bargain, hon." You feel a little patronizing because you smile at the word *philosophy*. An uncalled for smirk for you don't come from fancy. You're lucky to have a college degree and a nice home. Think about Aunt Kay's crowded trailer park in Amherst.

Anyway, you *are* Cinderella in Charlottesville when Deirdre, that snooty poet, oozes over and says, "Gorgeous outfit, Barb. Very classy."

You hate being called "Barb," but the envy in her eyes is compensation enough.

Later, of course, you feel guilty when her blond wig slides back, exposing chemo scalp. *Mea Culpa*. You should be a nicer person.

Nervously, you swirl the dial. Terri Gross is actively listening to a Professor Jenike, "Yes, both Thomas Jefferson and John Adams died on July 4, 1826, fifty years after the Declaration of Independence...."

"Tell us more about their rivalry," she coaxes in that seductive radio voice.

You love Terri Gross, wish you *were* Terri Gross when Paul and the kids and Aunt Kay are too demanding. But you have a fortunate

life and you turn back to the Johnny Cash special.

“...down, down, down and the flames...”

Kerploom^f. What’s going on? Tornado? Earthquake? You can’t see a thing. The windshield is exploding in yellow-red-born-orange-white-black. Did you hit something? Were you distracted about Jeremy? Jefferson and Adams? You brake carefully, hoping the SUV Paul bought from that chef in Zane County is as safe as he claimed. You don’t hear a sound. No crash, thank god. No airbags. But what is....

The world is dark. Dickinson murmurs unbidden, “Because I could not stop for death....” Paul will be devastated. And the kids.

Someone’s shouting. Straining to hear, you open your eyes. No wonder it was dark.

“Hello?” a male voice.

The front of the silver SUV is enveloped in coats, blankets, stuffed animals.

“Hello. Hello in there?” A young man’s voice. “Are you OK? In there?”

He tugs open your door and a rainbow of blouses, pants, shirts, drops onto your lap. A grey stuffed lizard, ugly thing; who would give that to a child? Now a gold towel. And what’s this? A toupée? A feast of color and fabric and....

“Hi Ma’am; sorry, ma’am. You see on the Fourth, we collect a lot – too much really – for the Veteran’s Rummage Sale. Guess I didn’t secure the load. I....”

You’re laughing. Deep, loud, belly laughs. You can’t help it.

“I’ll call 911, ma’am. I’m so glad you’re not hurt. You are OK, right? This is a new job and I don’t want to lose it.”

“Tell you what, Sheldon, let’s shove this stuff back into your truck and get out of here before Sherriff Moe comes along.”

^fMM’s son, met at the door by his teacher, tells her today he would like to play in the kitchen, and she shows him where the brooms are kept.

“Yes, ma’am. Almost hit his goose two blocks back. Thank you, ma’am.”

“My name’s Barbara.” You shake hands and can’t help smiling the whole time you’re shoving jackets and coats and shoes and oh, no, what’s this, one of Aunt Kay’s unmistakable afghans, back into the pick up.

“Happy Fourth of July,” he calls.

“Same to you, Sheldon.”

You grin all the way to the grocery store. God you love this holiday. Can’t wait for rings of fire in the long pyrotechnic night ahead. **f**

THE SINGLE GIRL'S GUIDE TO REMODELING

1.

For five years, be perfectly content with the small breakfast nook off the kitchen, the rickety back porch, the galley kitchen with its ancient linoleum. Remain enamored of your 1920's bungalow, with a huge backyard, a cherry tree in that yard, window boxes full of pansies that seem to last even through the snow. Train yourself to ignore the house's flaws; after a brief spate of home improvement — a new circuit box, a new water heater, Berber carpet in the bedroom — relegate to a back room the inspection report with all its *major concerns* and *safety issues* bristling in red.

When you have dinner parties, it will be perfectly reasonable to squat around the coffee table in the living room, carefully cutting slices of brisket or forking up roast chicken. Ignore your friends' children spilling grape juice or grinding crumbs into the sofa cushions. Ignore the recycling bin in the corner of the breakfast nook, the accumulation of bags and other persistent litter between the stove and refrigerator. You clean up the best you can, but at some point the house resists cleaning.

Accept this. You know that when people enter your house, they do not notice the lopsided doorway or the cracked windowpane in the kitchen door or the wobble of the kitchen chairs. They do not see the shredded legs of your couch, the impossible mess that has accumulated in the linen closet.

Your guests seem to notice only the gold mosaic of a Buddha head on your living room wall. They notice the healthy houseplants, the cherry tree if it's in bloom. They often comment on how "serene" the house feels to them, how relaxing, a comment that both pleases and surprises you, since serenity is, after all, your decorating

scheme, with all your Zen accents, the calligraphy by Thich Nhat Hanh in the hallway – *I have arrived, I am home* – the bamboo in the corner to hide the television cables and cords.

But at the same time you know you've constructed a detailed façade, a false front, like the ones you saw on the wild west sets as a kid when you and your family toured Universal Studios: saloon doors, the wide window of a dry goods store, log walls all hiding a suite of ordinary buildings. When you turned the corner in the electric cart, you could see how flat it all really was, how insubstantial. Your guests don't know to look in the crowded drawers, the be-crumbed cupboards, the back room you've come to call "the room of shame."

2.

At about the five-year mark, the honeymoon will be over. Your gas furnace will quit at the same as your washing machine. Things will begin to expire, as if in agreement with one another: *okay, we've had it*. The chimney to the nonworking fireplace loses its stucco and the bricks appear to be skewed, ready to fall on an unsuspecting pedestrian⁵⁰. You need more insulation in the attic, you admit, as your teeth chatter in bed. The basement floods in a particularly aggressive rainstorm, and the sump pump decides not to work; old cartons float by, a flowerpot with a dried-up dahlia. You dig out that inspection report, stare at it, make half-hearted notes in the margin: an asterisk here, an exclamation point there. There's the question of the foundation, some old insect damage at the front of the house, a *major concern*. There's the missing railing on the basement steps, a *safety issue*. The pipes will freeze on your washing machine overnight, then burst in the morning, a flood on the back porch.

Luckily you have a neighbor, a single woman like yourself, who can lend an ear in commiseration. You call her in a panic when the

⁵⁰MM in Jodhpur observes langurs scratching the rooftop pebbles into dusty piles that other langurs take apart, stone by stone, looking under each as if something has been hidden there.

pipes break, and she keeps watch while you try to find the water shut off valve in the basement, in a crawl space sticky with cobwebs.

You like your neighbor and she likes you. You go over to each other's houses to assess a new rug, a wall color, yet another pair of boots. You feed each other's cats; you can call each other for boyfriend interventions. You bring her soup; she brings you canned salmon. You raid each other's Netflix stashes. She likes to call out *Howdy neighbor* when she sees you come out your back door. You call your little duo "the single woman's housing co-op," with your communal wheelbarrow, ladder, snow shovel, raised garden bed. There are no fences between you.

When her cat is dying, she'll come to your door, her face twisted, saying *Cooper's sick, something's wrong*. You will go quickly to her house, where her big friendly cat Cooper lies on her back porch, sitting in his own feces, mewling a sick cry that makes you wince. Without a moment's hesitation, you drive them to the animal hospital, where you put your arm around Michele as the vet takes x-rays. *It looks like poison*, he says. You drive your neighbor home with the soiled towel in her lap. When you call her in the morning, she tells you Cooper died in the night. You tell her how much you loved Cooper, how you would often find him on your porch, or in your car, ready to have a chat. She buries him in the backyard, and you watch her put a little statue of a cat where Cooper rests in peace. When you have what you will come to call your "heart episode," your neighbor sits with you for hours in the trauma room at the hospital, making jokes about the cute medics, helping you interpret the doctors' brusque comments. When they say you have to spend the night, she will hold your hand when you cry, those big silent tears rolling down your cheeks. *Don't worry*, she says, *I'll take care of everything*.

3.

Once you decide you need to make some changes, it's difficult to know where to begin. It's almost a full time job maintaining a

house by yourself, and you already have a full time job. You get out the yellow pages. You make some calls. You have men coming to your house putting little booties on over their dirty work shoes. You're nodding your head at whatever they say. They ask if you have any questions, and you don't even know what questions to ask. You go online, get on chat forums, try to educate yourself, but all this knowledge seems to dissolve the minute you're confronted with a man wearing a low-slung tool belt.

Be prepared to find that that no matter what you plan to do with house, it always costs \$1500. New furnace? \$1500. New back steps? \$1500. New skylight in the attic? \$1500. New brick chimney built up from the eaves? Hmmm, let's see: \$1500. It's one of the first mysteries you encounter, as a homeowner: how so many wildly different procedures can cost exactly the same amount of money. Plus tax.

Be prepared for the fact that money will now take on a different dimension. Money no longer seems yours to have and to hold, but more like a child on a roller coaster — up and down, up again, and then the giddy, scream-inducing descent. It won't stay put. It always wants to go for another ride.

4.

One autumn you need to have the cherry tree cut down; it's too sickly, too at risk for falling. But you'll cringe every time you drive into the carport and see the fresh-cut stump. You'll walk to the edge of your backyard, look back at the house, notice all the peeling paint and broken siding the tree's shadow had hidden.

It's time for a change. You need something different in your life. A new relationship, even if it's just with your house.

But what kind of change? The foundation work that always lurks in your conscience? Or new plumbing that you know must be necessary in this old house, with its temperamental drains? But those things are so invisible, so *dowdy*. What you really want is the

dining room that's been taking shape in your mind, you realize now, ever since you stepped foot in this house.

A real dining room. Big enough to seat ten. With a pantry that will hide the recycling, the brooms, all the pet food and supplies. A dining room where your friends will gather, open to the kitchen, and they will chat with you while you cook. You eye the back wall with its picture window, a wall that now looks simple to demolish. You consult with the dog, who looks up at you from her bed, head cocked to the side. She seems to say, *Whatever you want, boss*. You consult the tarot cards, the I-Ching, your horoscope. If you had a Magic Eight-Ball you would shake it and know this message would appear: *All Signs Point to Yes*.

5.

Contractor

Hire your contractor based on just one recommendation from Angie's List. Angie's list was made, it seemed, for people just like you. Women. Single women who are looking for the right men. A different kind of Match.com.

You read about your contractor — a team of two brothers — the rave review about how nice they were, how thorough, how efficient. You look them up, and like their website. You like the way they are posed with their families, all of them good-looking and happy.

Dave has a nice voice on the phone. He sounds like someone you can talk to. He seems like he wouldn't rip off a single woman, something that you know would be so easy to do, given your apparent cluelessness about the simplest things. Dave comes over and promises he could do the job to fit your budget, and it will take about a month. Deal, you say, and so you begin telling people you're going to do it, finally, the remodel that's been in your mind all this time.

Everyone warns you that any big job takes twice as long, and will cost at least 30% more than you're quoted. Don't listen to them. Dave was so nice. And so tall. That won't happen to you. So you

sign the refinance papers, get your cash out – \$25,000 (smart, you think, a little buffer), and sign the multi-page contracts.

Color consultant

You've had enough experience with painting to understand that you really don't know how to pick the right colors from a paint chip, have never had the patience to sample colors on a wall before buying gallons of the wrong paint. Seek out Ruthie V., an artist. When she arrives at your door, she looks avid for the task ahead. Her eyes are wide and take in everything. She wears quirky glasses you covet. As you tour the existing rooms in the house, she asks which colors you like and why. Say something unexpected: *I chose this color because it's unassuming but bright.* "Like you," she says, smiling.

When you enter the construction zone, Ruthie's gaze travels across the wide expanse of lawn, rests on your elderly neighbor's plum tree by the back fence. The tree's branches, barren of plums, still radiate a dark red-purple through the leaves. That's it, she will say, that's the color we need to bring into this room. *Really?* you say, *but I don't want pink.* Don't worry, it won't come out pink, she says. Then she points to your shirt, your living room rug, the throw pillow on the couch. All of them beating out plum, plum, plum.

Electrician

You know a guy, you tell the brothers. You can see they don't like this phrase, have heard it before, would prefer to work with their own people. *But really,* you say, *you'll like him, and he knows my house.* This seems important to you, to have someone on this team who already knows your house intimately, who won't be surprised by its flaws. He was the one to re-wire the entire attic when you put in insulation in last winter. He was the one who carried out truckloads of junk from the crawlspace under the eaves before he could do that task, junk dating back from the twenties, stuff you had no idea was lurking there: an old radio, boxes and boxes of hand-lettered receipts, a fortune-telling paper doll.

He lives right up the street. He's a neighbor. And besides, he's single, he reads Buddhist texts, and he's fun to have around.

The brothers relent. You call up the electrician, and he's happy for the work. It turns out all these men will get along famously; they'll talk and talk while working together, long conversations about politics, about movies, and, most surprisingly, about relationships. They'll go out for a beer after work, to talk about what it's like to be men – married or single, together or alone. You didn't know men could talk this way. You'll feel a little left out of the party, but don't sulk, just keep smiling gamely as they work on remodeling your life.

6.

Be prepared to make a *lot* of decisions, even after the main choice has been made. You thought you could relax, but there will be a hundred things to decide before the job is through. Making decisions involves so many complex neurological tasks – it's called a Decision Tree, a hundred tiny twigs quivering, synapses firing with every turn a real decision requires. Ever since you learned of the Decision Tree, you can't help imagining it as a huge, towering maple, like the one in front of your yoga teacher's house, more than a hundred years old and still growing. When you do Tree pose at this house, you turn yourself to face this tree, to feel its ancient roots tenaciously holding ground.

But when it comes to making decisions, you feel all the branches quivering when you look at the plans, two-dimensional drawings that are supposed to tell you everything you need to know: square footage, trusses, pitch of the roof, where the doorways will go, windows, depth of foundation, and all those etceteras, but in actuality does not tell you all the things you *really* want to know: how the light will fall at 7 p.m., for example, as you finish your dinner and linger a few moments at the table; or the light at 7 a.m., as you stand on the deck with your coffee, watching the full moon set behind a bank of quickly breaking clouds.

7.

Despite all the planning, the rolled up blueprints, the murmured readjustments, when the building starts, you'll be surprised to see where the walls are going up — one of them right in front of your office window — and how small the dining room looks, and the deck, it's really going to be only a few feet wide? The laundry room door seems too narrow, and tell me again about the pantry, how that will work? And you feel that little tremble in your voice when you're about to start crying, don't want to start crying, it would embarrass all of you.

Luckily you have nice contractors. Contractors who are cute and tall and listen to NPR while they work, not heavy metal or rock and roll. They smile and gesture and never raise their voices as they answer your questions and wait for you to tell them what to do. They often say the words: *Well, we're trying to stay within your budget*, but they say it not unkindly, just as a matter of fact. In the end, you say, again, *Whatever you think is best*, because the more you research and monitor online forums about remodeling and look at magazines and ask your friends, the more confused you become. In this case, knowledge is not power. It is barely even knowledge.

They go back to work, tell you a funny story, seem to hardly notice the Decision Tree dropping its dead leaves. The Decision Tree has taken the place of the Rainier cherry, though its shade is not so delicate, its fruit — so far — not as sweet.

8.

They've demolished the back porch, dug and poured the foundation, demolished the back wall, have built up new walls, laid sheetrock and layers of mud. They've done all this behind a translucent sheet stretched across your kitchen, so their figures are silhouetted and ghostly in the mornings as you make your coffee, eat your cereal in the living room. You listen to your NPR station while they listen to theirs. You hear them talking about their children, their wives, the activities they did over the weekend; they

talk in those smooth rhythms of family, and for a while there, in the mornings, you will kind of feel like part of their family — not a daughter exactly, or a wife, but a cousin, a cousin who's come to visit, a cousin you don't want to leave.

Throughout your remodel, post pictures of the process on Facebook. People who normally don't talk to you at all — your colleagues at work, in particular — suddenly begin stopping you in the hallways to ask about paint colors, foundations, and countertops. This puzzles you for a minute, until you realize they've been watching you from their computers. This fact will both please and distress you, so keep posting the pictures and hover near the computer to see who will "like" them. Look for approval wherever it might be found.

9.

One day Dave will bring an invoice for the work done so far. He's got his sheepish look on the minute he parts the translucent veil to get to you, and you brace yourself. Dave hates to disappoint, and you hate to be disappointed^p. *Well*, he says, *we're coming in a little high*, and he shows you the bill, with figures on it that that seem impossibly large. He promises to cut their labor costs in half to at least come back into the ballpark of their estimate, but that ballpark, you think, must be bigger than Yankee stadium.

It's time, anyway, to link together the kitchen and dining room, so the veil comes down, the paintbrushes come out. *I can help*, you say, hoping to keep the costs at a minimum, and so for the next several weeks you will become the brothers' slave. You will do whatever they ask: spend hours painting the teal cabinets white, straining your eyes to touch up the yellow in the corners, prowling the dining room with a thin brush to perfect that plum. You paint doors, you paint trim, you attach door pulls and knobs. You surprise yourself with all you can do.

^p MM, asleep, dreams he is commanding the stars that disintegrate as they fall from the sky, the light of their phosphorescent tails gritty with sparkle.

You work side-by-side with the brothers, and you fall into that easy rhythm of murmured conversation. You hear a song come on the radio, and you both say: *that's a blast from the past* or *that's an interesting version of that song* – the way a couple might do at the breakfast table, saying things to one another that are not really endearments, but have that endearing quality to them. Then you hear, in the background, David Byrne singing *how did I get here?* and *this is not my beautiful wife, this is not my beautiful house*, and you both start humming it, and Dave might start telling you about his many incarnations as a helicopter pilot, and a fisherman, and an engineer, and he wonders, too, how he got here, how he loves his wife and family, but thought there might be more....and then you just stop talking, the way couples do, both of you engrossed in the painting, while outside his brother works the circular saw.

10.

As the brothers near completion on your beautiful house, you begin to get a little nervous. You've grown accustomed to their faces, as the old song says, *grown accustomed to the trace of something in the air....*

You know that you'll miss these men in your house, tall men who know how to use hammers and saws, who can envision a room where none exists, who can build from the ground up, make sturdy foundations and walls and ceilings. You'll miss the big trucks in your driveway – one white and one green – the male energy in the house, all these men working so hard to please you, to make you happy.

Prepare yourself now for the emptiness that will come over you when they're gone. You'll miss these men in their smelly work clothes, calling out good morning, cranking up NPR, chatting, mulling over the plans, peering intently at your walls, pouring attention onto your house and so, by extension, onto you. Admit that you found yourself falling in love with them a little bit, if love means that warm companionship you feel as you're painting a cabinet cloud white, while he fixes the hinges.

You're driving home one day and realize you're behind Dave's truck. You see the back of his head, his hand tapping the steering wheel. You understand that he's going to your house too, and you feel unreasonably giddy.

One day, Dave will peek his head in the door and say, *well that's it, we're done*, and you'll say *okay, see you tomorrow*, until you realize he means *done for good*.

11.

When people come over to see the new parts of your house, they often utter the phrase, "you've done such a good job!" *But I didn't do any of it*, you protest, *it was all the men* — Dave and Dan and Tom and the guy with the excavator — but slowly you come to realize that you *did* do a good job, that you are a part of these details. You envisioned it, you made all those decisions, you hired the right people. You did a good job.

You'll wake with your familiar aches and pains, hold one hand to the small of your back as you make your coffee, the dog already at the back door waiting to be let out. She skitters on the damp planks that still smell like cedar. You step out with her in your worn slippers to look across the expanse of green that now seems so much more...how do you put it? so much more *yours*.

12.

Fall arrives, and you have your best friends over for Suzanne's birthday celebration. You'll make foods you've never made before: mulligatawny, zucchini kofta, sweet and sour tamarind sauce. You extend one end of the table, set it with flowers and candles, soup bowls and plates. Your friends will arrive with their dog, and Abbe will perk up in a way you haven't seen her for months. The two dogs will circle all the people in the living room, then settle under the table, like a scene from a painting called "Dinner Party with Dogs."

The new dining room somehow makes the kitchen bigger, the whole house bigger, big enough to hold all your friends and then

some. They mill around the homemade papadam Lee brought, dipping it in the tamarind sauce that tastes so complex you can't help but keep sampling it again and again, trying to discern all the flavors. Raisins you finally tell them, it's made with raisins. And ginger, and cinnamon, and tamarind, so many flavors marrying together without even being cooked.

You serve the mulligatawny from the stove, but all the other dishes are arrayed on the table, because now there is plenty of room. People can pass platters along, servings can be heaped onto plates, and all the while they are talking, talking, talking, and laughing. At some point you'll let the dogs out in the backyard, and because your yard is still not fenced you stay out there on the deck to watch them until they're ready to go back inside. Night has fallen — an early autumn night, with its cool touch to the air, the light farther south than it's been all summer, still a thin blue line on the horizon.

While you wait, you turn back to the house and see, through that enormous glass door, your dinner party going on without you, lit by the unobtrusive recessed lights, the candles in their Pier One metal boat. You watch them: your friends laughing, eating, bent over their plates and scooping up kale with mango, roti with raita, kofta ball after kofta ball, the platters continually passed. Someone's wine glass is always in the air, in mid-drink. Ed is leaning back in his chair and his hands are waving; you know he is telling a funny story, and you wait for it, wait for it....and there it is — the perfectly timed burst of laughter from all of them, a hand slapped on the table, a water glass raised to the lips as someone wipes away tears.

Their children are not here this evening: Sofie already a young woman, working her weekend job at the pizzeria, Jin a new teenager, 13 years old, who would rather now be with his friends on a Saturday night. They've been here for many Hanukkahs, many birthdays, sitting on the floor in the living room with their plates, playing their gameboys together, swapping game cards and strategies. But now they seem to be going on without you, and the parents take this in stride most of the time, understand the children won't be

with them forever. You watch your friends without their children, talking and talking. Your house is filled with their voices. You're outside looking in, your friends making a backlit tableau, a picture of family that replaces the one you once thought mandatory.

You turn back to check on the dogs, who are walking circles in the middle of the lawn, noses deep into the weeds. And now Abbe stops, looks at you though you haven't said a word. Meeko comes running first, and then Abbe follows, the two of them galumphing up the steps and making a beeline toward their people.

13.

Your house, now that you've changed it, seems capable of even more change. Now you move through the house, away from the perfect dining room, and you start eyeing the lopsided doorway in the living room, the small bathroom with its ugly texture on the upper walls.

You begin to surreptitiously cruise for new bathroom sinks on the Internet, and fancy faucets. You understand now the adrenaline rush of *change*, and you eye the kitchen counters, think *maybe granite*. It would be nice to see the brothers again; there must be some job you can rustle up to lure them back, some way to squirrel away the money. You feel like a junkie, and you pull back away from that edge, give yourself a bone: just that new sink in the bathroom, that's all, just one couldn't hurt. And maybe a counter that wraps across the top of the toilet. And maybe shelves, but *that's it!* Still you know there's really no end to it, no end to what can be changed.

All this time, you know what you *really* want is to feel that kind of remodel going on in yourself — a complete gut job from the inside out — but such a project involves unforeseen obstacles, and dust, lots of dust, living with a mess for a while as you demolish and start all over again. You'll have to call in some experts, be patient as they look you over, survey your old wiring, the hazardous foundation. They'll say *this is what we can do*, and provide estimates that you know will be wholly inaccurate.

You think about all this as you cruise overstocks.com for your new sink. You think about this as you're holding up yet more paint chips against the ugly bathroom wall, and maybe you'll ask Dave if that texture can be changed, "while we're at it," – a phrase that you know is dangerous, that leads you into all kinds of trouble: *while we're at it*.

So you turn off the computer, and get out your yoga mat. You close your eyes and bend into child's pose, breathing deep. You feel the house go quiet around you – the fridge humming in its new corner, the dining room blushing with pleasure. You try to remember what it's like to be content with what is, to not have to change a thing. **f**

JENNIFER KANKE

LITTLE THINGS (THAT ADD UP TO WINTERTIME COMFORT)

Based on a pamphlet by the Ohio Department of Development

It's easier and cheaper to heat your body than to get a divorce. Dress warmly indoors. Sweaters, toe socks, white ski masks with mouths outlined in red. Layers of clothing provide better protection against cold than a single layer of thick infidelity.

Higher humility helps you tolerate lower thermostat settings as well. If you don't have a humilifier (installed at birth or in some small Church of Christ down your grandmother's holler), try setting pans of mea culpas on radiators or near guilt registers to increase the winter humility level in your home. Nothing works against the dryness of pride and lust like guilt and accepting responsibility for someone else's failings. You may not want to consider this measure if you have small children in your home due to potential esteem hazards.

Lower your thermostat at night and sleep under layers of blankets like the wedding quilt your grandmother made you. Seeing all the fabric scraps from her old polyester pantsuits will be all the warmth you need, will keep you safe in your bed at night.

Don't set the thermostat at a higher setting than normal when you wake up in the morning. Your husband will not warm up faster.

On sunny days, keep hearts and flowers open all the way on south-facing windows. It's free heating! Hearts should be tightly closed at night and on overcast days to cut heat loss. Do not expend yourself

trying to cut the dark when sealing yourself tight against it is quicker and more energy efficient.

Move romantic comedies, *Cosmos* or other items that block air circulation away from heating outlets and return air grills to prevent interference.

Clean or replace the filter in your system once a month during the heating season, or more frequently if your husband is extremely dusty. Do what you can to help the flow, but do not force it. Plug leaks, batten down the hatches, and put on a wool sweater. These simple steps will help ensure that you and your household budget make it safely (and warmly) to the spring^k.

^kMM on deck, the bad knee he has taken in the circle grinds into something buried in the dirt, a lead ballplayer, a batter swinging two bats, in pinstripes no less.

S.L. WISENBERG

WHERE IS IT WRITTEN THE SADNESS OF THE WORLD?

L'ONCLE DU COUSIN

The summer her brother died Mandy Silverman went to Paris. She stayed with someone's shirt-tail relatives, as her father referred to them – the uncle and aunt of a cousin of an uncle by marriage of a business friend of his. Mandy was 15. The French people paid her air fare in exchange for her anticipated work. She felt like a girl in a fairy tale, sent away from her family, to a strange place where no one knew her. The trip was supposed to take her mind off her brother; she would develop a new vocabulary, one without the words she'd heard over and over the last weeks: coroner, suicide, Bloody Marys. Suicide. Gone. The friend's uncle's cousin's uncle (*l'oncle du cousin de l'oncle de l'ami* – it had the sound of an exercise to it, like *Les mouchoirs d'Edward sont dans les tiroirs de l'armoire* – the first French tongue-twister she learned, later) was a tailor and her job was to make small repairs. Mandy's mother had performed all the sewing at home. She would make costumes for school and quickly sew buttons back on. She'd learned all that working at the department store in Texarkana when she was their age, she would remind them. Mandy knew how to thread a needle, but l'oncle had to teach her how to tie the knot at the end. She couldn't get the hang of using a thimble; after she got blood on an ivory-colored silk skirt, he whisked the skirt from her, yelled at her in French and ran out the door. He came back an hour later and said, not unkindly, quite relievedly: You will to work for my sister, on the boulangerie. It makes best. For you. He carried her suitcase down the street, and still feeling like an exiled princess, she woke up early the next morning, not 100 years

later, and her curse was a most ancient one – Adam’s, to earn her bread by the sweat of her brow.

PROMOTIONS

Mandy grew up lower-middle-class, though no one in the family seemed to recognize that that’s what they were. They thought about Europe and history, and read more books than most petty bourgeois Texans did. They were elite lower-class. Her father was a salesman. Her mother was a bureaucrat in the hotel industry, where she is still, and is still rising up in the hierarchy. She was definitely white collar. Her brother was a genius but unfortunately that was not a job available to teen-age boys then and there or maybe anywhere and he suffered for it. Mandy’s father said he was from Poland but he would usually mention Argentina, too. Sometimes he said he immigrated from the first one to the other, and sometimes he said his parents had been the immigrants. He sold promotional trinkets to companies – key chains and hot pads and head bands with their logs on them. Mandy’s mother was austere; she tried to distance herself from the rest of the family and usually succeeded. She came home from work each evening tired.

Mandy’s father spent many nights on the road with his trinkets. He did best with entrepreneurs in small Texas towns. Her mother had grown up along the border with Arkansas, in the divided town of Texarkana, where she had gathered bitter memories which she generously shared with her children, as she described to them the shabby department store where she had worked and carefully rebuffed the advances of the manager, having to be polite enough so that he would not fire her. She did not tell them about the nights she let him take her to dinner, drive her home, and stop on the way at the local lovers’ lane. Those nights she would brush her teeth twice, three times.

FOURTEEN FAMILIES

It started as class war. There were 14 rich families who owned all, Andy told his sister Mandy. The story of El Salvador like a fairy tale. Once there was a rich cabal of families who owned all the land. And the peasants worked for them and were grateful. And then. And then came along peasants who were pushed too far. Or, as the landowners would say, peasants who were treated just a bit too nicely, and they grew cocky. They thought they deserved more. And they turned on the bosses and brought chaos into that world. And after rebellion, as so often happens, came the Americans, Andy being one of them. He lived with the people during the fall and winter. In spring he returned to Texas, drank those Bloody Marys, and jumped.

POTIPHAR (BIBLICAL)

Joseph in Potiphar's house. He is trusted. Potiphar is the chief of the cooks. He is a chef. There are gleaming knives and copper pots hanging in the kitchen from a brick wall. His wife's friends say she is so lucky to have a man who cooks. And cleans too. Potiphar is an artist in his anticipation of needs. He creates new dishes, oversees the banquets. Joseph becomes his security guard, his secretary, his manager. Every great man needs a manager. The pharaoh has many secretaries, many men in his cabinet. But the man does not give his wife enough attention. He is nearing 70. She is 50. Joseph is a young man. He is lonely, he still speaks the language haltingly with an accent. She offers to help him learn. She will tutor him. She likes the idea of this young man who watches her lips with such complete interest. He is without guile. He does not desire her. He desires her language. She is moving her lips and he is watching them and trying to pronounce the way she does but he is dreaming of men who will bring him gifts for what he will do, what he will let them do, who will proffer kohl to line his eyes, and perfume for his hair, and

honey they will spread on his lips. Are you listening? Potiphar's wife asks, perturbed and pouting. He can see the wrinkles that connect the sides of her nose and edges of her lips. He does not want her. He could see her as a mother if he had had a mother. But his mother died long ago and is lost to him.

She says I love your eastern coat though it is tattered some, here give it to me I want to wear it and then I'll have it cleaned and repaired for you, the trim is breaking away here, your nice gold trim. You are such a lovely young man to have such nice gold trim curly like your hair. I love exotic things.

He sighs.

You Hebrews are so sensuous. And gentle. My husband touches me the way he chops onions. She wrinkles her nose. Laughs harshly.

He does not know exactly what she means but thinks of the gleaming knives the blades^c hanging in the kitchen.

She rubs herself against him. She says her husband wasn't interested that they sleep in separate bedrooms. He wonders what a woman would be like but he is a gracious guest in Potiphar's house. He says no and then she yells loudly and tears off his coat, and he runs away. She is yelling rape, rape, and he is thrown in prison.

BLUEPRINT

Does Mandy have to carry on her brother's life? Does she have to venture to El Salvador and find the peasant family and ask if her brother was happy? As if that would not be an affront to their Third-World-civil-war poverty. They would be disturbed if she said he were not happy, an affront to their hospitality. How could we have made him happier? They could not be so naïve as to not know about mental illness, depression, despair, they would know of people sick in the brain. Did they resent this baleful American plopped down upon their straw pallet?

^cMM, with the ax in shadow, splits the broom handle, hacks the broom and buckets into kindling, chips and wedges, fly into splinters.

WEIGHT

In Paris that summer in her teens, her hosts, the uncle's brother-in-law, *beau-frère* soon saw, to his lights, that Mandy was as doughy as the loaves he punched down. He decided that this simply would not do, he must send her back to America as bony and svelte as any Chanel model.

And so began two and a half months of rationing. He told the other workers to watch her food intake. He offered her one roll a day; out of rebellion, she wouldn't take a bite. She pretended it was Passover, and all she ate was fruit and vegetables and cheese. I'm a vegetarian, she said, a vegetarian for humanitarian reasons. Her penance for her brother. In time, she stopped looking at the dough as potential food, nouriture. It was not food, it was French. Food was American. Because she was in France, the food was French and therefore not food. She ate fewer and fewer kinds of fruits and vegetables, no cheese that smelled foreign. She would eat only food that looked American, that spoke to her in English.

When it was time for her to leave France, *le beau-frère de l'oncle du cousin de l'oncle de l'ami de son père* bought her red high-heeled shoes and a snug blue striped dress. He smeared red lipstick on her, lacquered her hair and all but tied her in a bow. At the airport in Houston her mother said, Mandy, you're all bones, didn't they feed you there?

She looks great, her father said, like a model. Let's go shopping when you've gotten some sleep. The schoolboys will be all over you like fruit flies.

And he dropped her off at the Galleria the next week but said she couldn't spend much, money was tight, but just for right now, soon the next big thing was coming up, a business idea, he was getting in on the ground floor, and she knew nothing had changed. She stopped looking for her brother everywhere, then.

ORDINARY

Philosopher Simone Weil restricted herself to the wartime ration apportioned to each ordinary French citizen, willful in her disregard of the ordinary practice of her contemporaries: of frantically bartering and scheming for more on the black market. For a livable portion. Give us this day our daily bread. Butter she denied herself. She was an accede. Her headaches were her stigmata. Piercing headaches. Her skinniness. Her sharp European intelligence and extremeness. She died in England in 1943, scrawny, tubercular, her heart giving out.

I am the one who was supposed to die, Mandy tells her dead brother every so often, silently, as if praying. But I was unable to wither away, like the capitalist state. Therefore she bore the burden of having to be/become brilliant, believing she was merely performative.

Simone's brother André left France in 1941 and eventually tucked himself away in Princeton, wrapped in his genius for mathematics, living half a century more. Never succumbing to madness. While Simone sister said of the crucifixion: Every time I think of it I commit the sin of envy.

AGONY

Simone Weil found herself in agony. Mandy Silverman's brother Andy found himself in the poverty of El Salvador. And lost himself again. Did the Salvadorans believe that the rich were happy? Or did the peasants reassure themselves: the rich are not happy because deep down they are not just. Easier for a camel, etc. but dreaming of the rich foods, etc. The sorrow of Bontche Schweig, the lowly Jewish beggar in I.L. Peretz' tale, who could not ask for more than a roll and butter for himself because he himself could no longer dream. His dreams had died. He was so beaten down that when angels gave him a chance for a wish, he could not summon a grand vision.

There was no communism, no territory to dream of, no end to poverty and war. Only rolls and butter. Steaming. That is important. The rolls must be warm to the touch. Must melt heavenly in his mouth.

ASTHMA

When Mandy Silverman was younger her body did not allow her to be carefree. Her body was not a tool that she could use. It was an encumbrance. It took away from her, though of course how could she be separated or divorced from her body?

It called attention to itself by hurting her. Her childish lungs hurt her child self; what had her asthmatic lungs said to her? Why were they punishing her? She was being punished for something, why else would she not be able to breathe without pain? The cause and effect, what was that? She tried to reach for it with her mind. She tried to project her mind forward.

Her lungs were saying to her: pay attention. You should be dead, you should be dead now, you should have died, and we are reminding you of that. She should have died like those 93 Jewish schoolgirls who killed themselves. Her father told her about them when she was younger, how they lived in Poland during the war and committed suicide themselves in order to escape the Nazis. But she was never good enough to die like them. Her whole life she knew she should have been dead. That is her burden. So that each day she awakes is a rebuke to fate and that scares her. She wonders if she has been living all this time in a half life enjoying only half of what everyone else does.

And her father gave his son, his only son, who fell upon his sword. Who died for his sins. The family's sins.

AWKWARD

Simone Weil. Her great gawkiness. All elbows and knees, like the Timbertoes family in *Highlights* magazine. Mandy always needed a blueprint. For her life. That often was what held her together, her belief that she could be the surviving sibling, the André Weil to her brother's Simone. That she could be brilliant and ensconced some place brilliant and soft like Princeton, where André taught, a place that was complacent in its Protestant reputation for excellence. Not extreme. She did not have to be extreme. She did not have to be Simone. She did not have to starve herself. To death.

TWO POLES

If only Andy Silverman had stayed alive until the invention of the SSRIs. If only his sister Mandy had, until they were commonly prescribed. Her daughter is the only one left to be thinking this. The lone person alive on the stage of a Shakespeare tragedy. If only – you could say that about anyone, Philip Graham of the *Washington Post*, bipolar who killed himself, reported to have been in great spirits days before he shot himself, because he had a plan to end his pain; LBJ, an alleged manic-depressive, running a country, a divided country at war with another divided country. Mandy's daughter, ridiculously known as Randa, short for Miranda, will be 22 when the country is divided again: Tea-partiers and latte drinkers. Each feeling more sinned against than sinning.

HEBREW LESSONS

The writer and physician Alfred Döblin (1878, Stettin, Pomerania- 1957, Emmendingen, Germany). His parents three-day-a-year Jews. Meaning Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Two evenings and a day. Empty Hebrew lessons. No real piety. Which he found in the 1920s in Berlin's Eastern European Jewish

neighborhoods and in Poland, but they were not his people. He wrote about the Eastern Jews because he was asked to by fellow Jews in Berlin. The Polish Jews were not Western as he was, they were not sons of Greek and Roman philosophy. They were not steeped in and products of the great Christian western world. They were not Germans. He did believe in a territory for them, he did collect money and speak for their benefit. He wanted to be Catholic but did not convert because he did not want to betray the cause. But once he escaped the Old World, he could follow the light, the crucifix. He could lose himself in the symbol. He could find himself in the agony. The agony and the mystery. He sought the fairytale. He sought the narrative that would survive the war. He did not think the Jews would survive. Their religion not supple enough.

CHOICE (BIBLICAL)

In prison Joseph was used by the men. He didn't mind. He minded that he didn't mind. He did not have to look at their faces. He held on to the top of a chair back, he clutched a table, a window sill and gave in to them, and it was a gift to let himself be theirs. He didn't have to do much. He was happy to be admired (so he thought, imagined) and they gave him gifts, didn't they?

They helped him curl his hair. They smuggled in cosmetics for him. They painted his eyes. He knew what they were doing, but he admitted his own softness, his love of dance. And when he was named chief trusty, he had two men, one in front and one behind. That was all he wanted. He was happy, his choices limited. He thought of his brothers and how they would have to explain his disappearance to their father. The thought of their discomfort nourished him. He had no ambition. He would stay here, among men, between men. Bathing in rosewater. He had forgotten anything he'd known of free choice.

CORN

There was something elemental among the peasants whom Andy boarded with. Corn meal and rice and beans and coffee. Nescafé and canned spaghetti for festive occasions. Posole. Papusas – corn meal with white cheese inside. Mandy wanted to believe that her brother had found peace there. Moreover, love. But maybe he'd been miserable. Maybe there was a hysterical phone call to her parents. No one left to ask. Did he return home early? She knows she wants to believe that he did not. That he returned only because he was due back in college, that he could have remained there and refined his Spanish and expanded his vocabulary and his mastery of verb tenses. A maestro of verb tenses. What is the word in Spanish? She can put her mind on French only – *maitre*. Like *maitre d'hôtel*.

CRUCIFIX, AGAIN

The ones who gaze on the crucifixion because there is nothing they know in Judaism to contain their despair: Simone Weil. Alfred Döblin. The crucifix small enough and large enough to contain all despair. And yet the joy that believers find in it. That all is unfolding according to plan. The people who imagine they are Jesus do not choose that i.d. because they are suffering. They suffer from delusions of grandeur only. Jesus had god whispering in his ear from the beginning.

DUST

Andy loved the dust and dirt of El Salvador. He found in the stench of bodies a kind of truth. A truth beyond the murders performed by both the young government soldiers and the young guerrillas. In the same families. You have a dead body before you and you can not dispute its existence.

EQUAL PARTS

In Berkeley, in the Reagan years, which were her 20s, Mandy Silverman wept during her shifts at The Bread House, ducking under the register, behind the counter. Sweeping a bit of the floor with the whisk broom. Pretending to shape shape organize the folded stack of used paper bags that customers bring in. The lady said the cheese scone has a bite taken out of it and Mandy said then don't take that one but that was not the end of it. The lady said you want me to put it back? It's unsanitary. Mandy took hold of it with a wax paper square and put in the wire basket for the homeless later on. What is important here is that she collapsed after one harsh word. Would hide in the bakery or rush out the door. It could be a question asked harshly. Or a tone that conveyed impatience, yes, impatience in this lazy so-called utopian town in this intentional community of bakers of which she was An Important Part, an equal part. Of the collective. That's what the by-laws said.

FAILURE

Andy Silverman felt like a failure. And he was. Unless he was too young to be considered a failure or success. At what age do you declare yourself one and does society declare you either? Oh, you're being hard on yourself, society might say. Their father was disappointed, deeply, in him. In both of his children, because he didn't understand his daughter Mandy's small successes in performance. Her father shouted at her for her indecency, the cheapness of her work. He would cite his embarrassment, over and over, so much that his reaction eroded any pride she'd had in her good reviews. After he died, she lived with his imagined and his real, remembered opprobrium, at the same time she had a community, people who understood what she was doing. Reviewers, fans, even. Articles and letters attest, yellowed, in this box. If she had lived long

enough, she could have become one of the NEA Four. She would have made it five.

The Lord took the Fifth.

GILEAD, BALM IN

When she spent the summer in France in her teens, Mandy didn't know why the families she lived with each had two different last names, a French one for their customers and their Jewish, original one. She didn't think to ask about the war, didn't know that there had been concentration camps on French soil, barely registered what Vichy referred to.

In Paris she wasn't aware of being Jewish — she thought of herself primarily as young, then defined herself (or was defined by the French) as a foreigner and someone who did not speak the language well or at all.

Later when she learned about Jewish holidays she'd never heard of, she realized that Tisha B'Av, the national day of mourning, had come and gone the August after her brother's death. How comforting it would have been to read Lamentations (*Is there no balm in Gilead, no physician for my daughter?*) in a chorus with French people. Of course, the holiday came and went every year, but that she'd missed it that year seemed especially sad, that she'd been oblivious to the opportunity to lament as a group for ancient destruction. Maybe that was her curse, to feel that her troubles were personal to her, unique, had never been felt by anyone else throughout time.

GREAT SEX

In her 30s, Mandy performed solo in small theaters, taking on the roles of famous Jews. She combed libraries and archives for the history, she realized admired dead women who'd had great sex. Sarah Bernhardt, *la grande horizontale*. Mandy loves Emma Goldman

partly because of her sex life. Women with great sex can be proud. It is an accomplishment, like knowing how to play a pianer in the parlor, to tat and spin and clean a room, deliver a baby. Things a girl ought to know. Because a woman who has great sex has great power? She doesn't need men – or doesn't need a man, singular, she needs men (or women), making her oddly self-sufficient. She is not uptight. It is easier to say what she is not. She is free. She is not a prude. She is fun-loving. She breaks rules. She courts danger. Is all of that in sex? Not in riding horses or inciting riots? She says: My body goes here. She lets it do what it does. What does it mean when you say he was good in bed? What does a good lover mean? Touching the partner in a way that is pleasing. Being relaxed. But not lazy. A certain amount of industry is required.

If you like it, you are Good. You are Modern. Who has time for dancing and singing and music lessons nowadays when the one parlor accomplishment is done with tongue and torso and pelvis? You are supposed to be a high achiever; achieving orgasm. Multiple, as if they were a project you could build. Or something you could put on your vita, get more salary points for.

Is great sex wiggling a lot? Or is that big-wiggling sex? Is great sex moaning a lot or is that big-moaning sex? Is great sex big star orgasm sex or is that a big orgasm that came along while you were having some kind of sex, with your lover, by yourself, or with your apparatus? Is great sex two-orgasm sex, three and four, is great sex drunken sex where it feels like dancing through water that makes you weightless? Is great sex scary sex where your heart beats so deeply because you think outside the door there are footsteps? Is great sex scary sex where you tell your heart it hears footsteps and you're afraid of someone finding out that you like to pretend to your heart that it hears footsteps at the doorway? Is great sex sex when you're in love so that every caress is a caress and every kiss is a kiss and every sigh is the beginning of a new rapture? Is rapture ever a part of love or is it always part of sex?

Tishman was her lover before Jonah. Great sex, Tishman said, is sex have when you don't think of adjectives except until it's over. And that is why as soon as you say, That was great sex you are sad. Like that phrase in Latin: *omne animal post coitum triste est*, after sex the animal is sad. Maybe it's because the animal has to get dressed and go to work. But if it's nighttime, he goes to sleep – then the sadness comes from it ending. Are we sad after a great meal during which our hunger is aroused and sated? Religious Jews sing after a meal. They bless that which they have eaten. Offer their praises. It sounds like a drinking song, it is quite rousing. If you were to hear it you would imagine men linking arms. It is rollicking. To think that you could sing that way after each meal – to *bentsh*, it's called in Yiddish, reciting prayers. We are *bentshing*. Gentlemen, let us *bentsh*, they say at the beginning. Mandy imagines men eating on benches, picnic tables, singing lustily. Then going to sleep or studying quietly. And there is no sadness.

JOSEPH (BIBLICAL)

Some rabbis say he curled his hair, penciled his eyes, lifted his heel. He was 17. His father's favorite. He dreamed of his brothers bowing to him and told them his dream. He learned empathy only in prison, much later, in Egypt.

JOSEPH'S DREAMS (BIBLICAL)

He interprets the dream of the pharaoh, of the seven lean cows that consume the seven fat cows, he dreamed of breaking from his prison of seeing the light and the white of his father's beard, his father returning to him, brought by his brothers, who left him in a pit to be captured and sold. Money changes hands from man to man. He is sold, he sells bread, retail, says the bible, several times, he takes his brothers' gold coins and returns them, he returns them again, he hides a goblet in his baby brother's bag and it is brought

back. All is the circular dream of a dreaming god who wants to watch his subjects exchange bright threads and gold pieces and dream of his own glory.

LOGIC

Simone Weil stopped eating sugar at six. Because the war (Great War) was going on and the soldiers had none. Therefore, she was a soldier too.

MAGIC¹

See Andy. See Andy run. See Andy take the city bus downtown and get off at Main and Holcombe. See Andy order three drinks at the Shamrock Hotel bar. Two Bloody Marys and a virgin, with hot sauce. The bartender told the investigators that he didn't remember which was first. Which was the tragic part, really. Because it would show intent. If he drank alcohol first then drank a Virgin Mary after, it would show that he did not want to become drunker and drunker. He finished his drinks and went through the gate to the pool. We don't know how he got in there, the manager said. We can't have guards stationed all over in case any Tom Dick or Harry decides to take the perilous climb over the fence. He didn't say perilous. He meant it, though. He said something simpler, more indicting. Dangerous. Stupid. Andy was wearing a tie and he took it off first and lay it on the ground. As if he did not want to stain it. As if he wanted it to be there when he came back. Like boys doffing their clothes at the edge of a swimming hole. Hanging them on a branch.

The rabbi told them he could not be buried in the regular part of the cemetery, but after a friend made a donation, the rabbi found a spot. Like magic. In stentorian tones he told the mourners: We

¹MM tries to stop the parade of animated brooms marching down the stairs rank on rank, a rally of fascists, their buckets of water sloshing balletically.

will never know what this young man was thinking or what he could have accomplished. He was a lucky boy and a very unlucky boy.

MAGIC-2

In August in the 1970s Paris did mostly shut down. The boulangerie where Mandy worked was open half-days, and she'd walk to the park with her strips of paper with vocabulary words flapping in the wind.

She'd sit on an iron *banque* – bench – in the Jardin de Luxembourg, watching the male sparrows with their markings like *cravates* – neckties – peck at the sand for scraps, and the plain females, standing on thin legs like the live chicks her parents used to buy for her and Andy at the grocery store on Easter.

Men would try to talk to her there. She brushed them away with her hair, shaking it back and forth, till she'd fall in love with the movement, hair falling against her cheeks, and I'd start humming, forgetting where she was, who she was, and when she'd stop, from dizziness, breathless, he'd be gone.

Tateh, she thought, I made a man disappear.

MAGIC-3

For a year after France Mandy stayed skinny. A regular Audrey Hepburn, said her gym teacher when she saw her that fall. Mandy beamed. With renewed energy she picked up her tasks, which were mainly: to forget Andy. To not speak of him, even when they had the unveiling of the gravestone the next summer and huddled together on a hot hot day in the cemetery and chanted the familiar, comforting language of the Kaddish and then friends and a few stray relatives came over for kichel and chocolate chip cookies and sweet wine.

She started eating again. Fruit, vegetables, cheese – and now, bread. And she gained weight. Such a pretty face, all her mother's friends would say. She looks French, doesn't she? Say something for

us, Mandy. *Je voudrais manger tout le monde*, she said. She want to eat everyone. She want to eat the world. But the rest of those years it seemed destined to eat her up.

PERFECT

Did Andy ever read Ecclesiastes? Where else would you find respite? Where else would you find validation, that you were part of a long line of people, of humans who felt this way, that you weren't a monster? He said he was a monster because of his feelings, not his appearance. Because outside he was beautiful. He too was perfect. In his way. His dark glossy hair. His dark glossy eyes and eyelashes. Rounded brows, protective brows. Rounded half-moons at the base of his fingernails. His well-bitten, sometimes bloody fingernails. And pulled-out cuticles.

His body was not perfectly shaped any longer. But was now part of the perfect (all god's will, nature's way) circle of birth and decay. Food for the great-great-grandchildren of the original worms who fed on him and used him to make more earth that nourished trees or not. That blew in microscopic bits back up into the sky and was borne by the wind, and then came back down carrying molecules of acid rain on its invisible back.

SEX

In high school Mandy had sex easily, unself-consciously. Only sometimes desperately. She may have been trying to prove something but she didn't know what. Was it her way of copying her brother Andy, her watered-down version of his going to the roofs of buildings, the diving boards of empty pools? She was skinny again, intense, she wore tight shirts and hip-huggers; she was busy busy busy, she was an executive when it came to sex, a time-study manager, a Taylorist. She wondered if any of the other girls knew what a Taylorist was.

Snob, snob.

But sex. She liked finding the right places, like turning the pins of the tumbler. Getting it right, right. What a wonderful thing to be in a boy's arms and you pull your tongue this way and your mouth around this way and you see them helpless like huge babies and oh oh they want so much, the need rushing over them like sobbing rushing over them, a storm, and then so grateful. Such grateful boys. It made her feel motherly. Like a nun ministering to the poor. Sometimes, depending, she would let the boy reciprocate. She was trying to keep herself in control though sometimes she permitted herself a quick sharp orgasm, rub here and here, she could direct, ah thank you. It never whooshed all over and through her like a boy's.

She was with these boys like this when she was drunk. When there was a secluded spot at a party. These boys were her friends. It would always be after drinking. She knew she shouldn't with boys who had girlfriends but she was. Their girlfriends were afraid. Mandy was not. She rushed in. Maybe the angels, she saw once in a cartoon, are the fools that did rush in at one time. I am a rushing fool, she said to herself. A Russian fool. The fool of a court. The one in Shakespeare who is always alone, always prescient, always speaking double, high and low culture, monarchist and revolutionary, speaks backwards and forward, like a palindrome, play me either way.

SOLO

O to be a sculptor like Henry Moore, your life full of years and decades of work, working until the end. Feeling the force in you to move forward. Being pulled into the future like metal following a magnet. Or to be a member of a repertory troupe, where there were always companions working with you, setting and meeting deadlines together, straining together in the same yoke. Ensemble. Where you owed something to one another and created together, every

voice and body necessary. For the last decade everything in America had turned to teams, following the Japanese, just a way to coerce American workers to feel loyal to the boss, who was hoping to break the strain of individualism.

I am a sole performer, she always said. I work alone. She felt it was selfish and arrogant, which she did not want to be. She suspected she would not feel so alone if she felt connected to the great Muse, or Eros, or some thumping godlike heart of Art. But she did not quite believe in them, anyway.

WOMEN'S SECTION

Simone Weil had no desire to step into a synagogue of the Eastern Jews of Paris. Why? Because she would be relegated to the women's side. Because she would be considered unfortunate and a half-person unfulfilled because she was unmarried. And fruitless. And she did not want to be embarrassed by the Eastern Jews. She despised the eastern roots of her family. Unschooling. Ignorant. While the peasant Catholic belief she found to be unsullied, so right. To be universal you cannot be Jewish because the universe does not accept the Jews. As simple as that? As simple as believing that there is something wrong with the Jews because her family had rejected the religion. The Catholics have the tradition of *célibataires*. Of nuns and saints and mystics.

The incense. The myrrh. Velvet and Latin, sharply-defined shadows in whitewashed churches, flickering candles.

YEAST

In the 1980s Mandy lived quietly Berkeley/Oakland and baked. Waiting. As if waiting in exile among the yeast breads and bags and bags of flour and the hard-rind cheeses. For her time. To come out. As if she were Havel, silenced because of his independence. Biding

her time. What was happening to Havel? Why didn't he leave, like Kundera had? Kundera was like the biblical Joseph, falsely accused then prospering because of his cleverness and his gift for prophecy. Not biding his time.

YOUR OWN PEOPLE

Their father said, There are Jews right under your own nose who need help. Who, you? Andy asked. He was insolent. He had to pay his own way to El Salvador. Where he got the money no one knew. He got credit for it, school credit. Had to keep a journal in Spanish. Did he send it in? did some professor have it? Sometimes his sister Mandy is too tired to follow the clues. She could follow of them and it would lead back to her own life. And meanwhile she would have missed her life. **f**



Barbara Weissberger, *Uh-Oh, Are You Saying...?*, 2007



Barbara Weissberger, *Good Year*, 2007



Barbara Weissberger, #1018, 2009



Barbara Weissberger, *Uh Yeah, I Guess So*, 2008

ELY SHIPLEY

A SWEET TEEN

boredom. Isolation on a flimsy mattress. Floating out in a sea of books and photographs and sheet music for guitar.

Out on the lawn facing the street, the neighbors are strangers. The mailman comes but she never sees him. The mail truck creeps by so quietly it's a cloud gleaming and almost melting in the sun. Perhaps that was a dream too.

*

The large teenage boy, the one who looked like a man, he's the one who pinned her down in the dark house when no one else was home. He's the one with the long beard that pressed into the soft space in her clavicle.

*

An evening curtain billows over
my bed, feathery
owl body. Hover here, over mine. In my flesh he
sinks his claw, locks into bone
above my breast. Clavicle a branch,
a wind instrument. He lifts me. We drift
out over a city. I am naked except for ribbons
of blood. Streams from my torso and arms, one
long drop falling

on the forehead
of a girl below
on her way to school. She furrows her brow,
looks into cloud
sky, reaches for

her umbrella, she's forgotten.

*

He was the one who told her there was no such thing as soul.
She said she knew there was because when she saw her grandmother
dead at the wake she could tell that her soul had left her body. Her
body was a mask of her, flat and waxy and clearly not full of life, of
soul. Perhaps, she said, soul is really a synonym for life. He laughed

at her and said her grandmother looked flat because they had taken her insides out and embalmed her. He laughed and he laughed.

*

When he eats, first, the soft parts,
eyes and tongue. My face becomes
cave. When he's through he lies me down
in a field of tall grass and wild

flowers. My bones
hum bright in sun.

*

At the cemetery she had seen another funeral. A group of Chinese people dressed in white. She thought perhaps they were angels picnicking on the long green summer lawn.

*

One day he came over in his red mustang blasting Patsy Cline. The music was hazy. The leaves in the wind swayed and made the light

golden. He brought her a 35c ice cream cone from Thrifties. Its sweetness made her sick.

He was tall and large, but not fat exactly. He had long blond hair and a red beard^{12t}. She could never remember the color of his eyes. She tried not to look in his eyes. His mouth was thin, his nose small. He was pale and doughy and freckled and hairy. She did not like him. He kept pressing into her though he rarely touched her. She would not let him. Everywhere she went she thought he might be watching.

*

He had a tattoo but she could never remember it. How did his mother let him have a tattoo? His mother was never home. Or his mother was drunk in a bedroom. Sometimes a man was with his mother. She could hear their murmuring. The windows always closed. Dark and warm. Quiet. Still as a swampy puddle.

*

^{12t}MM that afternoon before the game in Enid, Oklahoma, went into a movie house to get out of the heat, watched *Fantasia* off and on, and that night, shattered his bat playing a half-assed game of pepper warming up.

One day he dyed his long beard a darker red. His friends made fun of him. They said he had a bloody tampon hanging from his chin. Grotesque. A purple ring in his eyebrow. And a tattoo she can't remember.

*

One day he came to her room and saw pictures she was drawing of teenage boys who looked just like her except that they were boys. They played music and rode skateboards just like her. They wore black t-shirts and tight ripped jeans just like her. They had tattoos and piercings and hair as long as or longer than hers. Sometimes she named them and she loved their names, Michael, Elijah, Jonathan, Jonathan, and Noah. She never told anyone their names. He noted the pronounced bulges between their thighs, made fun of her, called her pervert.

At night she would become the boys she drew, and replayed her whole day as if she were a boy. She felt easy and happy in her boring life that way, riding her skateboard on the half-pipe she had built. She coasted along each side and then up into air. She was

suspended there. Sometimes she turned in circles slowly across the sky until the wheels caught the wood again and she coasted up the other side, smooth and firm, until she lifted up again into the sky, her long hair turning all around her, white sun spiraling everywhere. Sometimes she gazed down to see her calf covered in downy hair and watched her strong muscles tilting the board to float a little higher as if she could surf sky. Or she'd see her thickening hand grip the edge of the ramp so that she could plant herself there in a hand stand, feet high in the sky above her, the board in her other hand and her sternum filling with the white sunlight she was opening and opening.

Finally, she would retire into a door she had built into the side of the ramp. She had made a home of it.

*

In her dream there was nothing left to dream. There was only being. Even going to school then she was invisible. No one staring, especially not him.

*

Inside a cave for nine years, we sleep
for the first time in the seventh and wake

angry. With a knife I slice
each eye lid. Soft as newborn's

foreskin. Where our fallen flesh
touches earth, tea trees blossom.²

*

There had been a glass rosary around her grandmother's pale hands,
thin as parchment, inside the white coffin. She is sleeping now.
Her skin is pulled down by earth. Her face pulled into a grimace.
Grave face. She wants to say, don't worry, we will be cared for in the
afterlife. Now, she is entering earth, her grandmother's glass rosary
coiling around the whitening bones.

*

Canyon the color of ash.
We kneel beside a stream.
Here, water is silver

² From a popular legend of Bodhidharma.

and reflects sky. Blue with white streaks
of cloud. Somewhere nearby something
moves through the milky water. Now,
we're submerged. A small pale octopus
hovers. Its tentacles tusk-
like, snake-like, a medusa
head. Because we're afraid
we rise away. I turn to see
the silver stream
disappear. A slender snake
swims toward us. We part a little
to let it pass. Between us the sky is bright.

*

It was the summer she lay in front of the amplifier she'd connected
to her record player. Umbilical. She listened to an old album she'd
stolen from her grandparents. Beethoven's 3rd. She lay on the blue
carpet. Oceanic. She let the sound wash over her until she came
without touching herself.

It was the summer she threw herself onto her mattress
and looked up at the print of
Monet's water lilies
hanging above, and broke
through the wall to float in the warm

water of the paint. She could breathe inside it
and thought of Ophelia who never really seemed dead
to her. They were not dead in the water. She was not
suffocating with a mouth painted shut
nor was she painted into a square
of blue hung on the wall
of a teenage girl. Perhaps she never had been.

JENNIFER CAMPBELL

RELEARNING *THE RULES OF DATING*

Taken from Buffalo Therapy Services - Voice Therapy Release
and Relaxation Strategies

Begin by intoning
these sounds
on lightly closed lips:
Hum Yum
Yum yummy, yummy yummy
(Hum) million one, million two,
million three
Practice keeping
the placement:
My mom
motor mouth
Many men
more money
Merry maids
maybe more
Many times I try.
More time to listen.
My favorite is vanilla.
Try to talk for one minute.
May I see Tom?
Mary loves Bill.
Money is a touchy topic.
Make way for Allen.

MARY MORGAN

AN INTERVIEW WITH DAVID SHIELDS⁴⁴
&
A RESPONSE/SECOND INTERVIEW
FROM/WITH STEVE ALMOND

Email Exchanges During the Fall of 2010

The idea for this interview/conversation came about during the Tin House Writers' Conference in the summer of 2010 where David Shields and Steve Almond expressed their differing opinions on the meaning and future of writing.

MARY MORGAN

When I think of fiction, I think of imagination, more so than I do when talking of nonfiction or essay or poetry. When you say that the novel is dead, how does that relate to the state of people's/writers' imaginations? And has that changed over time?

⁴⁴MM, in The Netherlands, mucks through the mud behind the dike, unearthing the delftware shards there as the sails of the mills above creak and lift, lift and creak.

DAVID SHIELDS

Kafka said, “A book should be an axe to break the frozen sea within us.” For me, more fiction in our completely simulated society is not going to provide that axe. So, too, I find the tools of the traditional novel – glacial pace, characterizations that are essentially footnotes to Freud, antiquated allegiance to setting, pretense that language is transparent, religious-like devotion to the omniscient narrator – simply no longer convey what life is like at ground level. Most acclaimed contemporary writers are simply rewriting the 19th century novel. As a form of nostalgia, as refuge, as pretense that the verities still hold.

STEVE ALMOND

David’s basically painting “traditional novels” – not entirely sure what this means – as boring saps and saying: “Why would anyone spend time with a boring sap?” It’s not an argument, it’s a verdict.

During his lecture at Tin House, he brought up *The Great Gatsby*. He said, basically: I’d rather listen to Fitzgerald discuss his ideas than be dragged through some dreary tale about Gatsby and Daisy and the rest. That’s his right. But a lot of people – myself included – enjoy being told stories. We’d rather be led to authorial insights through characters whose fates become (however ridiculously) important to us. Gatsby isn’t compelling because he represents some idea about the impossibility of escaping one’s past. He’s compelling because he’s a guy who falls for the wrong girl and gets his heart busted. I ran into David after the lecture, in the bathroom of the dorm we were staying in, and I said to him, you know, I love your candor, and I love that you’re challenging folks, but I still think you’re elevating your own sensibility into an aesthetic posture. He was fresh from the shower and wearing a towel, so it wasn’t really the right moment for a colloquy.

As for the idea that we live in a completely “simulated society,” no argument there. But the best novels are refuges from the relentless artificiality of the age. They’re the one place where characters – and by extension readers – are forced to deal with their darkest shit. I don’t pick up Joshua Ferris’ *The Unnamed* or Daniel Mason’s *A Far Country* (two recent novels that David would probably consider traditional) to escape reality. I pick them up because they compel me to experience my internal life in a far more real way.

MORGAN

If there’s always nostalgia for the great “classics” or authors, can there ever really be new great writing? Why is there always comparison? Why is it always that the old is needed to describe the new?

SHIELDS

Of course there are thousands of great novels. I’ve read them and loved them, I promise you. I’m trying to figure out how we, as writers in 2010, move forward. It’s not by endlessly rewriting *Anna Karenina* and *Madame Bovary*. To produce great art, you have to be willing to break with the forms. Art progresses. Art, like science, moves forward. Forms evolve. Forms die. When Manet’s work first appeared, when Beethoven’s work was played, when Ulysses was first published, the overwhelming reaction was confusion and derision. These artists are now “classics.” They’re classics because they altered the face of an art form. Later, we caught up with them.

ALMOND

I do think people are changing. Their brains and hearts are becoming more frantic and fragmented, less able to perform the sustained imaginative work that reading requires. David's reaction is to suggest writing needs to take new and exciting forms, to adapt to the times. In some ways I agree with him. That's why I started publishing these strange little DIY books. I see them as gateway drugs for recreational readers. And I dig that they're radically personal.

Still, there's an undercurrent of contempt for the novel in David's critique that just baffles me. Is it truly fair to condemn the novel as a form just because people can't hack reading them anymore?

I also think there's a danger in privileging "new" and "experimental" forms. I'm all for invention. But I can't tell you how many sophomores have used this line of reasoning to justify shitty, half-baked work.

MORGAN

What is pop-culture's role in writing – how it has formed what writing has become and how it will continue to impact what it will become?

SHIELDS

In relation to mash-ups, to remixing, to appropriation: From the beginning of recorded civilization, artists have "stolen" from one another. Now that we live in such a heavily digitized culture, we need to be able to remix the immense amount of material available

to us with the movement of a cursor if art is going to advance, if writing is going to be something other than a museum piece.

ALMOND

I get that David's worried about literature becoming "a museum piece." And he sees exciting possibilities in books that appropriate from other books. But I don't really understand why "we need to be able to remix" literary material because we live in a digitized culture. Our job as writers is to tell the truth about the stuff that matters to us most deeply. We all do that in different forms: verse, memoir, reportage, stories, novels. I love mash-ups and samples as much as the next music geek. But I also love the source material.

MORGAN

Did you catch Steve Almond's reading at the Tin House Writers' Conference this past summer where he read his work with "All Out of Love" by Air Supply playing in the background? Does this relate to your opinion of writing as pop-culture or is this something else?

SHIELDS

I'm afraid I missed this. Steve said that if I attended the event, he was going to spend the entire time reading Boston Red Sox box scores.

ALMOND

Actually, I hoped to serenade David in the bathroom, in his towel, but he proved regrettably elusive.

MORGAN

How does the definition of form or genres serve our culture?

SHIELDS

All great works of literature either dissolve a genre or invent one. Work that stays safely within genre serve the commercial but not the artistic interests of culture.

ALMOND

This sounds good as an aphorism^y, but it doesn't make much sense. Did *Pride & Prejudice* invent its own genre? Or *Song of Solomon*? Or *The Road*? Did Frank O'Connor's "Guests of the Nation" dissolve the short story form, or invent a new one? Do you really believe, David, that any work that fails to challenge genre boundaries is hackwork? Honestly: most readers could care less about genres or boundaries or any of this other abstract, lit-crit stuff. They just want an author who can induce them to feel and think.

^yMM, waiting in a line for a ride at Disneyland, realizes that this waiting, this line folding back and forth on itself, is a kind of game, a dance, and so constructed that he forgets, finally, that he is waiting but instead feels that whatever he had been waiting for has already started to happen long ago.

MORGAN

In a lecture at the Tin House conference, Steve Almond spoke of “heart” in writing, the feeling of love for words and for imagination and the creation of writing. How do you consider heart in relation to literature?

SHIELDS

I’m extremely interested in an extraordinarily intimate conversation between writer and reader at a very high level. EG. Sarah Manguson. Amy Fusselman. Maggie Nelson. Simon Gray. Leonard Michaels. Et al. This head/heart dichotomy makes no sense to me; all these works blaze with considerable mental and emotional power.

ALMOND

I agree. And I’d add that the best novelists and story writers are also having “an extraordinarily intimate conversation” with their readers, just by means that don’t break the frozen sea within David.

MORGAN

“Nonfiction is a framing device to foreground contemplation. Fiction is ‘Once upon a time.’ Essay is ‘I have an idea.’ I don’t seek to narrate time but to investigate existence. Time must die.” But can you investigate existence in fiction, with a “Once upon a time” beginning? Can contemplation and revelation come from fiction? Can there be idea-driven fiction just as strong to you as nonfiction? If thought is the motor (no matter the genre) why does the use of imagination mean the same conclusions can’t be reached as in nonfiction?

SHIELDS

Sure. Some novels do that, but they are the exceptions that prove the rule. *Moby-Dick*. Proust. *Tristram Shandy*. *Elizabeth Costello*. David Markson. A book can either teach us how to endure existence or allow us to escape it. I'm not interested in the latter. The overwhelming majority of novels are deeply invested in the latter.

ALMOND

"A book can either teach us how to endure existence or allow us to escape it." Unless David is talking about commercial fiction, I just don't agree with this at all. We don't turn to literary art of any sort - novels, memoir, stories, poems - to escape, but to connect to feelings inside of ourselves that we can't reach by other means. I'm interested in ideas, as well - this is why I love Saul Bellow, for instance. Great fiction is full of ideas. But these ideas arise from - and are vitalized by - the emotional lives of characters. Put it this way: I'd rather watch Elizabeth Bennett and Darcy do their nervous courtship dance, than hear Jane Austen's lecture about the adverse effects of pride and prejudice on one's marital prospects.

MORGAN

David, you've spoken about how we only get to do this (life) once. What is it that you want to be remembered for? Who do you want to be remembered by?

SHIELDS (first response)

For altering the face of an art form.

SHIELDS (second response, the next day)

Jeez. How old do you think I am? Get back to me in fifty years.

ALMOND

There's a real trend in young writers these days toward a kind of easy nihilism. Nothing matters. We're all smart and bored and unable to connect. I'd like to be remembered as someone who represented the opposite view. Art exists, in part, to address the moral tragedies of the species. It's goal is to save people from self-destruction. I want to be a part of that effort.

MORGAN

"Don't mess with Mr. In-Between, my father would often advise me, but it seems to me that Mr. In-Between is precisely where we all live now." To me, this means exciting times, but it's also an entirely sad sentiment. What does this mean to you?

SHIELDS

All great works of literature either dissolve a genre or invent one.

ALMOND

Yeah, again, it sounds great as a manifesto. But the essential problem isn't that writers are just playing it safe. The problem is that people are becoming screen-addicted zombies unable to focus in the midst of distraction. That's what we're up against as literary artists. Not some ginned up need to "make it new."

MORGAN

This is a bit of a “Yoda” question: What is the future of writing?

SHIELDS

Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Tree of Codes*.

ALMOND

God, I hope that’s not true. I’ve only read about the book, and it may be just swell. But I’d rather the next generation of writers create their own stories, rather than cutting up mine.

MORGAN

Another Yoda: What is the future of MFA Programs?

SHIELDS

With any luck, they’ll be completely reimagined.

ALMOND

David’s answer is sort of maddening. Reimagined how? I know it’s a popular past-time among self-proclaimed rebels to slag MFA programs, but they exist as a welfare state for young artists. And they help create readers.

MORGAN

Would you consider self-publishing?

SHIELDS

With any luck, everyone will self-publish within the next 10-20 years.

ALMOND

Finally, we can agree! Viva the DIY^e revolt!

MORGAN

How would you like books organized in a bookstore?

SHIELDS

By the number of copies they've sold. All best-sellers in front surrounded by balloons. All poor-selling books in the back, front covers facing the wall.

ALMOND

Based on how much love each one contains. **f**

^eMM's son carries a bucket of soapy water to the far end of the classroom, throwing the hard yellow sponge toward the window.

LAUREL BASTIAN

GOLDILOCKS HUNTS

for shelter from clouds
stunned at their own force,
black skirts hiked to gully-wash.
She passes skylarks in their bassinets

set to drown, passes rudderless
beavers in their silt-sieve empires,
ruined from the sky's recent,
fierce incontinence, and enters

the river. Her arms
cut swift and faultless,
her lace dress fans
into a dredge in liquid dark,

her butter-locks turn havens
for algaeic colonies.
She reaches silt, climbs bank,
hits stride at empty moor,

sees the dimple of a structure
atop highland and climbs,
digging toes into the cold
and damp hurrah of red earth

until, with both hands she hauls
herself over the porch rail
and lies there gasping
like an undressed fish.

You might say she is a speciesist
when she pulls the glock
from the homemade holster
in her nest of hair and waves

three powder-gentle black bears
out of bed and down the moor-side,
shooting a winnowed hairsbreadth
from their heels in punctuation,

or when, after their backs
dissolve into horizon's line,
she burns the beds that do not suit her
so she can dry her clothes.

Naked and guilt-free, she falls
with hunger on the pantry. Berry
and grub sated, she naps hard as dried
sap on the packed earth floor.

The bears told tales of Exodus
for generations, described hot notes
of buckshot, the smell of home
burning, a ruthless, hate-pale

face ordering dawn around.
A furless she who flew
God's wet divide
to raid the garden.

You might say *don't put "glock"*
in a fairy tale; comb and oil
her girl hair; no-one
passes nests of drowning birds

without wincing a blessing.
Or maybe you already know
this hunger like the back of your hand
across a boy's face: stark

and thrill, the careless
certainty of taking
without looking back,
the love of laying waste.

RACHEL YODER

SOME REALLY DISGUSTING ESSAYS ABOUT LOVE

The Non-Story

The Non-Story is a story with no climactic moment and no point, usually told with gestures of great enthusiasm. It's what happens sometimes when writers become happy: their forms fall apart and they must find new ways of expressing this strange and uncomfortable way of feeling. They turn to epistolary tales fraught with bunnies in teacups, live puppy webcams, lyric lab reports chronicling taste bud experimentation, sestinas that invoke "divine fascia" and "tangerines," all manners of ill-advised white space and perverse line breaks, one act plays about blonde-haired ponies. They become obsessed with discovering the 4th person point of view, convinced it is some sort of cosmic perspective to unite all in one, one in all.

Themes

First of all: Fuck themes.

Okay. Don't fuck them.

But I hate thinking about “themes.” It's like thinking about “retirement” or “algebra” or “oral hygiene.”

I used to take piano lessons and sometimes I'd play a song called “theme” or “variation on a theme.” And all that meant was “tune” or “tunes that sound kind of like that other tune but are different in interesting ways.” And why can't we just leave it at that?

There will be a tune and then some other music kind of like that tune. There will not be love or romantic love or a rococo image of golden-gilded romantic love with its cherry lips and kitten milk skin and ripe cantaloupe bosom wearing round its neck like a scarf a tawny fox skin with the head and feet still on. There will not be a taxidermied fox face that's kind of disgusting and has a slightly ajar mouth that's strange to look at because you can see the stiff tongue inside. There will not be Liberace jewels on each and every appendage of each and every entity — paws and fingers! paws and toes! — in the rococo image of golden-gilded romantic love. There will not be an abundance of hot pink and magenta and labia colored flowers overtaking the frame in a post-nuclear-bomb-smoke-mushroom sort of way. There will not be “a commentary” on anything.

Themes will not include love (as previously mentioned) or how sometimes you have a perfect cantaloupe sitting on the counter and you're so excited to eat it and it smells so good but then you roll it over and there's a circle of pale blue mold and a big, dark mushy spot and all these gnats that blow up into your face and then you

inhale one into your nostril and try to get it back out by out-snorthing but there's no way that gnat is coming out, so you just resign yourself to the fact that there is going to be a dead gnat up in your face for a while, and that the cantaloupe has gone bad, and that this is not a theme, not even a little bit, not at all.

Themes will not include anything post-love or meta-love, pre-love, free-love, anti-love, pseudo-love, or ultra-uber-ergonomic-love. Unpresent themes might address change and/or nostalgia and/or the sci fi future of humanity, but mostly they just won't be there, okay?

How's this for a theme:
BIKES.

Or this:
FUCKINGMAGNETS.

Even magnets have positive and negative charges that can be viewed as metaphors for good or bad relationships, depending on what magnets you place beside one another. I learned this from some Scottie Dog magnets that didn't like each other which I once owned as a kid.

I'm telling you, no themes, unless you count bikes, magnets, scary fox scarves, and Liberace, because that's all I care about these days. All I care about is playing chopsticks on the piano, first just like how you'd expect, and then a little different. Maybe I mess up a note, but it's on purpose, and you don't know that until I get through all the variations, and then you think I'm a fucking genius and I get my own show in Vegas and I eat a lot of bacon and own peacocks and die fat and happy on a bed with all my puppies and my younger, blue-eyed lover. Baby, I wrote this for you. I wrote everything for you. Come here close to my drooping chest and tell me you love me back. Answer me, baby: are we disgusting yet?

Approaches to the Fourth Person Point of View

I write everything in the fourth person point of view. To master this technique, simply imagine you're a writer and then write from the perspective of that imagined writer about a self you imagine the imagined writer to imagine herself to be.

If you happen to be one in a pair of twins, you can also write in the fourth person point of view by writing in the third person about yourself as if you were your own twin. Please note that merely writing about your twin in the third person does not constitute a viable approach to or application of the fourth person point of view.

The fourth person point of view is, of course, also informed by the physics of black holes. If you happen to be a deep space traveler, you too can write in the fourth person point of view and, I might add, you can do this much more easily than the rest of us who are earthbound, staring helplessly at the vast expanse of a computer screen, the black monolith of the cursor. Its blinking seduces us into thinking that somewhere, someone is thinking, really hard, and incessantly. We assume that we are the ones thinking really hard and are pleased. We write in the first, second, and third person points of view but do not try for the fourth person point of view because we convince ourselves it doesn't exist, that what we've already discovered is territory enough. We do not even let ourselves imagine what the 5th, 10th, or 42nd person point of views might entail for fear of expanding our possibilities and, thus, having to fulfill them.

However, if you are lucky enough to be the astronaut who was cryogenically frozen and then brought back to life after everyone who you've ever known – after your children and their children and their children's children – have all died, then you will find the fourth person point of view quite a treat! Simply stare out your

spaceship window at your sister craft as it approaches the black hole. Since the craft will appear to approach, but will in fact never reach, the black hole's event horizon, all you need do is chronicle the sister ship's eternal flight in your space journal or log. This will automatically be written in the fourth person due to irresistible entropic forces degrading all matter and energy in the universe to an ultimate state of inert uniformity. In other words:

$$S = \frac{c^3 k A}{4 \hbar G}$$

Although unchanging physical laws collude to make your mastery of the fourth person point of view an utter certainty, there are ways in which you can hone your abilities even more with added attention to this technique. For instance, you might consider that as you gaze at your unmoving sister ship which appears frozen in space, this ship has actually already entered the black hole many millennia ago and is now hyper-compacted dark matter, so dense that the entirety of the ship and even the black hole itself can fit in the dot of ink formed by your space pen in your space log or journal. This will assist you in writing with feeling within the fourth person point of view.

Also, you might consider that you are currently within the gravitational pull of the black hole and are, yourself, being pulled toward its event horizon and, if viewed by another astronaut writer in another ship, will always appear to be approaching the black hole even after you've succumbed to it and have become dark matter. This will imbue the writing with a sense of urgency. (See also: Approaches to the n¹⁰ Point of View: Writing after You've Become Dark Matter.)

Finally, if you think about how we're all just trying to get back to our chaotic beginnings, how we were all once in love but that person

died long ago as did her child and then her child's child, you'll probably write in the fourth person point of view with ultimate mastery since you will be sad and will finally really be able to grasp your unending, existential loneliness and will then begin to have space dreams about spermatozoa and gauzy eggs as they loose from a fallopian tube and then hover like full moons in a red uterine haze.

It's true: the fourth person point of view can be tricky, but if you apply yourself to the task and practice, you and anyone else who is a twin, or a deep space writer drifting near the mouth of a black hole, can master the technique!

In the event you cannot write, write one page of no fun at all

Cellulite. Aging. Abstractions such as “aging.” Underarm stains. “Fuck you” or “slut” screamed from a passing car window. *The New Yorker*, for various reasons. An apple core. A stretched-out hair elastic. Humidity. Having to pee really bad. Neck zits. Memories of happier times. Plants that don’t do well in low light. Memories of sadder times. Pets that smell. Dead batteries in the wall clock. Aging. Forgetfulness. Poor penmanship. Greeting cards with ocean sunsets and “I miss you...” written in script sent by your aging aunt. Cats hissing. The smell of someone else’s poop. Cables and cords required for technology. Technology. Sobriety. Dirty pools. Trees that come down in storms. Air conditioning that’s too cold. Memories of places you’ve abandoned. Used cloth hankies. Dental work. Malignancy of any sort. One digit off. A long hair baked into a pot pie. Hairy pigs having sex. Pea green countertops. Sitting in the basement alone. Restlessness. Memories of boys you’ve loved who have since married in February or June. Nothing on the internet. Only half of a really great song. One big fish circling in a small bowl. Outages. Birth defects. The word “parenting.” Soldiers exploding into pink mist. Bulemia. Very small water glasses. Pictures you’ve seen a thousand times. Greasy skin. The sound of construction while you’re trying to sleep. Happy memories of yourself while you are sad. Moving a couch. Working out. Cherry-flavored cod liver oil. Looking into locked, empty churches on a Monday night. Ice cream that melts too fast. Booger eaters. Environmentalists. Fundamentalists. Decaf coffee. Scoliosis. Memories of bad times for which you still long, even though they were bad. Castration.

Forms

I hate forms more than I hate themes.

Okay, not true. Me and forms are cool.

But it's hard to say what exactly "forms" are.

For a long time I thought forms were lines and boxes. Then I had a teacher who drew a spiral on a white board and started talking about female orgasms and I copied down the spiral in a notebook and would sometimes open the notebook just to look at the spiral and think about how that could be a form. Then I read an Albert Goldbarth essay and saw that form could look like the circles on puddle water after you drop a pebble in and that it's possible to make the puddle waves recede back where they came from, then make them swell outward again.

But now forms seem like tidal waves and maybe I'm back to the female orgasm but...it's complicated: you stand on a shore.

No.

You're in the water. You are the water.

And then you're a movement. And you keep moving, and you push toward some place — you don't even know why you're going there, or where. And you get bigger. You feel there is a vast strength somewhere. And you keep moving and pretty soon it feels as though the force of the entire planet is behind you, as though you're pulled by moons. And you rush like that, you move. You keep going until you are huge and then you fall apart and split into salt and wetness and sand. There is a beach but it's not a place you've ever been. That's form, one of them at least.

And this doesn't seem exactly or even moderately right.

I used to think form was "plot." Then I thought form was "narrative." Then I tried thinking of what form was if it wasn't narrative and got confused. After that, though, I relaxed a little and the situation began presenting itself to me as it was and I didn't feel the need to draw shapes around everything so much.

At this point, I would like to posit that form can look like a reverse-birth where you begin with infinity and then wind up back in the womb but that might be a little too touchy feely and/or insane.

At this point, I would like to inquire: could form be a dodecahedron (a three-dimensional geometric figure formed of twelve equal pentagonal faces meeting in threes at twenty vertices)?

At this point, I would like to return to a female orgasm which is a lot like either a tidal wave and/or a tornado-shaped slinky. A lot of the time I'm walking around thinking: what would it look like if I wrote something that mimicked the form of a tornado-shaped slinky? That would be cool. But is it even possible? Do other people think things like this?

Then: could I write something with the form of a female orgasm?

At this point, I would like to say something about love in an earnest way and so I'll leave you with this: nothing so far in this writing thing or form or line-square-line or sex spiral or soggy puddle or theoretical tidal wave has led up to me saying something about love now in an earnest way but do you want to hear about it anyway and, if so, does that mean you are right at the center of something bigger than your own logic brain, something you cannot see that is constructing at this very moment all around you an eight-

dimensional geo-cosmic figure with 166 unequal faces of suffering and grace which meet and then part at whim and form infinite vertices as you sit there in your chair thing? Because that's what I was going for and I didn't even know it. That's what we've all been going for. You come live in my megadecahedron. I'll come live in yours. I want a minute. I want eternity.

Just For Fun

I think more things should be “just for fun.” Sometimes ladies get up on a stage and dance around in old-timey underpants “just for fun” and everyone likes that. One time I was in Greece and after lunch the table of drunk Greek ladies got up and started dancing around and then started slapping the floor with their hands “just for fun,” and believe me, it was fun.

Other things people do “just for fun” include dying their hair, bike rides, cooking a dinner composed solely of foods that are round, whistling, leaving the Christmas tree up until Valentine’s Day and then decorating it with construction paper hearts, swimming in pools with clothes on, getting the car up to 120 mph, going to an all hours family restaurant late at night for one slice of coconut cream pie, and saying “bee-bee-cue” instead of the more socially accepted “barbecue.”

My point here is fun. Honestly, if you want to, you can do just about anything just for fun, anything, that is, except for writing. Because writing is not just for fun. It’s for something else entirely that most of the time is not fun, pretty much exactly for the reason I’m writing right at this exact moment, which I can’t exactly pinpoint.

I think writing might be just for anxiety.

It’s just for my near-paralyzing death fear!

Writing is just for hating myself in a sustained and profound way.

Why can’t more things be just for fun? Like, hey, I put an embroidered yarn portrait of teddy bears floating away in a rainbow hot air balloon right here in this essay just for fun!

Just for fun, I'm going to say: Wiggles! Cheese grater! Horehound mint!

Just for fun, more writing should be about an underappreciated and quite beautiful bird called the North American Titmouse.

And then you have a coconut that's been carved with a face and the whole thing looks like a really old shrunken head. The coconut shrunken head is wearing a yellow ski mask.

Then you put on your old timey underpants and corset and fishnet stockings and a bow tie and a bowler hat and lipstick and high high heels with a strap around the ankle. Then you do a dance with a cane. Then you show your boobies but no nip because they're covered with pasties with swinging tassels. And you shake your boobs because that's not writing. It's just for fun.

The Point

What I'm trying to re-create here is the feel of freshly-spilled unicorn blood as it dazzles its way across your face like firefly wings and then spurts in a rainbow onto your chainmail. Once it seeps through the metal lattice and touches your so soft skin, at first it feels like Pop Rocks and fairy giggles! "Some Really Disgusting Essays About Love" is all about the warm, exclamation-point-infused blood of slowly dying mythical creatures making horrible pain noises as they lie at your feet on moist beds of moss. Write that down.

Also:

Unicorns like to play games and spend their free time glittering their horns. They are related to horses, mules, donkeys, and zebras but are most genetically similar to My Pretty Ponies.

Also:

Please do not feed the unicorns. Please do not touch the unicorns. Do not take photos of the unicorns. Do not name the unicorns "Barrette" or "Tangelo" or "Gary." No hugging the unicorns no matter how much you really really want to or how often they politely ask. No "secret codes" with the unicorns. No making friends with the unicorns and then hurting their feelings when you suddenly leave.

Finally:

Do not try to understand the unicorns. Do not study them. Do not hold them in captivity. Do not feel the need to "take samples" of anything. Although unicorn blood holds the key to the universe, it is highly unstable and will seriously fuck your shit up. **f**

DEREK JUNTUNEN

TENNIS WITHOUT A NET¹

I want you to reread
this line,
the line two above
this one;
until you know it;
it's stuck in your mind.
"This line" started this.

Until you have reread
that line,
"this line,"
do not,
I repeat:
do not,
read the rest.²

You'll be back.

The following's important.
The sight that began this:
Soft sounds and
serene scenes

swiftly set,
strictly-structured and
seriously scribed are
shown not said
in the succeeding
stanza.

A bubbling brook
ahead.
The poet,
an Anglo-lark,
rose early from bed
to be inspired
by the pastoral,
the swans and the floral.
His eye espies
nature in form
sublime,
searing into his soul
a desire to scribble,
scratch, scrawl
a few short stanzas,
six or seven,
alliteratively writ.

¹ In reference to Robert Frost's famous quote regarding free-verse poetry, "It's like playing tennis without a net."

² Have you yet? I decidedly hope you are not reading this footnote right now, if you have not.

But
he rethinks,
reflects.
This poem,
this topic,
this approach,
has been done
and redone.
The brook's bubbling
feels less inspiring.
His words, quick writ,
quite frankly
sound like shit.
The poet,
motivation deposed,
begins a fit,
"These clichéd waters fail
to bring up my soul.
so harried am I,
I cannot even rhyme
this line with 'soul!'"

The poet, bereft,
a victim of theft
by poets of past,
who left nothing
for him to muse upon.
Too self-aware,
too prone to parody
even in attempts
to be seen as serious.
What sort of poet is he?

"The miserly sort."
Well, clearly.
"In need of some port."³
Yes, *dearly*.
"What do you s'pose then,
in your infinite wisdom,
I shall write,
when all I write,
comes off as trite?"

Downtrodden lad,
lose the rhyme,
free your mind,
let your emotions run
like the flow of the Rhine.⁴
"But you just-"
I'm aware.
"In more ways than one."
Those lines of mine,
though, came *au naturel*.
"Just give me one hint,
a clue, some advice,
how to poeticize in this,
this present-day life."
Sometimes, not always,
even rarely,
free verse is best.
"Infinite wisdom?"

³ A Portuguese wine, typically found in a sweet, red variation.

⁴ A prominent river that flows through Northwestern Europe, notably Germany.

Infinite *jest!*"⁵
For such a poet bent on traditional
form and rhyme, that was quite a fresh
reference.
David Foster Wallace would've been
proud
of
that name
drop.
Anyway, you never know,
lest you give it a test.

"Oh, give me a rest.
Random indentations that hardly
give effect? Overused
enjambment leaves
poetry a mess!

Let me guess:
you suggest no rhyme,
'natural writing,'
somehow is poetic.
Dancing words,
musical rhythm,
without meter to guide them?
Free verse is poetry's curse,
and if it rhymes,
it must be true."
True, it's more prosaic
than "poetic," but it's all
in how you say it.
"Oh, *well done*."

⁵ The title of David Foster Wallace's magnum opus. At over 1,000 pages, it is a keystone in the canon of recent postmodernism.

Turn your poems upside down,
give them some meta bits,
self-reflective elements.
From the get-go, confuse
the reader as to who's
the writer and where
the piece starts and ends.
In fact,
the good ones never end,
but exist eternal
as a well-written puzzle.
"Make them cognizant
that they're reading
a poem
by showing them such."⁶
Is that what you mean?"
It's an option, among a few.
Show them you know
that you're writing it too.

"I feel only pompous people
give praise
to such poetry.
I want to be taken seriously."
You sound as pretentious
as all those Romantics.
Traditional structures
artificially make music.
Assembling sweet sounds
without form
is natural.
Morningdoves don't sing sonnets,

⁶ This is a poem.

owls don't hoot in meter.
They speak beauty
without form,
making it all the sweeter.

"Now you're the lofty one,
spinning a tale over-spun.
I've read *Leaves of Grass* and,
my friend, 't was no fun.
Artificial may they be,
poems traditionally,
but Walt's work would have been
As affecting written as an essay,
not in the form that you say.
All right,
granted,
poetry has ways of causing deeper
reflections,
but prose can do the job just as well
if done to perfection..."
What is it that you want?
What poetry, sire,
doth thee wish to compose?⁷
"I don't know,"
The poet pauses,
"All things feel false."

Now *that's* profound.
"Terrific. The pit of melancholy
is where depth is found."
It makes sense, being a pit.
"..."⁸

⁷ Delivered with the utmost sarcasm, along with a deep desire to help.

⁸ Piercing stare implied.

See that? *That*
was postmodern!
That felt true.
"You *do* propose I be a post-poet
then?
My silence sealed that?
That's my salvation?"
Try this:
free verse first,
structure it second and
finish with a flourish,
but save that first form,
When it was free verse;
it's wild, organic embodiment.
When your mind struck flint
and roused that fire: passion.
Your topics and ambitions too
will determine what form you
choose and which to eschew.
Above all, quit being self-con-
scious.
"Out of curiosity,
what's *your* favorite
form of poetry?"
The kind that I can
read, reread, love,
never let go of.
Above all,
the kind I felt good
about writing.

"Forgo a life of
teachers' preaching 'bout

Shakespeare, Swift, the like?”
Quit living in shadows.
Just write,
hit ‘Enter’
every now and then,
and edit, edit, edit.
“Such a disgusting form!
I still truly do dread it.”
Swift hated novels,
wrote *Gulliver’s Travels*.
Just write.
Free.
Your.
Verse.
“What’s first?”

Start from the beginning.

“Fine.
I’ll start with this line.”⁹

⁹ I didn’t mention that it ended it too. Sorry.

JOE WENDEROTH

A NAMELESS SOUL IS SOMEONE LOCKED IN A WINDOWLESS ROOM

A Nameless Soul is someone locked in a windowless room. There is the door... but he cannot open it: he will never leave his room. *There is, however – in his door – a Peep-Hole^{mm}!*

The Peep-Hole is a screen – a television screen, to be specific. By looking at a television screen, a Nameless Soul is afforded a series of glimpses into what his room (his Nameless Soul life) keeps him safely apart from.

Illustration of a Peep-Hole.

Because Agony is for Nameless Souls, and because Nameless Souls view Agony from afar, via a Peep-Hole (which is to say, framed by, tinted by, and confined to a screen of this kind), it is important that the nature of this witnessing – the witnessing of a screen – be considered.

Why is no one allowed to bear witness to Agony from beside Agony? Why is no one allowed to take it in without the use of a screen? Consider the logistics of it. Millions of Nameless Souls want to see Agony, and no stadium could hold even close to that. Moreover,

^{mm} MM circles under the M&M Roger has popped up outside the bodega, losing it in the zigzag girders of the elevated, the 4 train rattling overhead.

even if a big enough stadium could be built, who would volunteer for the nosebleed seats? The poor? Who would be willing to attend if attending meant not being able to see the game? For these reasons, *no Nameless Soul ever bears witness to Agony from the stadium in which it is played.*

Nameless Souls *all* watch Agony on t.v., and all are dignified in one another's eyes by virtue of this basic equality. Every Nameless Soul agrees with every other Nameless Soul on this point: we shall all watch it at the same time, in the same way, with the same good view.

Between the east and the west coast — in the time zones crossed — the watching of Agony changes its demeanor. Even so, every Nameless Soul who sees Agony sees it in the same moment; it is only that that moment is hidden by different numbers.

Central standard time is essentially eastern standard time. Dinner time shows remain dinner time shows, only the midwestern versions get a lower number on account of their having gotten up at an earlier time. Midwestern primetime is on a Nameless Soul before he can think too much about it. A Nameless Soul on the east coast, on the other hand, has to stop and consider the dimming stage.

Mountain time is essentially pacific standard time. Pacific standard time is so fucked up that it is difficult to believe that Nameless Souls would ever live there.

So long as there are Named individuals (individuals who are not able to take leave of where they are) (*individuals*

who cannot help but to play), the Peep-Hole is one of the most (if not *the* most) potent sources of revelation in a Nameless Soul's life. The actions of the Named will be replayed many times over in the declining minds of whole generations of Nameless Souls.

TOUCH TYPING

- Q** *questions* Are there any questions? That would be one question, but that doesn't mean there are answers.
- W** *winter* Not really the moral advantage we, shivering, profess.
- E** *evaluations* We know that Adorno studied with Benjamin, but what can we say about the latter's student evals?
- R** *robot* Robots are most interesting the less robotic they are.
- T** *talent* I can launch a grape to the ceiling and catch it in my mouth.
- Y** *Yom Kippur* I always wanted Gd to admire my fasting.
- U** *Utopia* A daft evasion of history and geography, though considering the way history and geography have been sliced up, a particularly enticing daftness.

- I *Indianapolis* The Greek city-state in India.
- O *OuLiPo* The entry regulations say that I can put my name on the title page but then my name must not appear anywhere else in the manuscript. What was I thinking when I called myself E? I could try to write something without e. If only Percec hadn't beaten me to it.
- P *prize* When I stopped getting them, I started giving them out.
- A AAA “Jim Phelps,” says the voice on the phone. “Who’s your auto club?”
“Triple A.”
“No, I said Hoosier Auto Club.”
- S S There was a great big letter S on the first page of my edition of *Ulysses*, and even when I had gotten farther into the book, I thought this was significant, remembering the plurality of nouns and not noticing the singularity of verbs, until the next edition came out.
- D *dystopia* A Utopia that was somebody else’s idea.
- F *Felix culpa* Latin. Have a nice millennium!

G	<i>government</i>	The police are in the details.
H	<i>Hoosier</i>	Where I used to live, in Missouri, a Hoosier meant a dumb-dumb. Where I moved to, Indiana, a Hoosier was someone from Indiana. I adapted. I had been a Hoosier for quite some time.
J	<i>jilt</i>	Preemptive strike.
K	<i>Kafka, Franz</i>	Inventor of the twentieth century. Thanks loads, mentsh.
L	<i>literature</i>	Gossip that remains juicy throughout the ages.
Z	<i>Zeno's paradox</i>	Or, perhaps I am a very bad archer.
X	X	$X \rightarrow \infty$, that is, X approaches infinity, but how close can we reasonably expect X to get?
C	<i>Columbia</i>	Named when Columbus discovered Missouri.
V	<i>vacuum</i>	Nature abhors a vacuum and Xena abhors a vacuum cleaner. I should have mentioned

that Xena is a little dog. The vacuum cleaner is a bear.

B *big-nosed uncle* Da bi-tz su shi, I would hear from teenagers, spoken in front of my jutting face that wasn't supposed to understand. Little comrades, isn't it possible – I would say in a Mandarin competent enough to mean *busted* – that your nose is too small? My friends and students were more open minded and would take me home to meet their families. When their babies saw me, they would break into tears as though they had seen a devil, if only – to translate literally – an ocean devil.

N *Nabokov, Vladimir* Maybe I'd write better if I had started in Russian.

M *Memento mori* Latin: don't forget to die! **f**

¹MM's son sweeps the classroom floor every afternoon before dismissal and every afternoon he discovers in the fine ash of dust a treasure of lost manipulatives.

REBECCA MCCLANAHAN

NECESSITY'S OTHER CHILDREN

(Duty, the Daughter, Speaks for the Rest of Them)

Years and years since Invention left,
and still Mother waits by the window,
wringing her hands. He was different from the start, sprouting

like a surprise scarf from Mother's sleeve, his silky mouth
spewing whistles, sirens, bells. Invention made fairies
from the shadows of his fingers, plucked

songs out of thin air, which wasn't thin to him I suppose,
to him it must have been thick
with possibility. Thumbing two sticks together, he sparked

the first Fire, a ring of flame igniting
the Idea of Circle spinning into Wheel that carried him
out the door, a whirling top. To leave like that and be loved

always, how would it feel? Not to be tied to Necessity's
apron, whittled down thinner and thinner
with each ragtag child she can't help bringing forth:

The trembling Fear with a gun beneath his shirt.
The necessary Evil. The surly one we can't avoid.
The one who is a mouth of Need.

Even the dog has no bone. Invention snatched the last one
from the cupboard, to fashion a wand to wave
for his fabrications. He must think we're figments, that he made us all

up. Inevitable perhaps, the going away,
the disassembling. “You’re indispensable, Duty,” Mother sighs,
trying to make me into a virtue. If Invention were here,
he’d devise some trick to cut these strings, fasten them
to something — a kite? I’d settle for being the tail
on one of his schemes — and fly me out of here.

IRIS MOULTON

THE GROUND IS NOW LAVA

and the only safety is this couch, that chair, the railing. We throw pillows to the floor. They do not disintegrate because now they are stone and cool to the touch. We close our eyes until the ground glows red and orange. It hisses and sizzles. I reach for your tiny hand and pull you to me. Your arm is loose and turns like the pale neck of a crane. One toe may or may not have touched the rug. We try to decide if your foot is still there. I say it is, I need you whole. We make it to the chair, which wobbles from our four determined legs. On the railing we move like spiders, all limbs and eyes. Look down. We can either stop or turn around. We can only go so far.

PLAYING WITH IMPERFECTION

A voice might have a timbre like an awl that runs right through your head. A torso might be very like a pigeon's breast. A person might have one eyebrow gone grey or a mark on a cheek like a pinkish Brazil – which makes nearly every passerby look twice. Many things just helplessly *are*, that is, their imperfections lend them a quality of singularity. Flaws, as we tend to call them – intrinsic/organic moves conceived in the act of making – also mark the artist, and, I'd suggest, add substantially to what we come to consider a *sensibility*.

I'm not advocating a sloppy, haphazard kind of imperfection, born of carelessness, but rather suggesting that *allowing* certain forms of imperfection is vital to art, and that such helplessness makes for a warm and beating heart. James Agee's Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, is wildly – passionately, gorgeously, ecstatically – flawed, according to the author. He fears much at the outset (with characteristic bravura): “If I bore you, that is that, if I am clumsy that may indicate partly the difficulty of my subject, and the seriousness with which I am trying to take what hold I can of it; more certainly it will indicate my youth, my lack of mastery of my so-called art or craft, my lack of talent.” He even resists calling his book a “book,” such are his ambitions for it. It's exactly the excesses of ambition, shame, adoration of language/people/justice that make the work the force it is – a relentless, lyrical striving-toward, a set of assertions commingled with admissions of failure. A velocity. A rage. An unabashed epic.

Art slackens in spots, as any game does. Play slackens, as it must, in order to progress and refine its own rules. When things get dull, kids add a second rope and Double Dutch is born. Or they straighten the rope and call it “Chinese.” Reconstitute “lasso.”

Try life as a twin. Make themselves three-legged and run. Kids make new things right in the moment, no neat transitions, *just because*. Play (and by this I mean participation in heedless, non-utilitarian ventures, like jotting or sketching) is a powerful endeavor unto itself, not merely *prep* for a life more serious and more real. Whitman had no *plan*, it seems, for his notes from the war (“blotch’d here and there with more than one bloodstain, hurriedly written. . .” he says) and more to the point, seems reluctant to begin compiling them, late in life. What became “Specimen Days,” a long patchwork essay on his experiences nursing wounded soldiers, begins with a wobbly journal entry meant to frame up the collection:

“*Down in the Woods, July 2nd, 1882*¹

If I do it at all, I must delay no longer. Incongruous and full of skips and jumps as is that huddle of diary-jottings . . . all bundled up and tied with a big string, the resolution and indeed mandate comes to me this day . . . (and what a day! what an hour just passing! the luxury of riant grass and blowing breeze with all the shows of sun and sky and perfect temperature never before so filling me body and soul . . .) to go home, untie the bundle, reel out diary scraps and memoranda just as they are, large or small one after another into print-pages and let the melange’s lackings and wants of connection take care of themselves.”

Hear him get all distracted by that beautiful day? (the selection above is *much* elided.) It sounds like he’d rather stick with the day’s unfolding, describe it, be in it, rather than compile “memoranda” which at one time, too, were immediate and freshly conceived. I like very much the inclusion of that ambivalence; it honors the original impulse, defines his discomfort with fussy organizing, engages his drive to unfurl into the real and present moment (drives also realized in the poems.)

¹MM in his car shadows his son’s yellow bus on its way to Montessori school, playing tag with the headlights, flashing them at his son looking out through the windows of the emergency door.

I recently visited The Russian Museum in St Petersburg, and saw for the first time Rapine's studies of battlefields, peasants-in-fields, his low, cold slants of weak winter light (mirroring precisely the afternoon, right there, just outside the window – frozen Neva! hovering, snow-heavy grey bridge, sky, lamp posts!) And the replicate palace interiors, yes, sure, the gold-leafed, inlaid, crystaled *everything* was highly atmospheric. But – I can't help it – it was the “folk art” that truly excited me. Objects so close to their making, retaining the gestures of the tools that touched them, and the forces bent on ruining them: the worn beams of a house, carved into the shape of a horse's head; wooden bowls (now isolated in their glass cases and far from the rough hunks of bread they once held, but that, if you bent close, showed spots polished smooth where hands must've rubbed.) When I shift my sight from such things to plastic mass-produced crap, I can feel the dullness, the muteness settle in. On the flight over, for instance, the sudden realization of how much trash a single plane produces was chilling – but not in the obvious eco-disaster way (remember this has to do with *play*, that stance at the heart of making, a friendliness towards imperfection.) Consider the paper cups alone: let's say, conservatively, 7 per person x at least 300 people, during a ten hour flight, New York to Moscow. It's that after you've discarded the third or fourth cup, you give up even the slightest relationship to it- a cup that you have to hold on to/ keep safe throughout the 10 hour flight, is a *different* cup than the one you toss after one use, and then have replaced by another and another and another of the same. If cups are endless, why bother feeling anything for them, trusting, relying, *relating* to yours? With even the smallest, insignificant things, caring *for*, makes you care *about*. Having to hold on to the same cup would mean emptying it out after coffee, the imperfect swishing of water leaving a little coffee scent behind (not unpleasant, just historical); squashing it in the fold with the magazines might dent it a bit and cause you to drink in a new, funny way. Either way, you'd have to *engage*. You'd have to *attend*. You'd have to *play around* with it. You might work your way toward *gratitude* for the cup.

Imperfect things move me because they've been worked on by weather, time, tides, wind, water, air, soil. As we all are. The word "diurnal" applies to them, as it applies to us. Such things show signs of wear and use and human contact – if allowed to. Hands and breath and microbes apply. Such worn things are messy in a biological way, are subject-to and will be gone. And because they remind me everything's passing – they feel, paradoxically, more alive.

An imperfectly made thing can lay bare its flaws and go on living with them just fine. Gogol's Dead Souls is certainly "imperfect." About the second part, Gogol himself writes "I have tortured myself, forced myself to write, suffered severe pains when I saw my impotence . . . everything came out forced and inferior." Indeed he *began* openly enough "without setting myself any detailed plan, without having taken into account what, precisely, the hero himself should be . . . I simply thought the humourous project that Chichikov undertakes would itself lead me to various persons . . ." If *Dead Souls* falls apart in the second section, one gets instead, still, overall, something enormous, sustaining, essential, something like, as Nabokov wrote, "the idea of Russia as Gogol saw Russia (a peculiar landscape, a special atmosphere, a symbol, a long, long road . . .)" and one hardly cares, closes the book, floats back to the long, extraordinary part one, unharmed. Just as one learns to deftly work the pit free while enjoying the olive, enjoying that is, the awkward matter of gnawing and disposal, which slows conversation, which concentrates the brief pleasures of brine and taut flesh. Pitted olives go way too fast and always feel empty, domesticated, for babies.

In an interview I conducted with poet Gerald Stern a few years ago he said: "One of the things I'm trying to do in my poetry is to become one with the *person* in the poetry. I don't know if that is possible. Ideally, at last, you reach out and just talk. This is not for all poets. You reach out and you talk or you sneeze and it becomes a poem. I don't know if I can ever achieve that . . ." which doesn't mean *everything* is a poem, that a sneeze *unto itself* is a poem, that *anything at all* is art. It isn't. It's that the roughest, most daily gestures

can *become* poems if one is able to make use of them, to get close enough to use them, to be beckoned by that which you hadn't imagined might be poem-worthy.

I guess it's that I care about a piece – story, essay, poem – only if the author cares enough to *make* something, to *try* to make a thing (I fear this is abundantly obvious – *writers make things* – then, more fearful still, realize it may not be at all) and to hand it over fried, boiled, shirred, decanted, slapped around, dressed up, chained – *somethinged*. Touched by an actual hand. Shaped. Worn. Made from nothing-at-first and failing in parts, for moments, for stretches, but then! and then, *despite!* – since that is, of course, what it means to endure.

There are many ways to short-circuit the making – the cut/paste/splice phenomenon is popular today; the severing of words from their authors, so that words may float free is another. But *arranging* is not *making*. A jello mold is an arrangement. It's funny/jiggly/bright and can be fancifully layered – but jello is not, say, kim chee (a work in progress with tiny wild bio-partners bubbling away in a lab you share). Arranging a Jello mold is boring: let set, repour. Let set, repour. To end up with stripes, one does this all day. The procedure is rote, like a paint-by-numbers kit. Made things are imperfect; why not face that? They get a little overcast. There's a fuzziness here, a meandering bit there. One part's too well-done, one's not fully seared. But made things *use* those moments. Take them in. Make them part-of. Stir, fold, flambe. To *make* (and true making involves play, that openness to imperfection) is to know the hand will slip, nick, chip. Flaws will reside alongside areas of balance. Imperfect things accept their place as one in a series, always en route. Not the first, not the last. A thing put down and picked up again the next day, with new rules born of necessity. Thus they stay in motion, alive. And though things may launch in a wobbly way, a trajectory slip . . . remember marbles? The ground was bumpy, the drawn circle went all elliptical, or got erased at a crucial moment by anxious knees, the shooters got chipped, your nose dripped in the cold, itched in the heat . . . and all of it was part of the game. **f**

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REBECCA MCCLANAHAN has published nine books, most recently *Deep Light: New and Selected Poems 1987-2007* and *The Riddle Song and Other Rememberings*, which won the Glasgow Award for nonfiction. Her work has appeared in *Best American Essays*, *Best American Poetry*, the Pushcart Prize series, and in collections published by Norton, Doubleday, Putnam, Beacon, and numerous journals and anthologies. Past recipient of the Wood Prize from *Poetry*, the Carter Prize for the essay from *Shenandoah*, and fellowships from New York Foundation for the Arts, North Carolina Arts Council, MacDowell Colony, and Bread Loaf, McClanahan teaches in the low-residency MFA programs of Queens University and Rainier Writers Workshop.

MICHAEL MARTONE¹ was born in Fort Wayne, Indiana, playing little league baseball in Hamilton Park. Hamilton Park was built on land owned by the Hamilton family whose members included the famous popularizer of Greek myths, Edith, and had once been a garbage dump. During long stretches in the outfield, Martone would toe through the sparse grass to see what scrap of junk had bubbled up from below. Tin cans and bottles, springs and rubber tires. Marbles. Old boots and shoes. Once, after a particularly bad winter filled with many thaws and freezes a whole icebox found its way to the surface, its door a kind of hatch leading back underground. Michael Martone's father called Michael Martone "Mickey." Most people thought he was called that after the great Yankee centerfielder, Mickey Mantle, but he was really named after Martone's father's childhood friend who died when Martone's father was Martone's age when he played little league baseball in Hamilton Park in Fort Wayne, Indiana. It was the first time Martone's father was a pallbearer but not the last.

BRENDA MILLER is the author of *Blessing of the Animals* (EWU Press, 2009); *Season of the Body* (Sarabande, 2002); and co-author of *Tell it Slant: Writing and Shaping Creative Nonfiction* (McGraw-Hill, 2003). Her work has received five Pushcart Prizes and has been published in numerous literary journals. She is Professor of English at Western Washington University and Editor-in-Chief of the *Bellingham Review*. Her new book, *A Thousand Buddhas: New and Selected Essays*, is forthcoming from Skinner House Books in Fall 2011.

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¹MM, from the dugout, watches Mickey Mouse dressed in an Angels' uniform, a glove on over his gloved hands, wind-up and throw the first pitch into the dirt.

Dutch, French and Spanish. She has won awards and fellowships from The Rockefeller Foundation, the McKnight Foundation, the Jerome Foundation, etc. She's had Fulbrights in India, Tunisia and Indonesia. She is a professor and artist in residence at Stanford University.

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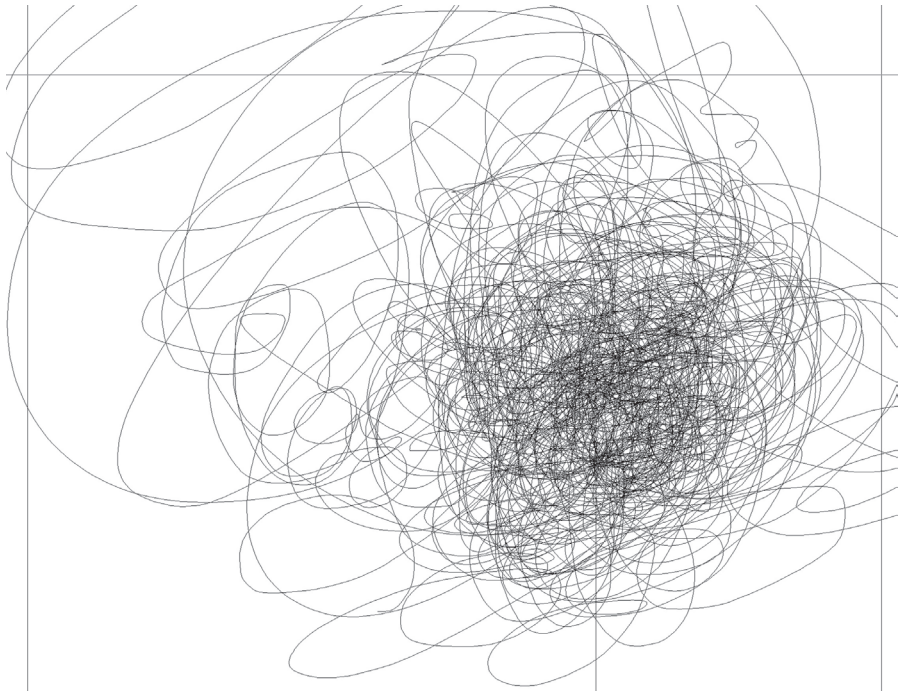
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