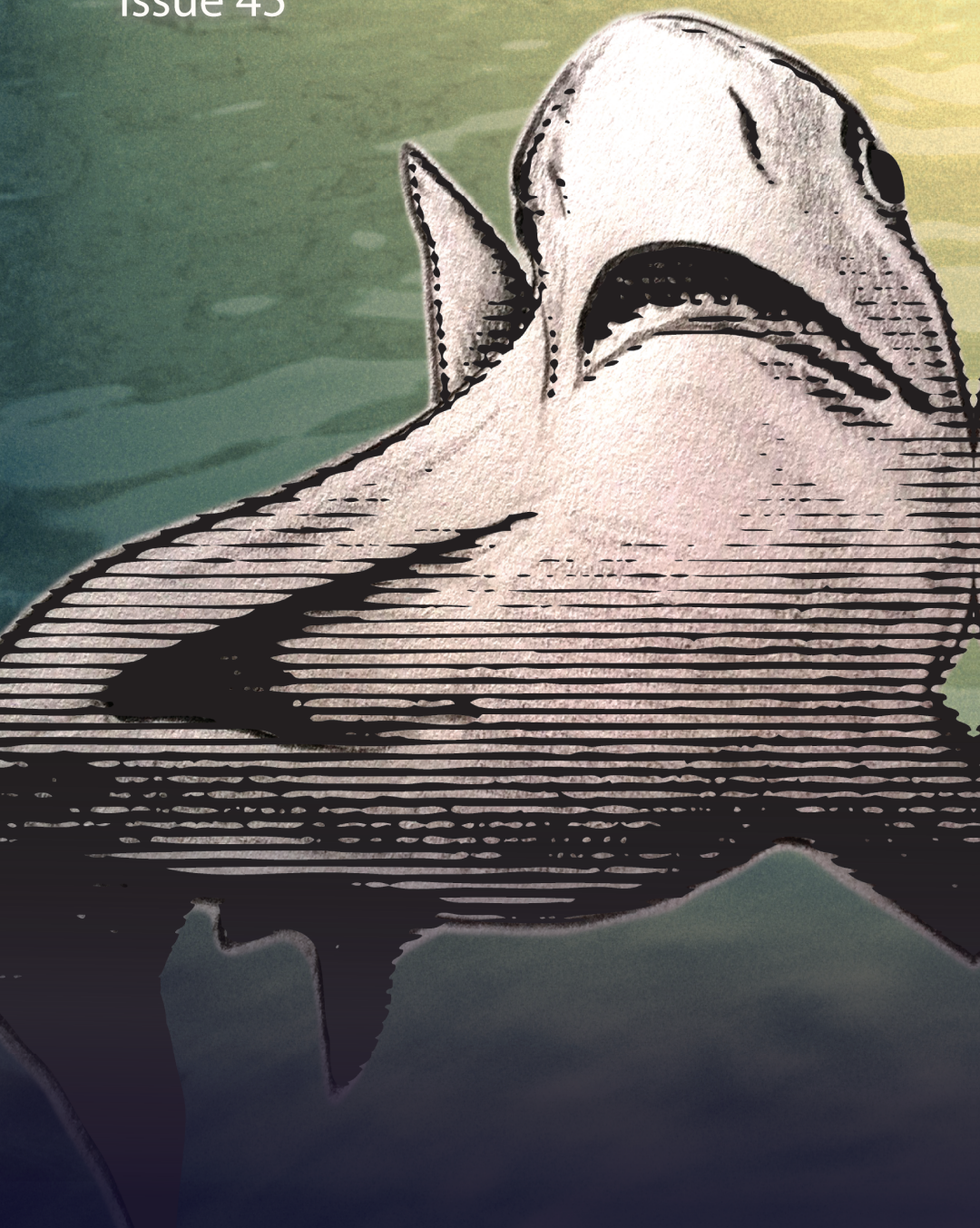
fugue

Issue 45



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Fiction, nonfiction, and poetry submissions are accepted September 1 through April 1. All material received outside this period will be returned unread. Please visit www.fuguejournal.org for submission guidelines. All contributors receive payment and a complimentary copy of the journal in which their work appears. 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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Summer-Fall, Vol. 45

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WINNER: "FOUR CONTRACTING SENTENCES AND TWO SCENES THAT WON'T COMPLY" BY RICHARD RAY

RUNNERS-UP:
"THIS ANIMAL" BY ELENA TOMOROWITZ
AND
"WANING CRESCENT" BY K. T. LANDON

I chose Richard Ray's "Four Contracting Sentences and Two Scenes that Won't Comply" for its inventiveness as well as its lyricism and mystery. I appreciated the way it works with memory and finally catches memory off its guard.

Richard Ray

FOUR CONTRACTING SENTENCES AND TWO SCENES THAT WON'T COMPLY

I.

That day on the farm with the peach
big as a hambone stripped down
to marrow and flavor,
the little heres-and-theres aunt Gertrude adds
that make all the difference,
get lost in the process
of moving out and moving on,
go down as
the missing ingredients
of a tradition that, if we close our eyes
and allow the drift, we can still taste,
maybe even identify
if we catch memory off its guard.

II.

The potentials in our natures
we've yet to activate
saying don't forget we're here
while you're busy with other
lovers whose promises
sound more enticing
than our meager requests for work,
work and hints at an eventual payoff that,
if you're lucky,
you won't be too old and decrepit to enjoy.

III.

Always less and more than what came before,
less than the woman
who of herself produced us,
more than the history whose landscape
spreads out beneath our feet,
our travels the newest points
of its ever-expanding universe,
pigeon-toed, pecking at seed, gamey.

IV.

Body revolving around body,
keeping their distance and keeping the order,
coming together and upsetting the balance
and we can't have that now can we?

V.

Across the way on a window ledge,
pigeons interlock beaks
and bob their heads up and down.

Have you ever seen two birds kiss?

He jumps on her back and quickly jumps off.
She casts him a look and flies away.
Something wasn't working,
an octave above and an octave below our hearing,
he alone and I alone,
the music not meant for mortal ears.

VI.

Their siblings who live in my wall
won't stop cooing
and I'd break their necks if I could.
It's been that kind of day. Syntax, hungover,
unfriendly, refuses to give an inch
so you want to rub it out
and lounge in the space it leaves behind.

Then a walk out in the after-rain
and seeing one drink from a dirty curbside puddle,
I'm so touched in the heart
I raise my hand to check for the shaft of an arrow.

No shaft, no arrow, I can only hope
the heart it didn't pierce wasn't all in my head.

Elena Tomorowitz

THIS ANIMAL

My mind was as vacant as the moon
and in the presence of its bulbous shape,
I prayed to the grapefruit to save me.
Believe me when I say
that I ate only round things for a week,
ate only while wearing mittens.
The eggs and pomegranates rolled out of my hands
like small animals, palms flat displaying their delicateness,
afraid to break them and lose them at the same time.

This is what's left: all the fibers and juice on the floor.
I drank cold whiskey instead, my hands like paws
hugging the highball and watching condensation drip.
I called it Tom Collins, my mother told me on the phone
that you can't call any drink a Tom Collins
and that my drink was probably called whiskey
on the rocks. I called it Moses. I was eager for him.
I pushed the rim of the glass to my ear
and listened to the cracks of ice.
Moses was cold, and I thought I heard him
tell me to drink faster and with purpose.
It was like he asked me to give everything I had.
I walked out of the kitchen, pulled back the solid wood
door and moved into the sheets of rain.

I saw this: in the stillness of night, a scattering of bats,
families and families of them,
wings so soft you could barely hear them there.

K. T. Landon

WANING CRESCENT

Children draw it
as if the better part of it
were missing but
on a clear night we see
the shadow, see what
we always see: ourselves
blotting out the sun.

11TH ANNUAL PROSE PRIZE JUDGED BY DUFF BRENNA

WINNER: "THE CRYING CARD" BY LISA ALEXANDER

RUNNER-UP: "DROP KICK ME JESUS" BY NIKKI MILLER-ROSE

From the first sentence in Alexander's story—"It was always the same."—and throughout the connecting paragraph, this reader knew he was in the hands of a skilled writer. I have no doubt that her superb narrative went through many, many revisions, each expression analyzed and balanced with all the other words and phrases sentence after sentence to make sure nothing was wasted and each word was pulling its own weight. A fine seamlessness stitches her pages together smoothly, with not only artfully lyrical writing but the type of metaphors that wedge their way into the underlying meaning of what she is saying: "Eve would describe the in-between time as misery shot through with radiance." "... it was like a door swung open to the kind of relationship that might be possible, but then something would happen to slam it closed."

I could fill the page with more examples, but let me speak to the story as a whole. In effect, Alexander is asking a question that many thousands of people have asked themselves over the course of their lifetimes. How should one handle the inevitable scarring that follows in the wake of a divorce and the breakup of a family? In "The Crying Card" we see this question illustrated through the eyes of a stepmother named Eve as she tries to cope with her husband's two daughters who obviously resent her and do their best to

undermine her, especially the sixteen-year-old aptly named "Scarlet." The deliberately oblivious husband is no help when it comes to handling Scarlet. He and Eve now have a five-year-old daughter named Lucy. She is "... someone everyone agreed on."

The family is driving to a vacation spot called Tomales Bay when Eve checks the back seat and sees the girls "... barricaded behind an assortment of electronic stonewalls—testers, gamers, iPads ..." How do we connect with each other when such stonewall barriers lie between us? Eve, as do many mothers, sees herself as the main problem. She even half believes that she somehow caused Lucy's asthma: "... *she* had done this, cursing her child to a family without enough oxygen." The observation is wonderfully astute. A family without enough oxygen is a dysfunctional family. The story brings to mind another question: Are there any *functional* families anymore? I could name one or two that *appear* functional, but in their own ways they could be as dysfunctional as Eve's current family. Within Alexander's tale there is always the implication that what we are witnessing is *appearance versus reality.*

Subtly, but now and then openly, the characters pick at each other and whine when things aren't "perfect." Fault finding comes naturally to them. Unable to handle her situation, Eve resorts to taking Ambien—"a chemical cast-iron frying pan." What happens next is something that surprised and delighted me. I won't give it away except to say that on careful re-reading, the incident I'm referring to was softly signaled early in the story.

The craftsmanship that marks Alexander's writing is evident on every page. Even the mention of sharks in the bay plays an unobtrusively symbolic role: the family has the equivalent of a shark swimming in its midst. Will this shark eat the others? The story gives a remarkably perceptive answer. I don't see how "The Crying Card" could have ended better. All I can add is a familiar observation made decades ago by Isaac Babel: "No iron can pierce the heart with such force as a period put in just the right place."

Lisa Alexander

THE CRYING CARD

It was always the same. Their weekends followed the same downward spiral. Eve got a headache just thinking about them. Her stepdaughters must have felt it too, the dread, and yet Jack, their dad, positively brimmed with optimism. He said one day it would get better; one day they would all get along. He had an expression for it: smooth sailing. Eve figured Jack was crazy. Given their history, the sea would never be flat; the sky would never be clear; the wind would never kick up.

Eve had met Jack when he was still living in the house with Cecile and the two girls, then four and six. Jack and Cecile had already decided to separate—Cecile had already brought home the trainer from the gym—but Jack had stayed so the kids wouldn't get freaked out. They were going to have the good divorce.

This was ten years ago. Eve would describe the in-between time as misery shot through with radiance. Every once in a while, she would connect with either Scarlet or Olive, never both at once, and it was like a door swung open to the kind of relationship that might be possible, but then something would happen to slam it closed. Five years in, despite Jack saying, "I don't see why you can't just borrow mine," their child, their Lucy came along. Lucy was good. Lucy was sweet. Lucy was someone everyone agreed on.

Without the usual fog, Tomales Bay looked tired and washed out. The wild green parrots made listless loops through the eucalyptus trees. The horses seemed to hang their heads in the paddocks. A kayaker tried to sidle through a too-small hole in a barbed wire fence.

"Are we there yet?" Lucy said.

"If you ask one more time," Scarlet said.

"Are we there yet?" Lucy said, oblivious.

And Scarlet mussed her hair. See, they loved each other. Eve checked out the back seat. There they were, barricaded behind an assortment of electronic stonewalls—texters, gamers, iPads—as Jack piloted their rented SUV to the battlefield. This was the annual trip he enforced, the one where they were all supposed to blend. Scarlet, now sixteen, was a sleek and shiny package that argued about everything. Olive, at fourteen, was big like her grandfather and just wrapping her brain around how all the boys were going for Scarlet of the shimmering hair and tiny waist. And then there was five-year-old Lucy. Asthmatic, she often gasped for breath, and Eve sometimes thought this was her fault; she had done this, cursing her child to a family without enough oxygen.

"Let's play 'Say Something Interesting,'" Olive said.

"Oh, good, another icebreaker," Scarlet said.

Still, pause here for pride. Eve had taught them this game, and it had been a good day when they all realized they shared the geek gene.

"No two zebras' stripes are the same," Olive said.

"Reindeers fill up on moss," Jack said. "It has some kind of chemical that makes them warm."

"I can't sneeze with my eyes open," Lucy said.

"You know what the freeway exits say in Germany?" Scarlet said, "Ausfart."

"I read this article about drug cartels in Mexico," Eve said. "A boss sent his wife to the beauty parlor of the other bad guy's mistress. The wife paid the hairdresser to shave the mistress' head." There was a pause. There often was when Eve piped up.

"I saw 60 on the garbage can," Jack said. "60's the address, right?"

The wind whirled drifts of pee-smelling leaves. Twigs scratched the side of the SUV like fingernails. Jack angled it down the sharp

driveway. The open carport was crowded with split logs. Wasps buzzed the cans. Someone had abandoned a trike. The house itself was splotchy with lichen, the paint peeling like old bark; nothing like the peppy pictures on the website.

"This is it?" Olive said.

"I told you not to touch me," Scarlet said.

"I didn't touch you."

"You frigging did."

"This is great," Jack said. "A real cabin in the woods."

Scarlet popped a bubble and smiled at her dad. "I think it's great. Like camping."

"I want to go home," Lucy said.

"Don't play the crying card," Scarlet said.

The two older girls bumped their suitcases inside. Olive and Scarlet were fresh from their Hawaii trip with Cecile and the new boyfriend. The girls pulled their bags across the living room, the wheels catching area rugs and scattering dust bunnies. The space was musty and dim. There were black scrape marks on the walls and lamps leaned out at broken angles. Someone had left an elaborate puzzle on the table, everything done but the sky.

"No TV!" Lucy cried.

"But a real record player," Eve said. There were albums in the crate—Janis, Billy Joel, Grateful Dead, Talking Heads. Lucy stared at the whole contraption as if it were a time machine. Olive and Scarlet thundered downstairs, then up again.

"Daddy, there are spiders down there," Scarlet said.

"Kids, calm down," Jack said.

"I'm sleeping up here," Scarlet said.

"You girls are downstairs," Eve said, but too quickly.

A casual listener might have glazed over how loaded this comment was, but Scarlet did not miss a thing. "Why are you like this?" she said.

"That's a very good question." Now Eve was trembling.

"Control her," Scarlet said to Jack. "Please."

Then another pause, longer now. "They don't have to if they don't want to," Jack finally said to Eve.

It had only taken them half and hour to get here.

"What do you like about him?" Eve's therapist had asked her early in her relationship with Jack.

"Our cat had her kittens on his chest. It was a mess but he didn't care. He just lay there, watching it."

"Oh," her therapist had said.

And there were other things. Jack built a room off the house so Eve could paint. On rainy nights, he sang her to sleep. He said "There you go, Eve, being complicated again" when she wailed about being unable to cook the simplest thing. "If you think I care about food when there's this," he said, taking her by the hips and pulling her to him. He ran his big hands through her dark curly hair. Here was another thing she liked: Jack said she had a classical shape. It meant that she didn't have to try to be smaller when she was with him; she could be herself. And there were also the curls. Eve spent a lot of time trying and giving up on taming them, but he didn't like it straight.

As Eve went into the bedroom and shut the door, she remembered how just yesterday they'd spent the morning in bed, Jack had made his signature eggs, they'd played with their cat, though now all that seemed so far away. She and Jack only worked when they were with Lucy or alone. With his girls, there was a new set of rules that Eve could never get right. She was expected to be loving, but was not allowed to correct. Once she pointed out to Jack—she didn't think it was a conscious thing—but Scarlet *flirted* with him. His reaction was immediate and outraged. Scarlet was just trying to stay close; she was a girl who'd suffered through a rough divorce.

"I thought the divorce was *good*," Eve had said.

*

No sheets on the bed. Of course. The mattress was a boat with a leak in it, sagging in the heat. The metal window lever broke off in her hand. With the flat of her palm she pushed open the glass. A cloud of midges was silhouetted in a ray of sun; a mosquito catcher barged in.

Olive's voice sailed up the stairs—*Don't hurry love, no, you just have to wait. Love don't come easy*—before Scarlet cut her off. "No, it's not that way, Olive. It's *Love's a game of give and take.*"

"Where are the sheets?" Jack said, coming in.

"I ordered some. They didn't leave them."

"What kind of a vacation rental doesn't have sheets?"

"The kind I got. Obviously."

"It's not the place," he said. "The place is great. I'm happy here."

"How can you be so happy when I'm so unhappy?"

"Because you can't even sleep on the same floor as my kids?"

"I'm not perfect. No one is."

"Everything's great until they come along."

"Everything's great for *them* until *I* come along."

"It's that you're trying to separate us," Jack said. "They're my kids. I abandoned them."

"Again. Not my fault," Eve said, though she felt bad for this. Too late: when Eve passed Jack in the door, he shrank back so no part of him touched any part of her.

With fresh desperation, Eve went downstairs. She opened a closet to find linens, balled up, but clean. She carried them to Olive and Scarlet's room. "Look what I found," she said.

"They're all messed up, like somebody else's," Scarlet said. "That is so deeply gross."

Eve let herself dump the sheets on the floor. "But washed."

"In Hawaii we stayed in a mansion," Scarlet said. "Mommy said it was a thousand dollars a night."

"The air conditioner didn't work," Olive said. "Mommy hated it." She was reading a book minus its slipcover, the damp kind you find stacked in corners in vacation rentals, orphaned by past guests. "You'd like this, Eve," she went on, holding it up. *The Beauty Myth*.

Five minutes later, Olive and Lucy bent over the missing puzzle sky upstairs. Scarlet, who watched a lot of *Iron Chef*, unpacked groceries and clanged pots in the tiny kitchen. She was on a Thai kick: she had made them stop in Chinatown on the way out of the city so she could get lemongrass. "I'm cooking dinner. Not that anybody cares."

The master had a tiny bathroom at the head of the bed. The wall reverberated with the sound of Scarlet chopping. Jack lay on the naked mattress, staring at the ceiling, arms by his side. Eve sat down beside him, determined to try again.

"The Farallon Islands are right offshore," she said. "It has the densest concentration of great white sharks that come back every year. They come to these inlets to mate and have pups, but no one has ever seen it or really understands how. This whole area is a mating ground. I read it in Nat Geo, that's how I know."

"I need some space," Jack said. "I think it's better if we don't talk right now."

"I'm sorry I snapped at Scarlet," Eve said. "And you." At great cost, she touched his arm and gave him her hand. He took it for a moment, then gave it back as if it was a present he needed to return.

Now Eve was pissed off. And miserable. And unlovely. And ready to punish him and herself. He was being bad, but she was worse. After all, *she* was the one who couldn't get past the smell of Cecile on her cubs, *he* was the guy trying to reconcile two halves of his life. But then Eve reminded herself that they'd been here before. They *would* get through. Jack couldn't help it: when he got hurt he withdrew, but he would remember himself.

It was cooler in the spare bedroom. Spiders had staked out space. The synthetic blanket rasped Eve's skin. A half hour passed and she

tried making a cave, but the cover was too short and her legs stuck out. By now Eve would have taken any kind of ceasefire, or even a conk on the head with a chemical cast iron frying pan. She was thinking of just this, actually, a dirty Ambien in the bottom of her purse, when Lucy materialized.

"Dinner's ready," she said. "Please come up. We set a special place for you."

In the dining room, Eve made a point to avoid Jack, looking instead through the picture window at the pigeon-stained deck, the railings patched with chicken wire. The bay was dazzling, a glorious glittering blue that looked almost opaque. And here was something hopeful: the mood at the table felt good; Lucy, Olive and Scarlet were acting nice.

Scarlet put the noodle dish in the center of the table. "It's got coconut milk.

Lucy spooned some onto Eve's plate. Cubes of tofu bobbed in a watery rice paddy of noodles and peppers, white and emerald green.

"Ten points for presentation," Olive said. "Plating is so important."

"And creative use of ingredients," Jack said. "Let's not forget that."

"And it tastes good," Eve said. Jack looked at her quickly, and Eve allowed herself a hopeful smile.

"Tell us about the gangster lady again," Scarlet said. "The one who had that woman's head shaved?"

"That's all I know, but I heard another one," Eve said. "This girl was mad at her boyfriend so, every night, she put Nair on his hairline. He thought he was going nuts."

"That is so evil," Scarlet said.

"I heard lipstick contains fish scales," Olive said.

"More people are killed every year by donkeys than planes," Lucy said.

"Venus is the only planet that turns clockwise," Jack said.

"Skip me," Eve said. "I can't think of anything."

But Olive and Lucy turned to look at Jack. The moment stretched and he said, "Yes, you can. Try sharks maybe."

And now Eve felt good; yes, she did. Though Scarlet seemed bleak. Eve was surprised at this—did she want her dad to be mad at Eve?

That night Eve was passing back to the spare room when she stopped in the hall. Lemon light pooled around the girls as Olive carefully braided Scarlet's hair. Eve could almost feel the weight of it, thick and gorgeous, down to Scarlet's perfect ass. Olive alternated the switches while her sister sliced ads out of a gossip magazine.

On the first floor, the choreography had changed. Jack wasn't quite ready to sleep in her bed. Curled and fetal, his forehead was slammed into the couch cushion. Lucy, legs flung out, made a starfish on the bed. When she was a baby, Eve would find her in this pose after play-dates that lasted too long, or that one time the cat wandered off for two days.

Lucy's breath sounded like a door creaking. Eve fished out her inhaler, then attempted to put it in her mouth, but Lucy's teeth were clamped shut.

"Open up, you're wheezing," Eve said. Asleep, Lucy's head lolled. Her finger went up her nose. "No, honey, your mouth." Lucy reflexively pushed her away with the flat of her hand. Eve wrestled in the inhaler and counted 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 breaths.

Back downstairs, Eve polished off a pint of coffee ice cream and swallowed the Ambien dry. It took a minute for her eyes to adjust. Darkness reduced the furniture to shapes. A moth whirred by her ear as she waited for the dumb slide to sleep.

Eve dreamt of a young man pursuing her, his face and chest smooth as a soap carving. Somehow she lay on the upstairs couch. Somehow he pulled up her skirt. Somehow she came in a lapping of little waves. The medicine red eye of the digital clock blinked.

Seven hours later, the wind whipped the curtains and woke Eve up. She lay there, taking in the lime green parrots camped in the eucalyptus trees, the horses clomping through the grass.

Jack stuck his head in the room. He let his eyes graze over Eve in a measured manner—she could have been an apple, an eggplant, a piece of driftwood—but then he leaned towards her, and for a second they were Jack and Eve again, and he was sorry, and so was she, before Jack caught himself.

"I'll take Lucy to breakfast," she said.

Jack nodded. "Scarlet and Olive are asleep anyway. Be home by ten, though. I want to take the kids to the boat place."

The Point Reyes hamlet had an entire gift shack devoted to faery lore, a bait shop with buckets of squirming worms and rows of fierce hooks, a general store with miniature lifeguard towers, and a wall covered with stuffed replicas of native Californian wildlife. Lucy chose a mountain lion from among the fluffy condors, otters, quails, red-tailed hawks and great white sharks. They got playing cards for Scarlet and Olive, stood in line for hot quiche and Italian sodas, and Eve finally relaxed.

"I have a surprise for you, little bear," Eve said.

Lucy licked the crumbs off her fingers. "Show me."

Eve led her to a bush by the side of the road. Blackberries hung in clusters in the thorns. "You can pick them. Just be careful of the stickies."

They pulled the berries off, each one plump and tart with juice. Eve told Lucy a long story about the time in Canada when her cousin beat up some boys who stole her blackberry basket. Lucy's teeth were stained blue. She listened as if everything was important information. Eve thought she had never loved anyone so much.

They returned full of hope and good feelings, but the house was too quiet when they came in. Eve sensed no one was asleep. A sound, unidentifiable at first, gelled to unmistakable: someone was crying.

The puzzle had been swept off the table and, in its place, was a severed ponytail, its thousand strands bound in a pink scrunchie for ballet class or a day at the beach. Except it was not attached to Scarlet.

The family gathered in the living room, but no one sat too close. Scarlet sobbed, big mucous-y gulps, a pink hat jammed down over her chin-length locks, only rousing herself to point at Eve.

"She did it last night," Scarlet said. "Ask her, daddy."

The act itself was so brutal, something out of Noh drama, that it was hard to stay in the room. A bird with a red beak pecked at something on the deck. Scarlet's weeping got worse. Eve's first thought was dismay. And then horror—was she capable of doing such a thing? In some druggy fog? But how could she not remember? There was only the soap carved man in her dream, and the amazing hairlessness of his chest.

"I didn't do it," Eve said. "Of course."

No one replied. Scarlet continued to sob. Lucy watched as if she were at a tennis match, only the balls were grenades.

Olive touched the ponytail with tremulous wonder. "I bet you could sell that for a lot," she said.

"There's that wig place for cancer kids," Lucy said.

"But it's my hair. I didn't want to give it away. And that bitch, that stepwitch—"

"Stop," Jack said, with great force, and Eve could barely look at him. "We're all going to take a minute here." Scarlet made a strangled sound and flipped open her phone. "Didn't you hear what I said? What are you doing?"

Scarlet shrank back. Everyone, including Jack, flinched. "Calling mommy. What else?"

"Give it to me now," Jack said. Eve could hear the phone ringing, and Cecile's disembodied "Hello?"

"She'll take me away from here," Scarlet said. "You know she will."

"Hang up and calm yourself."

"You try calm," Scarlet said, but she clicked it closed on Cecile.

"Olive, tell me what happened." Jack's voice was so low Eve had to strain to hear.

"Me!" The girl looked at the ponytail as if it could leap up and bite her. "How should I know? I was asleep."

Jack turned to Eve as if this was something they all needed to see. Eve tried to stay in the room, but she saw them all from a great distance. Outside seemed the brightest of all. The bird with the red beak hopped around on one yellow leg in the pine needles. Its beak was very red, tomato red, crimson. Eve decided to paint this bird, if she ever got out of here alive. She could see it now—a splotch of red on what? Black. And then she realized she could not locate ever wanting to cut off Scarlet's hair, but she *did* want the ponytail. She coveted it. And what would it have been to snip it off like that? She could so clearly summon the satisfying way the scissors severed the fibers, how easily they came away.

"I didn't do it," she said again, but her voice sounded so guilty now.

"*Yes*, you did," Scarlet said. "You told the story, remember? About the woman who shaved that girl's head?"

"Jack, do something," Eve said. "Please."

"Oh, you can bet I will." Then a pause, the longest of all. It seemed porous, the weight of their marriage absorbed. "Come away, girls."

They left, even Lucy, bundled away from her crazy mother. Eve stood by herself in the center of the house, too stunned to do anything. The sun tracked across the floor from the table leg to the bookcase. When she had recovered enough to move, she cleaned. There were dirty dishes and crumbs in the pan at the bottom of the toaster oven and butter smears on the counter and beds to make and trash to take out.

When Eve had finished, she took the ponytail and went outside. She laid it on the deck. The ponytail lay inert and defenseless with a matte quality, a density to its blackness. It was strange and outlandish and yet, somehow, the perfect expression of what was broken about all of them. Eve watched the bird with the red beak land on the deck. The bird, her bird, dragged the ponytail a few inches. Eve lunged for the hair, as if it could somehow be reattached, but it couldn't, and so she let the bird drag it a little.

Better to let it go. Better it should line someone else's nest. But no, she couldn't let it just disappear.

Eve ran at the bird. It dropped the ponytail. The bird danced at the edge of the deck as she picked up the hair. A squawk of outrage, and then it flew away. Smooth sailing, maybe she'd wanted to believe in it as much as Jack. And how foolish that was, how impossible. The ponytail felt smooth and glossy and dry in her hand, not a reproach, but a thing of vacant loveliness. Especially in light of what she'd found in the trash.

It was Jack who said they should go to the boat place later that afternoon because everything was already fucked so why not? Eve was surprised the girls went along; maybe they were relieved to have something else to focus on other than themselves. Jack had not invited Eve, but he didn't stop her from sliding into the front seat. He stared at the road and jerked the brakes at stop signs as if he wanted to punish them all with whiplash.

Blue Water Kayaking was one of those places that advertised fun. There was a boy surfer behind the desk, the one you expected. Blonde fur on his muscled calves, biceps bunched, bleached hair and blue eyes, blue as a blue water kayak. The effect this guy, Danny, had on Scarlet was at once calming and electric. Watching them, Eve had the faraway sensation again, as if she were seeing them all in slow motion, time sprinting past. She had shown up because she had something to say, though, in their vivid presence, she wasn't entirely sure when or how to do it now.

Eve trooped with the rest of them down to the beach. The evidence—her vindication—bounced in a small bag against her leg.

Danny demonstrated the kayaking strokes, mainly to Scarlet in her tight wet suit. "Bend from the waist, like this," he said. The hard little boats slapped the water in the inlet. Scarlet turned her torso from side to side and her chopped hair swung in a triangular shape. "Dip the oar like a spoon in a bowl of ice cream, that's good."

"I get the front, Scarlet. I called it," Olive said.

"No, you don't," Scarlet said. "You heard what Danny said, the heaviest person goes in the back."

Olive's long toes flexed in the sand. She wore a tee shirt that said *Everybody loves a Jewish girl,* which was so obviously not true. "Daddy, I want to go with you."

"You can't," Eve said. "I need him because we have Lucy in the middle."

"Olive," Jack said. "Just sit in the back."

Danny waved from the shore as the bright boats slid into the mirrored bay. Flashes of mica caught the light in the bottom silt. The water was cold, ice cube clear. Small gray fish darted around.

"I'm not scared," Lucy said.

"Brave girl," Eve said.

Scarlet and Olive rocked their kayak behind.

"Olive! You're hitting me with the oar," Scarlet said.

"Let me steer! I have the rudder," Olive said.

"No, you'll mess it up," Scarlet said. Their boat veered left and right. Olive's oar hit Scarlet's. "Daddy, it's not fair. She's such a cunt."

Jack put his oars down, his face darker and more powerless than ever before. "That's it. I'm through."

"Oh great," Scarlet said. "First you leave mommy. Then you leave Eve. Now you leave us. Nice going, Dad."

"She's right," Olive said. "*You're* what's wrong. You never stop us until it's too late."

"Don't say that to Daddy," Lucy said. "He's good."

"Everybody shut up," Eve said.

The oars were still in their laps, the boats stalled, and Eve thought again of what she'd found: the magazine in the trash with the picture of the girl bent at the waist with her head upside down as she clipped off her ponytail in one swipe. "How to Cut Your Own Hair," it said. And who had put it there? Olive? Scarlet? Did they want it to be found? Eve got a clear view of her stepdaughter's

face, pinched and miserable, the oars sticking out from her lap. She looked young, adrift and mother-less, sister-less, father-less. She was a child. But so was Jack. And Eve was too. Maybe most of all.

Eve took the magazine from her bag and launched it. "Hey, Scarlet. Look what I found." It spun once, then took on water, as Eve had known it would.

"What's that?" Jack said.

The newsprint darkened and bled, the magazine creasing at the center before it sank. "Nothing now."

Scarlet stared right back at Eve, but Eve could see the girl was weakening. It made Eve feel sadder still.

"I'm so confused," Lucy said. "I always am."

"It gets worse when you're older," Olive said.

To Eve's surprise, Scarlet tipped her head back and sang, "Row, row, row your boat."

"Gently down the stream," Olive sang.

"Merrily, merrily, merrily," Lucy sang, and clapped her hands.

Impossible that this day would end in song, but sing they did. The girls harmonized a round, Olive taking bass, Scarlet's voice soaring over the high notes, the boat obeying and straightening, pulling forward and running parallel with the other kayak, the gray rocks in sharp relief against the stone beach, the light so bright Eve had to look away. And there they were, or almost or maybe were —two great white sharks in the water, rubbing their raspy bodies against each other, engrossed and oblivious as the kayaks slipped over their heads. f

Nikki Miller-Rose

DROP KICK ME JESUS

I've heard "Drop Kick Me Jesus (Through the Goalposts of Life)" is Bubba's favorite song. A tune buried deep on the B-side of country singer Bobby Bare's 1976 record *The Winner and Other Losers,* the song tells the tale of a man who pleads with the Lord not only to save his soul, not only to offer him redemption, but to go right ahead and treat him like a ball of pig skin, to drop kick him right through the goalposts of life toward the "righteous uprights," toward Heaven, the Holy Superbowl.

Its slow-rolling melody sounds more like a drunkard's back alley, paper-bag wine drinkin' rendition of "99 Bottles of Beer on the Wall" than the more reverent country spiritual, "I'll Fly Away." "C'mon, Jesus," the song seems to be saying, "Gimme a swift kick in the rear and let's see where I end up. Hopin' for the best here, Lord!"

But hold up – who's Bubba? Bubba's not a guy I knew growing up in rural South Dakota. He's not my wee-bit-inbred cousin and he's not my jalopy-drivin' neighbor. Bubba's not even that cousin of mine I've heard's been doin' time in the state pen. Bubba's our esteemed 42nd President, William Jefferson Clinton. I've heard Clinton's nickname is Bubba, at least, and I've heard this is one of his favorite songs. It makes sense; the man went through a whole heckuvalotta trouble before and during his presidency, and he must hope he's come out a winner, that he might someday tumble on up through those righteous uprights.

But what do I know about righteousness? It was early in Clinton's presidency that I lost all my authority on Jesus.

It happened twelve months after my sixth grade teacher interrupted class to roll the big TV from the library into our room

so we could watch Bill Clinton's first presidential inauguration. Bill Clinton liked Jesus, and because I reckoned my mom did, I liked Bill Clinton. I trusted Mom's politics, 'til she got rich, that is, and voted in a way I didn't much agree with as an economically struggling and socially liberal adult.

For the first dozen years of my life, I suppose I knew a good amount about Jesus, and much more about God. I knew prayers up the wazoo. Most of my friends in my small prairie town grew up Lutheran, Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, Evangelical. They went to churches where folks sang uplifting folk and even rock songs about Jesus. Onstage at these churches—yes, their churches had stages!—believers who were, by our podunk standards, burgeoning guitar virtuosos strummed acoustics during services. The Sunday school classes and bible camp sessions my friends attended were filled with coloring book illustrations narrating the compassion and all-around awesomeness of that longhaired hippy Jesus. To those kids, Jesus was simply awesome.

But I wasn't one of them. I grew up Catholic, which I didn't know at the time was a kind of religious minority on the Plains—not as minority as the Jews, and I didn't meet a Muslim, Buddhist or Hindu 'til I turned eighteen and moved to the city—but more so than the various Protestants populating the area. When you grew up Catholic, Jesus was not awesome. He didn't look like a guy we'd hang out with on a big rock surrounded by a bunch of baby lambs, like the version of him depicted in my Protestant friends' Sunday school books. We Catholic children also knew Jesus as the Son of God, but that Son was an abstraction, a spot you touched on your chest after you tapped the Father (forehead) and before you tapped the Holy (left shoulder) Spirit (right shoulder), Amen.

Our Jesus didn't hang on rocks with lambs. Our Jesus wasn't a hippy. We didn't sing about him in church with acoustic guitars. We learned he died for us, and that we, sinful creatures from conception —thank you, eternally maligned Eve—were forever in his debt. We were taught to always look over our shoulder and shrug off that

devil who might be encouraging us to swear, to lie, to masturbate, to procreate before marrying a proper Catholic man in a proper Catholic ceremony. And when we'd done any of those things, we were instructed to confess and pray accordingly to Jesus's mother: ten Hail Marys for swearing, another twenty for lying, some five hundred for masturbating. No amount of confession or prayer could absolve you of the sins of premarital sexual relations and the use of contraception. The threat of excommunication loomed large, and these sins remained our collective secret.

We were, however, a ceremonial bunch. We memorized prayers —the first time I heard a congregation of Protestants tack "For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever" business to the end of that prayer I'd learned from rote, it 'bout blew my mind. We listened to purportedly celibate priests chant in a long dead language. We daubed our heads in holy water and ashes and drank wine and ate wafers that didn't just represent but that had been magically turned into the real, honest-to-God blood and body of Christ Himself, no foolin'! And we didn't go to this magical Sunday school, this mystical Bible Camp. We went to CCD. On Wednesdays. Catechism. And it was Hell.

I didn't know what CCD stood for back then. I've since learned that it means "Confraternity of Christian Doctrine," but this proves no more illuminating. What I knew then and what I know now is that every Wednesday, from the first grade 'til my mom let me quietly withdraw my membership, I was in CCD. Catholics love our rituals and ours went like this:

Mom would leave work early to drive me to five P.M. piano lessons with Ms. Stacy. After five minutes of waiting for the nerdy girl before me to plunk out the closing notes of Mozart Simplified, after ten minutes of my own lessons, then ten minutes of theory, then ten minutes of dancing with Ms. Stacy to the waltz she'd cued up on her record player to help me "get a feel" for 3/4 time (this part was uncomfortable), Mom would pick me up around 5:40 (perpetually late). At six, Mom warmed up a couple frozen chicken

patties, threw them on white-bread buns with Miracle Whip—we were a religiously no-mayo household—and we'd eat at the brown table set on the blue linoleum kitchen of our rambler. Come seven o'clock, my sister and I were dropped off at the local Catholic school and we'd run to find our classrooms, which were decorated not only in charts demonstrating D'Nealian and times tables, but also pictures of the Virgin Mary. We'd sit for our lessons 'til we were released at eight. Mom wouldn't come 'til at least 8:15, making me walk past the long line of punctual moms and dads in minivans right outside the school, and then all the way down the block to the other street, so she could avoid "traffic," she'd tell me, traffic a concept I'd learn the real meaning of when I moved to a big city some ten years later.

In my first year, CCD was a benign and lovely engagement. The instructor of my class was an aged Catholic nun who, despite all stereotypes to the contrary, proved a calm and affirming presence. She didn't carry a ruler, and to prepare us for our First Communion she had us practice on Oreo cookies and grape soda, gently warning us that the "real thing" wouldn't taste as good but that we weren't to screw up our faces or spit it out. She told us we could either take the Body of Christ the way adults did—mouth open, tongue out, awaiting placement of the wafer by the priest—or we could hold out our hands, cupped, accept the wafer, place it in our mouth, chew for a brief moment, swallow, then step away from the priest. This was important: *Do not step away from the Father while still munching the Body of Our Father!* She gave us little round stickers bearing images of rainbows and smiley faces for each job well done on our lessons. And she looked on proudly as we took the "real thing" without making bad faces or letting wine—yes, real wine you Protestant, grape juice-drinking heathens—dribble down our chins during our First Communion.

The rumors about ill-tempered nuns may not have always been true, but there were others to cover for the cruel malevolence of Catholicism wherever kindly nuns fell short. The next year my

Wednesdays were spent with a young, recently married Catholic couple who taught the class jointly. It was awful. There was no Good Nun/Bad Nun happening with those two—they were Bad Nun/Bad DudeNun. The husband would lead the lessons while the wife circled the room, watching with the darting, forward-seeing eyes of a bird of prey, or while she sat in a folding chair in the corner, her oversight seeming less predatory but somehow just as ubiquitous.

In a flash, she'd interrupt her husband's lesson, point her finger at an inattentive child doodling skateboard graphics or skulls in his notebook, and screech his name. Her husband would descend upon the kid, usually with a stern warning to knock it off. It seemed it was always Jamie getting yelled at. Buck-toothed, freckle-faced, red-haired Jaime, if you can imagine such a child ever being persecuted in a parochial setting.

During one of the last classes of the year, Jamie's infractions had either crossed a line or accumulated too greatly in number because the husband ordered him to stand, and, when he obliged, the husband grabbed the folding chair in which Jamie had been sitting and threw it halfway across the room. Then, in an amazing show of force for a man with arms as scrawny as his, he threw Jamie and his few dozen pounds of freckly flesh right into it.

Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us and so on and so forth, we were learning.

In the fifth grade, I was placed in a class instructed by a woman who by day served as my elementary school's librarian, Mrs. Kakoski. Mrs. Kakoski was perhaps the holiest of all my CCD teachers. She might have even been holier than the nuns who'd taught me before, and she was definitely holier than that crabby lady and her abusive husband. Mrs. Kakoski lived the absolute word of the Lord, though she always managed to separate her Church and her State when she instructed me on how to properly shelve and align books in the library on the days I'd stay in from recess to avoid the mean sixth graders on the playground (strike that) when I'd stay in to help her

shelve books because I just cared about our library that darned much.

Her holiness Mrs. Kakoski held a particular interest in the Third Commandment: *Remember to keep holy the Sabbath day*. Each Wednesday, Mrs. Kakoski would take roll of all students in attendance, and I'd always chime in with a cheerful, "Here!" But when she'd call a second, more important attendance, I was the only one who would consistently turn up in absentia.

"Who went to church last Sunday? Reber?" She'd peer up over her bifocals. "Check. Murphy? Check. Schmidt? Check. Huber? Check."

But when she'd call my name, there was no check to be made. At this point, Mrs. Kakoski would walk over to my desk, her immense brunette halo of picked and sprayed curls floating ethereally over her head. "Why haven't you been going to church?"

"Mom doesn't take me."

"Why not?"

"I don't know."

I probably did know. I probably knew my mom, though Catholic-identifying, was one of those "lapsed Catholics," or "recovering Catholics," one of the Catholics who want to retain the code, the religious identification, but without all the baggage that came along with attending the Church. These were the self-aware folks who weren't in denial about all the ways in which the Church had turned its back on them: the homosexuals, the divorcees, the contracepting, those shacking up or having children out of wedlock, those married in parks in sleeveless dresses by their hippy friends to Lutherans, not in Catholic churches with covered shoulders by priests to other Catholics. They were self-aware enough to step away from the Church, but not confident enough to disavow it altogether. (Total disavowal would take another decade of sex scandals and pedophila, it seems). But was I going to say any of this to Her Holiness, Mrs. Kakoski? Did I even possess the ability to articulate such observations?

"I don't know, Mrs. Kakoski," I'd say. "She just doesn't want to go, I guess."

It was then that I'd flash my biggest, most innocent dinner plate-sized doe eyes.

"Well, honey, if you need me to come get you, I can take you to church. It's very important you keep the Sabbath day holy."

When I'd find my mom after CCD, I'd hop in the car and tell her that Mrs. Kakoski had offered to save me, implying that I needed someone like her to ensure my salvation. Week after week, Mom dismissed me with a wave of the hand. "Fine," she'd say, "have Mrs. Kakoski drive you to church. Then I don't have to feel bad about not taking you."

This was, of course, not what I wanted to hear. I wanted my mom to take me to church, if only to get Mrs. Kakoski off my back each Wednesday at CCD during her roll call, and to thereby help me conform. But I didn't want to ride in Mrs. Kakoski's car to church each Sunday. I was pretty sure she drove a car from the seventies, and how weird would that have been? She had weird hair from the seventies, too. People would judge me if I started showing up at church with Mrs. Big-Hair, Old-Car Kakoski.

Instead, each week I shook my head abysmally when Mrs. Kakoski took her Holy Roll and blamed my transgressions on my misguided mother, all the while silently satisfied with my Sundays spent ignoring this holy day, in fact *working* on this holy day. Working hard at watching *Saved by the Bell* reruns on the couch, that is. *Forgive us our trespasses, Mr. Belding, as we forgive those who've polluted the football field with oil and polluted the face of Kelly Kapowski with homemade acne-clearing concoctions that turned her nose red during Homecoming week, and lead us not into detention but deliver us to "The Max" for hamburgers, Amen.*

By the end of the next year, the mean sixth graders I'd hoped to avoid on the playground had moved on to junior high, and now I was one of them. So not only was Mrs. Kakoski no longer offering

her benediction to every one of my church-attending classmates but me, but I'd also stopped hiding out in the library during recess, shelving books to escape the older girls who'd pick on me. I was, however, begging my heathen mother to fork out the cash to send me to private Catholic school for seventh grade. Those who attended Catholic school weren't required to attend CCD on Wednesdays, as their entire curriculum was based in the Lord.

"But Mom, it's really important! I really care about God, and I want to learn more about Him!"

Secular Translation: The two Justins will be going to school there next year, and they're really cute! I want a boyfriend! A Catholic Justin boyfriend! And, more importantly, my Catholic school cousin reported to me that her P.E. teachers don't make her shower after gym class like they do in public school.

"Pleeeeeeease?"

But my mom knew better than to pay to send her gifted daughter to a subpar private school when there was a perfectly good public school down the street and you could go there for free. And it's a good thing this heathen child didn't get sent to Catholic school because, early in the seventh grade, an important religious conversion was set to take place, a conversion that involved logic and a graphing calculator.

The year before, a number of students and I took a test for placement in math classes two years in advance of our grade, the idea being that by the time everyone else was starting trigonometry, senior year, we'd already be enrolled in advanced college calculus (or have two years of open math periods, which was the route my underachieving self ultimately took). Time spent in the pizza parlor was more important to me than college calc, but the study nerds who underwent the extra math did get some awesome scholarships to pretty good schools. One of them even got an out-of-state scholarship. In Minnesota!

Only three of us in my peer group qualified for the advanced class, which meant we took math courses with kids much older

than we were. On Wednesdays, the older kids had their college prep curriculum to attend to—standardized test planning, high school registration advising and so on—so I was sent to the library to study with my young cohorts, Sally and Ethan, our massive and expensive Texas Instruments graphing calculators in tow.

Our teacher, Mrs. Calhoun, would check on us at the beginning and end of each Wednesday session, at which point we had a signal to clear our calculator screens and act like we weren't up to no good. This was before smart phones, so there were no dirty Internet photos to quickly dump. In fact, we wouldn't encounter the Internet in any capacity for three more years. What was exciting to a technophile rebel kid in possession of their first piece of technology before the Internet was widely available was that on fancy TI calculators you could hit the logarithm key over and over and over again until your screen read *LOG LOG LOG LOG LOG LOG LOG LOG LOG LOG LOG LOG LOG LOG LOG LOG* for as long as you could hit it before Mrs. Calhoun cruised around the corner. LOG to such kids meant poop, and so this was all very funny, especially in an era when a couple deities named Beavis and Butthead reigned supreme over our youthful ideologies.

Mrs. Calhoun would appear out of nowhere. "How's it going, kids?"

"Oh fine, Mrs. Calhoun, fine! Just doing story problems."

When we'd tire of our logging, we'd pull books off the library shelves at random. Mrs. Kakoski wasn't there to supervise, and the junior high librarian was hardly a diligent supervisor of the stacks.

One day, we pulled out a book about the Bible, or about the apostles, or some such religious business, and took a brief respite from our logging to get highly philosophical about God.

"So, the Bible, huh?"

"Yeah, the Bible."

"So, it was written by some dudes who talked to Jesus or something, huh?"

"Guess so."

"So, like, what if the dudes just, like, got drunk one night, and made all this stuff up?"

"Probably."

"So, like, why do people believe it?"

"Dunno."

And, with that, two-thirds of our study group became atheists, and I lost my authority on Jesus. I was quite open about my religious enlightenment—or disenlightenment? This was a controversy whispered about amongst my peers, but they rarely questioned me. My generally cantankerous and scrappy disposition no doubt warned them away. But there were three notable exceptions.

My friend Amy went to one of those churches with the acoustic-strummed rock hymns, and, on several occasions, she mentioned she worried about my salvation. And I was like, "Whatever. Sheep."

My friend Jake never questioned my beliefs, but he did introduce me to his pastor. The pastor had come to the hospital room where I sat in order to "counsel" my first boyfriend, himself admitted for a pair of collapsed lungs after smoking too much weed. He was asthmatic.

Jake introduced me to the pastor in the waiting room, and it was immediately clear that the pastor already "knew" about me and that our "casual" introduction was part of a carefully constructed ruse to get me recruited to their church. Their church was one that preyed upon rebel teens, teens who, whether asthmatic or not, were liable to smoke so much pot they have to be hospitalized. Despite my polite hello, the pastor quickly chose to take his leave of me. Lost cause.

After a year spent in quiet withdrawal from weekly CCD classes, a respite which my mother and I were both happy about, Mom asked when I planned to return to prepare for that ceremony where you become a real, honest-to-God member of the Church. As I understand it, you're baptized to clear you of your original sin and to keep you out of Purgatory should you die of childhood measles, and then you go through Communion and do your First Confession

to learn and assimilate to two more of the Seven Sacraments. You don't become a full participant in the Church until you go through Confirmation as a teenager, yet another occasion for which distant aunts and uncles send you pastel colored envelopes and cards with crisp twenty dollar bills tucked inside.

"So, when do you want to get confirmed?"

"Well Mom, never. I am an atheist."

I'd never seen my mother look so shocked. She was more shocked than the time I'd screamed bloody murder for her to *hurry quick, it's an emergency,* and, after running up the stairs, having abandoned wet laundry on the basement floor, she found that my baby sister was not, as she'd suspected, in danger, but that I wanted confirmation as to whether the man on the television (musician Huey Lewis) was the same guy who played the dad (Alan Thicke) on *Growing Pains*. Oh man, did unsubstantiated Alan Thicke/Huey Lewis-related peril piss that woman off. *I was to never again scream at her to hurry because Huey Lewis or Alan Thicke was on the T.V.*

I wondered if she was faking it this time, just to play the part of Good Catholic Mom. She may have even cried, or laugh-cried.

I remember thinking her reaction was funny.

I was, of course, not mature enough to think that perhaps my announcement actually did bother her. That it bothered this woman who gave me my first Bible, dressed me in a frilly white lace dress, white gloves, and shiny white patent shoes for Easter service, the woman who cleared space on the shelves for the teardrop-eyed Precious Moments figurines my grandma bought me for special occasions, the woman who, since I was a baby, had sat with me nightly to say, "Now I lay me down to sleep…" then clicked off the lights and told me to sleep tight.

My dad came home a short time later, and my mother reported to him our earlier conversation, speaking as if she'd caught me smoking cigarettes behind the garage or as if I'd gotten a D in math. It was as if she wasn't truly shocked but was paranoid God was watching and so wanted to accurately convey the import of the issue.

My dad gave me a high five, something he'd never done before and has never done since.

"Way to think for yourself, pal!"

It was a totally unexpected moment of bonding. He continued, "I used to be agnostic myself." *Agnostic. . . what's that,* I thought? "But once you reach a certain age, you begin to think about what might happen to you once your life is over. And your thinking tends to change about these things."

In that moment, unbeknownst to me, I was hearing one of the wisest things I'd ever heard. Thinking and beliefs aren't black and white, they don't remain fixed over a lifetime, and sometimes they don't really make a whole lot of logical sense. But that's okay.

As an adult, my beliefs remain wishy-washy. I'm not an atheist, but I'm also not a believer. I just don't know, and, honestly, at this point, I don't much care, but that doesn't mean I'm not moved by displays of faith.

When a family friend died unexpectedly (and far too young) from his first and final heart attack, during the church service at his funeral, rather than your typical Christian hymnals, a recording of "Turn! Turn! Turn!" played joyfully over the PA, the Byrds singing Pete Seeger's take on those lines from the Bible's Book of Ecclesiastes, and my friend's family, tearfully but purposefully and faithfully, followed his casket out of the church, holding on to one another. I remember how, after the burial, the family assembled in the church basement, and while friends and family ate carrot cake and sipped hot coffee, they clung to each other once again, this time to sing Bon Jovi's "Livin' on a Prayer." Don't question my sincerity when I say it was the most moving thing I've ever witnessed.

And I have a confession to make. Last January, on the tail end of a trip to Mexico, my entire family, including my sister's very sweet little baby, was camped out in a mildewy motel in Cancun after engine problems delayed our flight back to the U.S. We knew we'd be getting back on that very same plane the next morning. We hoped the new part that had been allegedly flown in overnight from

the States would get installed good and tight, but we couldn't be sure that it would be.

Before I went to bed that night, I got down on my knees and I prayed. And it calmed me.

It's moments like those that have made it all the more evident to me why and how people believe so strongly in a higher power, and yet how easy it can be for someone to slip from non-believer to believer, and then right back again.

Not that long ago, I learned that Bubba, himself just a heart attack away from the other side, has gone vegan. Our former President is not just *not* eating McDonald's anymore, but he's not eating meat or butter, nor is he drinking chocolate milk. Talk about full-on conversions. He's getting older, and sometimes that necessitates a change in perspective.

As I've also gotten older, I've come to realize my seventh grade self had a point. As she joyfully "logged" in class, she was learning it can be a good thing to be skeptical.

But this adult has also learned to embrace ambiguity, which is probably why that Bobby Bare tune speaks to me as it does our former President. The song's "Let Go, Let Punter" message exhibits an attitude I've tried to adopt in my life and in my faith, even if that faith starts and stops at the letting go rather than believing that someone or something's gonna catch me. I know better than to think I'm any bigger than that. f

Christine Potter

COLLEGE RADIO, 1972

The studios with their nursery-school blue walls
always smelled of sawdust and ancient paper—
newly built but somehow older than our parents,

many of whom had already reclaimed our bedrooms
for dens back downstate. We had no faculty advisor.
We taught one another to spin the record backwards

three-quarters of a turn from the beginning of the track
and keep the microphone turned off in case someone
said *shit!* Evan believed the FCC listened in Buffalo

with special receivers to pick up our 10 watts, and
therefore we shouldn't play songs that glorified drugs.
One Toke Over The Line was the most obvious, he said,

and clogged its grooves with purple crayon. The AM
Top 40 place up the hill pumped it out twice an hour.
That winter, I tried to stop seeing a poet named Joe,

who drooled over my poems in Workshop thrice weekly.
He lived upstairs from the station. He set his dirty
underwear on fire trying to purify it with incense. We

watched charred cotton scraps of it float down and
land in the snow outside the control room: hiss, hiss.
During the mining of Haiphong Harbor, we sat up late,

cross-legged on the floor in the newsroom, yellow reams
of UPI stories spooling out over our heads. We talked
about the Book of Revelation. Weren't there nukes at

the Seneca Army Depot? No escape, even home in
Westchester. We'd heard a history prof was running
to Fiji with a student nanny. Could that be true?

When the world didn't end, we propped text books
against the mixing board and studied for finals
on the air. I moved out of my dorm room to stay

with a friend so I could do my last show, the week
school closed. Her dad was German. *There she goes—*
Rah-dio Free Europe, he said as I dragged grey

wooden crates full of LPs over the dandelions on
his lawn, loading somebody's southbound car. Locusts
moaned a cue tone for an upcoming program

about which I hadn't been informed. The trees' green
was like fire, the air so hot it vibrated. Joe kept calling
my parents' house. My mom took all his messages.

Matthew Lykins

LIKE AN ORGAN, NOT A VALENTINE

I.

Lucy only felt something when she raised her .45 to the heavens and tried to kill the moon. She'd been doing it for years, emptying magazine after magazine in 4/4 time, hundreds of dollars in bullets, which beat the hell out of the thousands in therapy her mom spent after her dad blew town.

Therapy and booze. Pills and men. She was in there now, Lucy's mom, "entertaining," which as far as Lucy could tell was just fucking to music. Lucy was twenty; her dad had bolted when she was eleven. Her mom had been drunk for nine years. We all lose time, though; we all lose it in different ways.

Lucy, for example, wanted to watch the moon burst apart like a slapped grape, see it rupture like the way she felt her heart rupture the day her daddy took off, squirting juice like a cherry-red tomato on a barbecue skewer.

II.

When she was sixteen, Lucy had a girlfriend named Angela Rich, a big, proud, bull dyke with a mullet so short, hard, and sharp on top she could pop balloons on it. Lucy'd never been into girls. She was as close as her class had to a merry-go-round as far as boys went, but something about Angela made her sit up and take notice. Angela told her once, after band practice and during a car ride when they screamed the new Sleator-Kinney album at passing cars, that there was no soul. Only bone, blood, and meat.

"Your heart is a muscle, like your bicep or your tongue. Don't get fooled by all the Hallmark cards." Angela sang a lyric from one of their favorite songs:"It's cherry, cherry red."

"*...and it beats in time, time, time, time!*" they both screamed into the wind.

"I like Hallmark cards," Lucy had said, "but I like your tongue more."

If it was just chemicals in her head and meat in her body, then the only real thing was what was between her legs. She could live with that. It beat fighting. Her mom fought. Her little brother fought. Everything, everybody, themselves. Let that shit go. Your fights are with shadows.

III.

Months after all the stuff with Angela and her dad blew over, Lucy started another band. It was 1998 and she felt like she'd moved beyond all the muddy wah-wah pedals and the smash of the kick drum. She wanted to focus on something different. Just Lucy and her bass guitar, steady and sharp, the train and the razor. Nothing fancy. She advertised in a record store and found two guys willing to try what she had in mind. She played them old Waylon and Cash albums, a little Bakersfield stuff like Buck Owens and Merle, and though she had a sneaking suspicion they were in it for giggles, they put together a pretty solid three-piece.

Of course, after Angela's dad showed up that night with the gun there wasn't a band anymore. She never saw Chet or Ray again. She was surprised she remembered their names now, even though she was still pissed that they hauled ass out of her garage and didn't even try to help her.

"I want to know why you did what you did to my family," Angela's father had said. He said it calmly, the hint of a bark that always wrapped around his words—like a towel around a wet puppy—strangely absent. He wasn't angry, just curious. She had no doubt that he was there to kill her, and himself.

"Angela's okay, I'm okay, you're family's okay, Burt," she said. "It's all over."

"It will be," said Burt, racking back the slide. "You took advantage. You ruined everything."

"I…" but she stopped. She had no words.

"I was trying to help," Burt said.

"I know." She'd never needed help, but she let it go. You let things go when a gun's pointed at you.

"I'm here to make it right. It's what I want, it's what God wants."

"Is it what your wife and daughter want?" Lucy asked.

"They aren't in the picture anymore."

"I see."

"So this here's where it all ends."

And that was when Lucy hit the garage floor, sputtering and shaking, frothing through her clenched teeth like she'd gargled with dish soap, and Angela's dad dropped the pistol and rushed to her, watching her head and feet slap the garage floor like she was a frying egg.

"Lucy?" he asked. She grunted in reply, or at least it seemed that way. It occurred to Burt that there was no one to hear her, no one to help her if he hadn't come.

"Where's your mom?" he asked, but got no reply. It was up to him.

He would save her this time.

IV.

In 1993 Lucy was twelve. It was the year her dad left. He took nothing; he didn't even bother to drive the family home from Hara Arena after the rodeo was over. He mentioned having to piss while they stood in line at the snack kiosk between events—broncos and barrel racing—and never came back.

Lucy just stood there, listening to the calls from the rodeo announcers, holding a soggy cardboard lid of greasy nachos sloppy with cheese and jalapenos. Her mom panicked after the first twenty minutes, raged into the men's room, kicked open stall doors, drawing whistles and yells, then found customer service and put out an all-call.

Nothing.

Lucy did not move, letting the indifferent surge and break of the crowd press against her and pull back, like waves in the tub. Her brother wept, slumped against the wall with his knees under his chin. Understandable. Harry was eight, thin, grayish yellow from the pain meds and skinny-fat from a youth spent in an orthotic halo to correct for "shit that happened after the stroke," as his dad referred to it to his buddies.

There were two periods to that point—the shit before the stroke and the shit after the stroke. Now there was a second epoch: the shit before her dad blew town and the shit after. There was a lot of overlap in the two movements, lots to codify and label.

Lucy regarded her weeping brother and bawling mom, now reduced to screeching embarrassing things like "I knew that bastard was a bastard!" and "He told me he loved me!" The guy had been gone for an hour. What did her family know that she did not? Why were they so sure? It was as if she were the calm center of a whirlpool, watching everything flush away, denim and felt, buckles and belts, the swirl of the crowd now just glints of brass, dun gray, and khaki.

She looked at the nachos, then to the left of the lobby, where the low light of a ratty ballroom peeked from behind a set of double doors.

"This is where my prom will be," she told the hunched pile of her brother. He regarded her with wild, pink eyes.

"Dad's gone," Harry said.

Lucy chose a chip from the center of the wilted cardboard. She opened her mouth as wide as she could stand and took the whole

dripping mess in one bite, then smiled at her brother around the cheesy, greasy blob and threw the rest away.

V.

Burt Rich, Angela's father, was a guidance counselor and basketball coach at Lucy's high school as well as a deacon at the Baptist church right outside of town—an old, squat, brick building with a gravel parking lot and a sad, bent-to-shit swing set that served as the Sunday school playground. On fall Friday nights a group of boys, fresh from another football win, liked to celebrate by tipping the swing set over on its side. Burt, as squat and ugly as the church itself, would push the swing set back into shape early Sunday morning, his face as red and rough as the bricks the church was built from.

He first saw Lucy with her family, when she was nine, a visitor to the church. Burt cornered her dad when they arrived at the building, friendly, bluff, open-palmed, but cornered him nonetheless, and asked him his business with the Lord. Lucy's father grinned and shook his head, waved to his wife, and waited out the remainder of the service in the car. Burt had that effect on people, despite his best efforts. He tried to smile, but always looked like he was bearing his teeth.

He often thought he had the heart of a Christian in the body of a pit brawler, and his gravelly bark of a voice and stalled cadence didn't help matters. He was, truly, a mess of a guidance counselor and a mess of a deacon, the kind of fellow that makes one wonder how he got those jobs in the first place. That same gruff delivery was a boon in the Army and a necessity during his missionary work in his late twenties, spent in godforsaken places with no running water and too few wells. God, at that point, needed a hard sell, and he could provide it. You wanted someone to soft-peddle the Lord, you needed to look to Pastor Jerry, not him.

After Lucy's dad retreated to the car—"damned if I was going to sit and get interrogated by that ugly fucker," he explained to his wife

later—Lucy had her first seizure. Burt watched her drop and start to shake, and it was understandable that he, at first, believed her to be possessed by the spirit, as they were in the middle of "A Closer Walk With Thee" and it was the end of the service and the beginning of the invitation, the time to give your soul to Jesus.

Lucy's brother lurched over her quaking body, the halo restricting him to bows and stabs at the waist, like he was trying to hammer home a fence post with his face. Lucy's eyes stayed open the entire time, the damnedest thing, and Burt, who was trained to recognize and assist with such things from his years as a soldier, teacher, and coach, was shaken despite his awareness of what was happening.

"She looked like she was trying to shake her soul right out her body and join the angels right there and then," he told his wife at dinner.

"Finish your peas, Burt," his wife said, "you sound like a creep when you talk like that."

Lucy was fine, just epileptic. A battery of tests in the next weeks confirmed it. Her father, initially terrified, and finally just annoyed by the whole ordeal—doctors, nurses, CAT scans and insurance claims—groaned as much to her mother one evening driving home from a barbecue his boss held for work. "Shit," he said, "one kid looks like the Tin Man and now my daughter decides to become Shaky McTremble. Glad I got snipped, the next'd be born with wings and horns."

Lucy's mother, still sober, respectful, and tired of trying so hard, nodded and looked in the rear-view mirror, glad that both kids were asleep, wishing they could stay that way until all their pain was over.

VI.

It never occurred to Lucy that she should feel different because of her epilepsy. By the time she was seventeen or eighteen the medicine had basically wiped out most of the seizures and she understood

enough to know that her condition was just faulty wiring, a chemical deal that was neither her fault nor something to lament or gnash teeth over.

By that point she'd listened to too many people with too many stupid ideas to trust words like fate, or hope, or prayer, or repentance.

It was a glitch. It was in her and of her and *her*, and that was that. At times, one in particular, it was even a convenience.

VII.

When she was eleven, Lucy tried to lift the sewer lid from the street in front of her house. The sewer lid stayed in the street, but she felt something pop and stumbled back inside. She waited two days, then told her mother.

Her mom looked in at her dad, who was sleeping one off, and then in at her brother, who was dozing on the couch, and she pursed her lips at how the aluminum from his halo dug into the drywall behind him.

Lucy had an umbilical hernia and needed surgery, but they decided to wait until the end of the year, when her brother's treatments spooled out and they were out of pocket, so the surgery would be free.

In the car on the way home from the pediatrician's, Lucy traced the raindrops as they slid down the passenger side window and listened to her mom's complaints.

"I'm not saying the Lord gives us more than we can handle. I'd never say that, but I understand why your father drinks. We are a star-crossed crew.

"I'm going to tell you a story."

Oh boy.

"When your daddy and I started to want kids, we tried and tried and nothing really worked. Years. Three years. We had two miscarriages, and I don't expect you to know what that is but it's

when the baby dies in her mommy's belly and they have to go in and get it out. My tummy felt like a haunted house. And I prayed for a little one. But nothing. Nothing.

"So I found a woman, a little old woman who said she could get me a baby. And I went to her and I lay on this woman's kitchen table and watched her chop the head off a chicken right in front of me and smear the blood all over my belly. Isn't that the funniest thing? It was nighttime, and I had to come when the moon was full, and I probably should've known what I was into, but she did all that and lit a black candle and said some words I did not understand.

"Nine months later, there you were.

"And I thanked the Lord that you had ten fingers and toes, and it never bothered me that you didn't cry or whine or smile. You were alive, and you were mine. But then you kept not talking and not talking and your daddy started to worry. And we took you to doctors, and they said you were okay and you'd talk when you felt like it. But I knew better. I knew I'd opened something up that was dark and ugly. So I took you to that little old woman again.

"You were two.

"The little old lady lit that same goddamn candle and said the same goddamned things and then made you drink the chicken's blood. And I let you. And after you spit it up you started crying. A month later you started talking. Full sentences. And your baby brother was on the way.

"Like a bonus going-away gift on a game show.

"Then there was the stroke, and you got the shakes, and your daddy's drinkin' again and runnin' around on me, and I think now that there's a black sail flying over us. And it'll always be there. And it's my fault because I loved too hard and needed you all too much."

Her mom started crying so hard she pulled the car off to the side of the road, even though they were a block away from the house. Lucy stared at her sneakers in the foot well of the car and rubbed the sore spot under her belly button, where she was once attached to her mother and where she had ripped a hole just a

couple days before. Had it really been so bad? Had their lives been a series of hurts, injuries, setbacks, and tragedies? To her, it just felt like a life. Ups and downs, long and short, all at the same time. And though she didn't have words for what she felt then, she could certainly apply them now, on her back, her breath calm and even, in 4/4 time, as placid as prayer.

And those words are: People will swallow the most egregious piles of bullshit as long as it makes them feel like they're not alone.

VIII.

The first time Lucy slept with a girl, she was sixteen and it was 1997. *Dig me Out* by Sleator-Kinney lived in her Honda Accord. She'd blast into the school parking lot, the sharp punctures of sound from the title track blowing out of the driver's side window, right at the scowling jocks and pep squad groupies arranged along the grassy median strip between the senior lot and bus lane.

"Turn that lesbian shit off, rug-munch!" a flannel-clad, Stetson-wearing offensive lineman yelled at her one morning, but he got so busy dodging her flicked, lit Camel Light that he didn't have anything to follow up with.

Angela played drums in Lucy's band. She was tall and blocky, with a real potential to be much bigger, and perched on the tiny stool behind her drum kit like Grape Ape on his van. Lucy, who until that point had a well-earned reputation as an easy and strings-free lay, was in love for the very first time.

It wasn't perfect; Angela's dad worked at their school and her mom, Jerri, was willow-thin, creepy, and always drinking coffee, but it was enough.

She was especially taken with Angela's hands and forearms, which were as hard, round, and tight as a ten-year-old's calves, and her collection of vintage metal T-Shirts—Deep Purple to Metallica—she'd filched from her brother when he went into the service. Lucy loved the way Angela's spiked hair felt between her legs and across

her hips, the way Angela's nostrils flared pink when she came, and the hours they could spend up in Angela's bedroom between school and dinner under the guise of studying, a luxury she never had with all of the boys.

Whether or not the girls chose to believe as much, Angela's mother, despite her piety, was an imaginative and suspicious woman, and even if she was a harpy and a zealot, as Angela could attest, she was far from an idiot. One afternoon after making good-and-damn sure they were settled in upstairs, Angela's mother jimmied the lock with an unbent paper clip and cracked the door just enough to see her daughter writhing naked astride Lucy's face. Before she could think to stop herself, Jerri kicked the door the rest of the way open and invoked Jesus, his mother, father, and four or five of his closest friends before damning Lucy to the elaborate and perpetually screeching hellfires of perdition.

After Lucy's Accord spun gravel off the front of the house like buckshot and screamed onto the side street and out to the interstate, Jerri called Burt to tell him what had happened, how his little quaking angel had become the worm in their family's apple.

IX.

Burt punched the phone back into its cradle and stood, startling the acne-pocked kid in front of him. He grabbed his beige windbreaker off the hook by his "Footprints" poster and spun around three times, like he wanted to lie down in the brush. "Gotta go, Lonnie. We'll continue next week."

Lonnie slapped the book of Isaiah closed, dead-eyed and relieved to be off the hook, and rose from the hard-backed cafeteria chair Burt had been given for the students who came to his office. Burt knew that reading the Bible as a form of after-school therapy was not in his job description as a public school guidance counselor, but he believed what he believed. And Lonnie was a tough nut.

After Lonnie had murmured a goodbye and oozed out the door, Burt pushed in his chair, patted his keys in his jacket pocket, and started to remove his ID badge. He caught a look at himself reflecting from the small picture frame on his filing cabinet, his fierce eyes and drawn mouth a ghostly judge on the happy family in the picture. Burt sat again and dialed his home number; when Jerri answered he asked to talk to Angela, but she told him that Angela wouldn't respond to anyone or anything, and she imagined he had bigger fish to fry, starting with the firm tongue-lashing he was to give Lucy as well as her drunk mother, wormy brother and deadbeat dad, if he was even still around.

Burt asked, again, if he could talk to Angela.

"She's playing drums. You know, like she does."

Burt knew that would likely last for a few days, and promised Jerri he'd stop by Lucy's on his way home. He hung up the phone again, more gently this time, and decided he would indeed pay a visit to Lucy's house, out of Christian and fatherly concern.

So why the strange light in his eyes when he caught his mirrored self splashed darkly across the framed glass moments before? Why the flutter at the back of his throat?

He only knew this: it was neither concern nor anger. He'd felt those enough to know that this was different, slipperier, older.

Dangerous.

X.

Lucy's first time was with a sallow, pot-bellied kid in the eighth grade. He was terrified and she was underwhelmed. If he hadn't been the first, and hadn't remained a casual friend, she would've forgotten the whole thing. She wasn't proud of it, but she'd do it again. It was 1994, and he fucked her to "Animal" by Pearl Jam. She thought they were posers and would've preferred Nirvana, but it was his room, his bed, his invitation. Anyway, "Animal" is a short song, and he only made it halfway through.

"Sorry," he said. "When I'm by myself I can go longer."

"It's a compliment, then," Lucy said. "I'm more exciting than your right hand."

"Left, actually. I've tried with my right but I feel like I'm doing it to someone else."

"Where are my clothes?" Lucy asked. It was late and she figured the conversation wasn't going to get any more stimulating. She tossed aside a pile of flannels and torn corduroys, kicked through a pyramid of cassettes. One caught her eye.

"Johnny Cash? *Folsom*?" It wasn't really a question. She could read. She just didn't know other people listened to that music.

"Um, it's my dad's. I don't know where it came from." He was embarrassed. This was before the Rick Rubin disks, the *American Legend* phase, when Cash was just a punchline, a hayseed. No better than Glen Campbell or Eddie Rabbit.

Lucy's dad had made her listen to the Folsom album, to "Dirty Egg-Sucking Dog" and "Bathroom of Your Heart" first, to get her giggling, then "Cocaine Blues" and "Jackson" to get her hooked. It was why she played the bass, the steady click and thrum of Marshall Grant, his train-engine 4/4, her strength then and forever.

She smiled and tossed the cassette back into the pile, but decided that she could stay for a while longer. No need to find her clothes just yet.

"I knew you were a hick at heart, Nelson," she teased.

He grinned. "I love the John Henry song," he admitted.

"Fuck, yes," she agreed. And they talked, naked and young and alone, until three that morning, wearing out the tape and mashing the buttons to get to the parts they loved.

XI.

It was that little sickly thirteen-year-old who popped into her head as she popped rounds into the night sky. He moved the summer between middle school and high school, six years ago. She'd kept

tabs, though they'd never really spoken, let alone fucked, after that time with Johnny Cash. Still, there was something to be said for the kid. He was real. Liked what she liked. They talked that night of starting a band, which they never did, but the seeds planted that night became Plays Well with Others, the thrash trio she'd put together with Angela and Morgan Teller, whose hard candy shell—prep squad, National Honor Society, 4H—hid a prescription fetish only Lucy and Angela knew about. They'd seen her crunch a Vicodin between her gas card and student ID and snort the powder right in front of the principal. Nobody suspected a thing.

Lucy gave her a year, tops, before she hit bottom and was whisked off to some Caribbean detox like she'd read about in *Rolling Stone*. She'd come back healthy, happy, and missing the ragged fringe that hung from the outside of her voice like dirty snow off a mud flap. They needed to start looking for someone new.

But that boy, whose name she forgot but who'd stuck when all the others hadn't. She'd heard he died. She felt nothing but curiosity—she'd fucked a dead guy. It changed things, she thought. Certainly how she saw the experience: it validated it, made the tawdry seem necessary. She hoped that she was what he was thinking about when that semi crossed the double yellow or whatever it was that took him away.

Truth was, though, that everyone she fucked was a dead guy, or girl in Angela's case. Just not yet. So the guy wasn't necessarily special, just different in a way that we'd all be different someday.

XII.

Burt drove past Lucy's house three times before his reflection in the rear-view made him sick enough to stop the car on the curb and scream into the mirror.

"Do your fucking job, coward!" he bellowed. But he wasn't there for work, he realized, his reflection so much as accused. He surprised himself with his vehemence and with his language.

He rarely uttered a "damn" or a "hell" under less stressful circumstances.

"Do something, anything then. Grow some nuts and get out of the fucking car." In retrospect his reflection had been the smarter of the two, but so often in life action means duty, and duty is honorable. We need to be sure, and sure is more important than right, and sure can only be proven with action. He was sure that he knew what was best for Lucy. He needed to prove it. That meant getting out of the car no matter what misgivings, real or otherwise, he may have been feeling.

He'd brought a bucket and the kind of enormous, peanut-shaped, foamed plastic polymer sponge with which one washes a car. He'd had to stop at the house, sneak into the garage, afraid that his wife would think he was ducking his responsibility and give him four kinds of hell about doing his job as a father and husband and deacon and educator and blah and blah and blah. He thought about the look Lucy's dad had given him that day in church and wondered if he should pack his pistol, but he thought better of it. Peace this time, a sword the next.

It was fall, so he'd packed the cleaning supplies in a box behind an old toaster oven and some stained oven mitts. He stopped to consider why they were keeping such obvious garbage but then heard his wife's voice in the mudroom, immediately adjacent to the garage.

"...right between her legs, snug as a bug and I'll be darned if I didn't scream everything a Christian woman has a right to when the devil's in her house..." He grabbed the bucket and sponge, hit the garage door button, and rolled out into the driveway like Indiana Jones. By the time the door was on its way back up, his wife in the garage, arms akimbo, he was in drive and heading back down the street. He'd explain when he returned. He could tell from the rhythm and polish of the words he'd heard in the garage that his wife had been on the phone all afternoon, shaping the story into something both Harold Robbins and Billy Graham could envy.

Foot washing was a risk, no doubt. But Burt felt like he needed to do something that made a statement without forcing him to use words, to explain, which was his weak spot. Just a little about why he was doing what he was doing. No more. Any more and he ran the risk of scaring her.

It had worked in Kenya, and the metaphor was simple, the lesson life-affirming.

I'm no better than you.

This sin can be washed away.

What I do thou knowest not now; but thou shall know hereafter.

Grace is not always a thunderclap, and the village natives, at least, seemed puzzled but thankful. Maybe it was just a novel way to get a foot massage. Maybe it was more. The foot's a part of a body just as sin's a part of a life. The whole is what's important, what needs dealt with.

XIII.

So many men wanted to treat her like she was something apart, whole cloth, unknown and aloof. She is all things, like everyone else. But one thing. Only one thing. She'd say that they broke her heart, if she thought such a thing were possible. She'd say that she broke theirs, if such a thing were possible.

But to know, to hurt and to know was unacceptable. She had now, this night, this gun and this moon and she needed nothing else. Would never need anything else. She is eternal, she is all, she is now and all things.

But really one thing.

XIV.

Lucy had had no intention of sleeping with Burt. She knew how it would look to Angela, and that it would ruin everything; but, and she wondered it to herself, was this the curse of her father? Her

father, who couldn't go longer than two or three weeks without destroying all the good things that came before?

Two solid weeks of backyard barbecue, Johnny Cash on the box, and dinners at home. Two solid weeks of her parents' locked bedroom door and satisfied groans from within each night. Then he was gone again. *Swinging another tramp from his arm,* her mom would say.

Was this the weakness of being a human? We are lost for so much of our lives, far longer than we are found. Maybe such a change, to be safe, understood, loved, is not our natural state.

Maybe I just like fucking, she thought to herself, anyone or anything. Maybe that was her father's curse, or humanity's curse, too.

Sometimes Burt would want to talk when they finished. Sweaty and cold, under a wool blanket from the trunk of his car, Lucy still astride him in the front seat, he'd grab her hips and pull her closer and whisper stories to her, about the Army, about his missionary work in Kenya and South America.

"Lot of places I'd go, I had so much more than them, and I'd want to give everything I had to save them. Not just their souls, even though that was the ultimate goal, but their lives too."

Lucy, who'd never been particularly interested in the state of her soul, pretended to listen and tried to think of something to say back, something like, *Maybe you should take me home now*, but more polite.

"The secret to helping was letting them think they were helping themselves. Not making them feel weak, or needy. You had to think like them, use what they thought was important, act like you thought it was important to you. If some little grass skirt was dipping water for her kids from the same hole she'd dumped her family's piss and shit in the day before and offered you a drink, you took it, then showed her how it made you sick and led her to the well. If some little tribesman loved his statue of a snake god, bowed and scraped to it, you did the same. Gave him his respect and yours, then showed him what you had to offer. Heaven, salvation, peace."

Burt stopped and watched the late fall snow pile on the wipers like the bushy brows of a patriarch. "I never felt so at peace, so of use. All this time since I've had this rage and restlessness I never knew was there, until you, until I found you and figured out I had another mission in my life."

"You want to save me?" Lucy asked, and it came out, despite her best efforts, in the same tone in which it echoed through her mind. Disbelieving, teasing, are-you-kidding-me-with-this-shit?

"That's why I'm here," he said.

"*That's* why you're here?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Maybe you should take me home. Now."

XV.

Burt knew he could pray until the sweat and blood poured off his head; he'd done it before. And he knew God was love and blah and blah and blah.

Faith pulled him through Grenada. The Lord called him to Kenya and Brazil, and later Bosnia with the entire family. But you still had to put in the work. God plants the seed, but every man tends his own garden.

"You're brain is a muscle and exercise makes it grow." It was on his wall when he taught ninth grade social studies, and he'd framed it when he became a counselor, right by his master's degree from Ohio State and the pictures of his wife and daughter. But faith was that way too. Can't put that in a frame. But it was true. Grace was a beautiful thing, and it came like a behind-the-back pass or crossover dribble, quick, easy, inevitable after you saw it but thrilling in the act, in the milliseconds before and after, as much to the actor as the audience. The strange melding of past and future: the inconceivable act rendered into solid, indisputable fact.

Grace.

But grace, like a behind-the-back pass or a crossover dribble, was available only to those who'd put in the work.

He'd put in the work. Grace couldn't be far behind.

He glanced again at Lucy's house, imagined what his wife must've walked in on that afternoon and what he had to do. He closed his eyes and rested his head on the wheel. That first night, the night he'd given his heart and mind to Christ, he spent in turmoil. Fighting. Watching Pastor Jerry, then just a strangely pale, almost translucent young man behind the pulpit, work himself into an eerie, ghostlike glow over a passage from the letters of Timothy. Enough got through the devil's defense (definitely man-to-man, and definitely a full-court press) to make him uneasy, then furious, then exhausted, and finally filled with a solace he'd never known.

Surrendered. Saved. Fixed.

Heaven. Salvation. Peace.

What do you have to offer?

That night was a gate to a new life. He'd married the girl, worked for Christ and his family and the great state of Ohio. He prayed, tithed, taught. He saved and fixed, as best he could. He worked. Your soul is a muscle and exercise makes it grow.

There is a purpose and plan and we are never lost. His daughter is not lost. This girl cannot be lost.

XVI.

She was never lost. Or maybe a better way of saying it is that everyone is lost, so to acknowledge it would be like acknowledging the air we breathe, the pressure of the atmosphere, the physiology of walking. The gravitational pull of the earth. You can't think about things too much, or you'll stop moving. Hesitate.

If you're lost, someone gets to find you. Lucy would never put herself into that situation. The idea! The gall.

Like the comic said, "I was lost, then I moved here. I've improved my situation immeasurably."

Lucy never told anyone about her jaunts with the pistol. It was something she did, hers alone, though she was tempted. She thought that once she settled down, she'd have to let them in on her little peccadillo, the same way you discover upon living with someone that they're a slob or suffer from awful gas or chronically masturbate. Lucy shot bullets at the sky for a couple of hours a month. It wasn't the worst thing in the world; in fact it made her seem a little intriguing, mysterious, dangerous.

But she kept it locked up, like a lot of things.

"If you'd open your heart to people, baby, you may find that they're not all like your daddy," her mom told her one afternoon a year after her dad left. Lucy bridled at the comment but didn't say anything. Opening her heart sounded like the worst idea in the world, and had nothing to do with how she felt about her father.

Her mother noticed and changed gears. "Your daddy was quiet and selfish, hon, just like you, but that's why I loved him, and why it hurt so bad when he left me. I just don't want you—"

"To be like him?" Lucy asked. "That ship's probably sailed, Mom." Lucy was a hardcore believer in science and genetics—sperm meets egg, cells divide, and that's all she wrote—you are who you're going to be. Her father was a funny, dreamy, rat-bastard. Her mother was worried, caring, and self-destructive. Lucy was whatever she would be.

Hearts were for pumping blood, not for opening or closing. We give things life to explain life, she thought to herself that night, smiling up at the moon. We animate because we don't understand what it means to be animate.

She should write some of this shit down someday.

XVII.

After the introduction of the bucket and the sponge, after his whole speech about sin and baptism and what foot-washing signifies to the Lord, after Lucy'd kicked the bucket and sponge out into her front

yard for the third time, after she'd grabbed him by the shoulders and told him to fuck off and he wouldn't fuck off, and after he'd tried to hold her and she turned on him and planted her lips on his and unzipped the fly of his pants and found that he was as hard as a doorknob and twice as long, Burt returned to his car to take stock of the situation.

Didn't even get to wash her feet, he thought. Didn't even retrieve the bucket and sponge from the neighbor's yard. Both still sat there, right beside each other, in a pool of porch light, behind an ancient birdbath.

He turned the key to the old Buick and tried to summon the requisite feelings of shame. He was the purpose, the instrument of change, and he'd used his station and standing to seduce a young girl—for all intents and purposes, the love of his daughter's life—and betray his wife, his daughter, himself, and his God.

He was no better than the scum of the earth. He remembered his Isaiah: *But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousness are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind have taken us away.* But what concerned him the most was the shit-eating grin mocking him in the rear-view mirror and the lightness in his heart. He was on a cloud. His soul was singing.

You're born into grace, and you work for it, but—and if he never admitted it to himself before or again he was damn well going to do it now, because he was a sinner and a louse and no matter how he spun it tomorrow morning he couldn't deny it tonight—grace was not and would never be any match for lust, and the charms of the Lord would pale, every damn time, next to the pale perfection of a young woman's thighs.

He could not accept this, he realized, could not face this. How could this feeling *not* be grace? Because what he did was wrong?

But it felt like grace.

So it had to be.

What god would make it so confusing? What perverse horse's ass of a deity would make such a mockery of his good intentions?

What kind of mind would twist his need to save a girl's life, her soul, into such a snarl?

And it hit him, like a thunderclap, without the work and without the sweat, for the first time in his life God seemed to allow him to connect the dots.

He *did* feel like when he was digging wells in Brazil or riding in a jeep in Central America. What if this *was* the Lord's work? What if this was his inroad, his way of winning her to the Lord?

You show them you respect their ways, then show them what you have to offer. Heaven, salvation, peace.

Could that be what the Lord wanted? Was that something he could do? He pushed the car door open and put a foot back on Lucy's driveway. Eyed the house.

Only one way to find out.

XVIII.

She fucked Mr. Rich for the remainder of that fall and well into the winter. He'd stop by on his way from work, before her brother was home from school while her mom was sleeping off third shift at Meijer's. Sometimes they drove around, sometimes he came in.

She still saw Angela, still preferred her company to her dad's. A psychologist would probably say that she was overcompensating for her father's absence. Her mom would say she was evil to the core, that the witch had made some sort of trade and ruined Lucy's soul. Lucy would say she liked fucking, girls and guys, and if they happened to be related she'd just have to be a little more discrete.

Eventually the shit hit the fan. Angela found out, discovered a pair of Lucy's panties in her dad's car, tried to slash her wrists. Lucy was sorry it became so tawdry, so melodramatic and ordinary. Who leaves panties like that? She did, she supposed, because there they were, in Angela's bloodstained palm as she bled out on Lucy's front porch. She'd walked all the way to Lucy's house, leaving a trail of blood four blocks long. Lucy called the squad, then wondered if it

was necessary and how one cancels the service, only to watch Angela collapse in her kitchen mid-tirade right before the EMTs rang the bell.

She'd heard rumors—and since that was the last time she saw Angela or her mom they were just rumors—that Angela had used a straight razor, then picked up her sticks and started to pound out the beginning of "Heart Factory" by Sleator-Kinney, spraying the walls of her room with blood before stabbing both sticks through the timpani and snare and making the trek to Lucy's.

All in all, it was a quite a sendoff, a major to-do, and after Lucy got over the initial shock and learned that Angela would be all right, she figured that she got off easy, considering how she'd acted.

That was when she figured on starting the country-and-western outfit. Something simple. Something her brother and mom might like. Something her dad would've approved of.

Of course, then she saw Burt that one last time. He'd carried her into the emergency room and stomped back out into the night, a violent grin on his grim lips that parted the waiting room crowd.

The orderlies checked her vitals and found nothing to be concerned about.

"I'm epileptic," Lucy explained.

"Did that dude know that?" they asked.

"Guess not."

"From what we can tell, you're not displaying anything that would point to a recent seizure."

"Weird," Lucy agreed.

"You want to clue us in on what's going on here? Why he handed you over and took off?"

"Just luck, I guess."

She found his gun the next day. A .45. She had no intention of returning it.

She graduated and got a job with her mom at Meijer's, watched her mom start to drink more and more, eventually on the job, then get fired and spend her time shopping off of QVC and calling

old flames to come over and visit. Three years after she graduated, around when the towers came down, they got a letter in the mail saying that her dad was found dead in an abandoned apartment complex in Las Cruces. His head was stove in, and he'd been dead for weeks. He'd left a number of things in an old safety deposit box, including a brick of cash that, since he'd never actually divorced Lucy's mother, was now hers. They moved to a double-wide on three acres outside town.

Her brother grew out of the halo, maintained an enviable GPA, and won a free ride to Purdue.

If Lucy had any hope for a plan, a destiny, a purpose, it would probably be for someone, someday, who would sit by her cross-legged and chat while she squeezed off rounds. Maybe they could talk about Johnny Cash. Maybe even listen to a few songs.

It was as close to a plan as she thought a human could hope for.

But right now, alone, she squeezes an eye closed and draws a bead. Center of the moon, a little to the left. Right where the heart would be.

And it beats in time, time, time, time.

She pulls the trigger in a 4/4 rhythm. f

Amir Hussain

AFTER HOURS

I used to love the world but now that you are gone
I have learned to love the hours.

I love the hours that sit tall on park benches
and turn themselves into humans

just to see what they are. Or the hours
that pedal bicycles along lake trails.

Somehow they make do without feet.
I love the hours that sit on roofs drinking iced tea.

Sometimes they drop like black-and-white cows
and the street puddles shiver from their fall.

I love the hours that sleep on soft cushions.
Waking, no one can tell how long they have been gone.

Samuel Ligon

EXXON, MY LOVE: A MEDITATION ON THE CITIZENS UNITED RULING AND CORPORATE PERSONHOOD

Exxon Candace Mobil loved animals more than anything, the playful otters peek-a-booing with paws over their faces like tiny hands, the pelicans and puffins and arctic terns, and killer whales so smart—smarter maybe than people even. She would never hurt an animal, even if her mother had once spilled over ten million gallons of North Slope crude into Prince William Sound, killing thousands of mammals and hundreds of thousands of seabirds and billions of salmon and herring eggs. But what happened in Alaska wasn't her mother's fault, not really, though outside agitators blamed her and her mother both—as though she were her mother—while investors cared only about returns. But Exxon couldn't think about returns. Not now. Maybe never again. DuPont had texted, claiming to be stuck in Delaware and unable to get down to Texas ever, unless some huge restructuring occurred, which seemed entirely unlikely. She simply could not stop crying.

As a woman of a certain age—almost fifteen—Exxon longed for more than just record breaking profits. She wanted to be held, not merely as a stock in some distant portfolio, but as any fourteen-year-old wants to be held: as the center of her lover's life. Without that promise of intimacy, her daily refining capacity of 6.3 million barrels meant nothing, and all of Texas—all the universe—felt empty and cold and dead, all the joy and meaning gone from her life for good. She could hardly believe only three years had passed since the Supreme Court had recognized her right to speech, her right to shower unlimited financial support on political candidates, a kind of beautiful song she couldn't stop singing at first. Now, her

memory of those days was clouded by doubt and confusion. DuPont didn't love her. Not enough to move to Texas. Was DuPont even capable of that kind of commitment? And before DuPont…the honeysuckled evenings with Justice Scalia, their love cries ringing through the Lone Star night like clanging horse head pumpjacks—wait, had that even happened?

She felt so confused, so unsure of what was real and what was impossible delusion. She needed a hit of weed and a long bubble bath, but she didn't think she had a bathtub. Or any weed. Why had she failed so in making her needs known? And to whom should she make them known now? To silent Clarence, the vacant Justice? How they'd explored each other's bodies and souls behind the old solvent extraction tanks—but that probably hadn't happened either. Did that mean she was a lesbian? A diesel? That just seemed so obvious. Besides, there was no mistaking, when she thought of Raytheon or Halliburton or certainly DuPont, a stirring in her loins or soul or wherever, though she hated to admit that she wanted—lord, *needed*—a man. And not one of the Lilliputians scuttling inside her, navigating her rigs and filling stations. She could hardly feel them when they entered her upstream division headquarters in Houston or her downstream offices in Virginia.

Lord, how she longed for DuPont.

It seemed only he could help her understand her muddled past and who she was becoming. But who was she becoming? She knew her parents had changed their names, her father to Mobil from Standard of New York, and her mother to Exxon from Jersey Standard, the Standard in their former names only recently suggesting forbidden love between them. As cousins perhaps? Or worse, brother and sister? Weirder still, why did the massive spill in Alaska, those adorable, pitiful animals coated in crude and dying—her Mother's memory—seem as vivid to her as DuPont's loving gaze?

She was feeling less separation between herself and her parents, herself and her ancestors, all the way back to Great-grandfather Standard's birth in 1870. Exxon had lately come to feel his birth

as though it had been her own, a painful passage down an Ohio birth canal toward pending personhood, the skin of her corporate body so delicate and sensitive to the raw air outside the womb from which she and Grandfather Standard simultaneously emerged. She wondered if all people had such direct access to their ancestors' memories, or if this merging of identities was suggestive of some dawning madness. Worse, she was losing her ability to shrug off the constant, mean-spirited charges leveled against her—that she was driven only by greed, for example, indifferent to nature's majesty. DuPont's claim that he would not be joining her in Texas had left her feeling more vulnerable still, half convinced that maybe she *was* a bad person, only good for providing endless petroleum products to an ungrateful world.

At least she could still speak—though Justice Scalia had said the first amendment referred only to speech, not speakers. Did that mean her speech could exist, while she herself could not? What a stupid thought. She totally existed! Holding her in his strong, hairy arms, Scalia (her Antonin) had also said that no *category* of speaker could be denied first amendment protection, which seemed so reassuring at first. Now, she understood what he'd really meant—that she was some other kind of speaker, no different than the unions, whom the supremes had set free in the same ruling. But that was impossible! The unions were dirty and coarse, selfish and corrupt. Yet the court had lumped them with her in the same category, as though she could now in her loneliness imagine a liaison with the Teamsters. She didn't think she'd fallen that far. She hoped she hadn't fallen that far! But didn't the International Longshore and Warehouse Union crave the same contact she longed for, the same human touch? She imagined herself and the UAW, touching, exploring—oh, God. Just because she was publically traded didn't mean…

She needed to text DuPont. Now. She felt on the verge of something important, a discovery about who she was and who they would become together, and if she could just talk to him she

knew she would make him understand and he would rush down to Texas and they would make love and be together for eternity. But she couldn't find her phone. Or her hands. She couldn't bear to wonder where her phone or hands were or whether DuPont could ever love a woman so confused about who she was, or who she'd been, or who she was becoming—herself, her motherfather, her granddaddy, all her cousins or sisters or pieces of herself broken apart but reuniting—brash Chevron, shy Amoco, lost Sohio. Oh, God, lost Sohio!

Everything felt so insane, as if the gift the supremes had given wasn't a gift at all, but just some trick to make her think—what? That she was one of them? Fully human? And if she wasn't one of them, would that mean she couldn't speak? As if! She talked to DuPont all the time, thought about him all the time. The unbearable gravity of his absence weighed down her lungs with every breath. And she needed him now more than ever.

She closed her eyes and imagined him not merely as his headquarters far away in Delaware, but sprawled—as he truly was—from Wilmington to Belgium to China to the River Works Plant in Orange, Texas, her own backyard, DuPont spanning the globe, his massive belching of chloroprene, sulfuric acid, and volatile organic compounds a clear and wonderful indication of his ability to feel and act, to produce and live. To love! Why had she been so small in her thinking before? Who cared if he couldn't move his Wilmington headquarters to Texas. She'd take any piece of him she could hold onto, even if it was just a rusted can of fluoropolymer additive, or a bucket of peelable sealant resins she could pour over herself as she sang to him her songs of love. And he would sing his songs of love to her, too, their voices rich and powerful and so clearly their own, arising from their very souls—not a gift bestowed upon them by some puny court of law. She and D were so much larger than the supremes and always had been, always would be. Forever.

Another of Grandfather Standard's memories washed over her, the justices like giant crows brutally ripping him apart—ripping her

apart—in the 1911 antitrust settlement, crow judges morphing into vivisectionist magistrates amputating and discarding Grandfather's limbs. Her limbs. Yet here she was, whole. Here they were, she and her grandfather, she and her mother and father and aunts and uncles, reunited as one and stronger than ever. Even if she couldn't find her breasts, she could now see Scalia and Alito, Thomas and Roberts, all the supremes nestled against her corporate body suckling, and she would be of them, her virgin born children, as she was of Standard and Mobil, until the end of time. Somehow—she didn't know how exactly—but somehow she and DuPont would soon be fully joined. And their love would be unending. Their love would be unstoppable. f

Jacob Oet

MALL SONNET

The porcupine and I go to the mall.
One store is selling formulaic titles:
My Vampire Days, Flame of Light, Eden's Fall.
I pick one out. The porcupine sidles
up to the salesgirl, takes her hand, and says,
"Baby, I could write a best-selling book
about you. You could put it on display."
The lights go out. Outside the window—"Look!"
A long-armed solar flare snaps down from clouds.
Fire-sprinklers jerk on, jetting their warm wash
into the dark. Some sirens wail. She shouts,
"The end has come! The dead arise from ash!"
The store floods. A blanked book floats into sight.
Porcupine picks it up, and starts to write.

BATH

A porcupine and I take a bath.
He says, snout sticking out
of the foam bubbles like a pinecone
half buried in snow, that I
should look for a boy without a mother,
and write poems to him
about the trace of a mother's hand
on the wind-swept hair,
about the strength of a mother's voice
like a bullet through glass.
Yes, says the porcupine.
Write about the speed of a mother's voice,
that sweeps clean through the window
like a bullet, without breaking it.
And I run the porcupine like soap
up my legs and my shoulders,
and the skin is weeping.
From the water stems a flower,
from the drain, whose years-later ring
will still have the red stain.

RM Cooper

WHAT REMAINS?

I recently had coffee with an old colleague, Michael, who was passing through town. Over the course of an hour and two espressos, we covered the basics (work, family, receding hairlines) until Mike blurted out, "I've decided to be cremated." He paused, leveled a deadened stare, and added, "Into coral." Mike went on to say coral was alive, at least in the sense that it grew, and that a fifteen-foot segment of the stuff could sustain over seventy unique subspecies of fish. Michael and his wife Joan had decided they'd "go in" on the coral together—by "go in" he meant they'd combine their remains, along with a cocktail of their two Pekingese-terriers, Lola and Darwin.

It wasn't the eccentricity of coral cremation itself that affected me as much as the way in which Mike described it. The man sounded downright fanatical about the decision—was wide-eyed about the possibility of Clownfish and Moorish Idols fluttering in and out of his and Joan's remains for the foreseeable eternity. "Can you imagine?" he asked. "Eyelash-thin flesh, translucent fins gliding over you? Newborn guppies calling you home? Wonderful." When he paused to sip his latte, I politely asked if he or Joan had any health concerns. He laughed and said, "It's not like that. The whole thing's just been on my mind awhile. Years actually, you know?"

Trouble was I didn't know.

Beyond the options of traditional entombment and what I considered the "modern alternative" of cremation, I'd never given much consideration to my future remains. Should I be in a charitable mood, the idea of donating to science came to mind, but such thoughts were rare. (I had to check my license for my official donor stance: "Y.") The fate of my body just didn't seem to matter. Sure, I'd heard the urban legend of Walt Disney freezing

his head to be cloned in the future—allegedly stored beneath Disney World in cryogenic stasis, awaiting a tomorrow free of lung cancer—but outside of that, dead was dead. Head freezing and its half-baked offer of immortality seemed on par with the pyramids of the pharaohs: a privilege reserved for the highest echelons of society whose aspirations for immortality carried a quasi-super villainous element. (Maybe that's why Chaney and Nixon seem like ideal cryogenic Popsicle candidates.) But that pharaoh bit got me thinking, nonetheless, and, my God, what a curse considering the residuals of one's death can be.

Whether the dead want to be buried, cremated, diced up by med students, or turned into coral, the response from the living tends to be the same: blind acceptance due to lack of public consensus. America's collective willy-nilly response to burial is intriguing in its own right, but it becomes downright unsettling when contrasted with those pharaohs. The Egyptians were pretty goddamn sure as to their burial preference. In fact, nearly all cultures throughout history have had an approved method of burial. The modern, liberalism of Americans regarding the wishes of the departed is an entirely novel cultural construct, and, frankly—with all due respect to the West's increasing use of antiseptics and decreasing use of human sacrifice—it's impossible to know what metaphysical tree we're barking up (or burying our dead beneath, as the case may be).

So I turned to the oracle of our day for answers. I Googled everything—and I mean everything. I already knew the basic options (burial, cremation, and ancient practices like mummification and funeral pyres), but I was surprised to learn modern science had perfected cremation in the form of diamondification. For the right price, yours or your spouse's or child's or the family tabby's remains can be diamondized into a handsome ring or broach (group discount options available). The science of diamondification is, essentially, the same behind Mike's and Joan's coral: incinerate the body and repurpose the ashes into new carbon-based matter. But

carbonic repurposing doesn't end there. There are biodegradable urns that—when mixed with your ashes, soil, and your choice seeds—turn into trees. You can also decide to be repurposed into a vinyl record or pencil or firework. Carbon repurposing, as an eco bonus, is technically a natural process (all natural materials are composed of carbon). Instead of waiting to become, say, soil, then a worm, then a tree, then a bookshelf, you can pay a premium to skip straight to the desired end-product. Death is no reason to risk becoming a cucumber when you really wanted to be a Brussels sprout.

Maybe all this carbonic recycling into coral and diamonds and vinyl sounds whimsical or romantic to you, but don't be fooled by the inherit shimmer of newfangled novelties. These are not the tranquil waters of eternity over which we preside. Say you're a lifelong Deadhead, and, as an ode to Jerry and the gang, you decide to spend the afterlife as your favorite Grateful Dead album. Now, consider if a routine clerical error led to your vinyl of *Working Man's Dead* being mixed up with *Greatest Hits: The Monkees*. There's a circle of hell for you. Or what if, as a firework, you took a wayward trajectory and maimed a youth—or, worse yet, you turned out a dud, and, despite your best efforts, you painfully, publically, went *silently into the night*. Or imagine the garbage that could be written should you be a pencil. Your descendants could use your final remaining ounces to pen tomorrow's *A Shore Thing* (Snooki), leaving you longing for a grave to roll in instead of the macabre pun of a postmortem number two.

What's more, none of the aforementioned even begins to account for ancient superstitions regarding burial and the supernatural. Suspend whatever disbelief the contemporary world has instilled in you regarding eternity: What if our ancestral forefathers had it right? Jesus, you could spend the afterlife as a house plant—people pissing on you at St. Augustine's parties and forgetting to water you or open a shade for some otherworldly sunlight. Or what if possessions really do matter, as the Egyptians believed, or if it's just the opposite, as with the Apache who

burned all the possessions of their dead to deter ghosts? Is an earthly purgatory more damning than a humdrum afterlife without your golf clubs? There is, of course, Nihilism's offer of rotting in the ground to consider, but that is more of a safety net akin to minimum wage jobs—an existential fallback. There's no more point in preparing for oblivion than there is in stockpiling canned goods for Mayan doomsdays. If our true fate, nonexistence awaits us with sheer indifference.

Maybe Disney had it right. Maybe you can die and come back, decide which you prefer, a modern Lazarus approach, if you will. But if your head is frozen, do you get an afterlife? The transcendentalists believed you joined the Oversoul when your body was absorbed by the earth—does that still work if your head is in an ice tray? And cloning is no good, anyway. Who remembers that story of the Texans who cloned their prize bull and it came back evil? Instead of a second life with their gentle bovine, the Texans received a genetic doppelganger that tried to murder them! Seriously, that shit happened! It was on *This American Life*! What's more, there's Tibetan sky burial, reincarnation, the recycling of matter in physics, and scientology's promise of pure thetan existence to consider—and the list continues, and sprawls backwards across cultures, generations, eons, and lurches forward to the promises of eternity yet to be made. Each entombment option contradicts, deconstructs, and tarnishes its neighbor, until all we have left—beyond guesswork and suppositions—are our attempts to find purpose, to answer the question: What remains of us once our source of meaning is gone?

Maybe I should call Michael, try and go in on the coral with him and Joan. The Clownfish would be nice. So would the Caribbean weather, the slow push and pull of the tides, the dance of light filtering through the water above, and—shit, I forgot about those terriers. If you're entombed in coral with a pair of Pekingese, can you hear them bark? Now there's something to consider. f

Jason Storms

BALLET RECITAL

This is how stars become installed
in the sky, how the universe knits them

into its great black quilt: a dancer
sweeps her arms, bends her knees, throws

herself skyward, blends with the light. Then,
she drops, a white meteorite against red silk.

She leaps—an act of ambition laced with dreams
of flight, the gesture that breaks gravity's chains,

the freedom of everything above
the ground—but the floor proves her failures.

Here, in this dark auditorium—nebula of faces
and stage lights, music swelling like a river

cresting its banks to flood a small town—
she kicks down gravity, swims through the air

in her available world, yearning skyward—
her ambitious leap—until she stays

suspended, shines brightly: she is still light
surrounded by dark space, which swallows her

like water around a stone dropped in the sea.

Katelyn Kiley

I LIVE IN A CITY & THERE HAVE BEEN ROBBERIES

for MB

I know I shouldn't walk alone at night but sometimes
I think I don't care if they take my iPhone & the Canadian twenty
I've kept in my wallet since August—the money merely
a memento: I have traveled, & will again. Sometimes I think
it might be smart to speak only to people who live far away,
I think it on the walk home, six blocks of leaves crunching
& three beers in my belly—I have a friend who hates that word,
belly, & why not? but I like the cup of it, the way the word
is always holding—I think it as the air has cooled & I wish
for a jacket. My friend works for a circus in Cincinnati
& if he were walking beside me now I'd say I can't remember
the last time I lived only in one city, a time I wasn't straddling here
& elsewhere. It's been so long since I've seen him that I no longer
know
how he sounds when he speaks. When I get home he'll be half-
there—
the click of words on a glowing screen—voiceless I won't tell him
of the dim walk home, because what's to tell? Voiceless I'll like him
for the times he uses words I don't know, so when he voiceless says
limerence & loves it for its diagnosability, I'll read up on it.
I'll want to tell him this is just another word for heartbreak,
& unquantifiable. *Limerence* he'll say as if it is a science, & if
the word consoles him he should keep it—but for now
my socks are warm inside my boots & autumn smells clean &
I hear my own leafshuffle & convince myself I could hear
anything approach—no matter how close the crunch, how far.

Ben Hoffman

THE DEFENDERS OF BURH PARK

The spring the rains came was the year meth swept across our heartland, and when the Graduate Students first moved into the house on the corner of Winston and Abelard, we thought they were drug dealers. Marcy Wheeler (331 Cranbrook Ln.) was our racist, and she catalogued the evidence and presented a PowerPoint to the Neighborhood Board: the late, strange hours, the bonfires in the backyard and rotting couches on the porch, the rumpled clothes, the untied shoelaces and scruffy faces, the endless pizza deliveries, the vacant stares, the mumbling, the bubbling chimney, the beakers and scales and beer cans in the windows, the smell of burning and the periodic explosions. It turned out they were only studying chemical biology or biological chemistry—none of us could remember which. They had names none of us could pronounce, though our children could. We were suspicious of the Graduate Students, but we thought their work ethic might be an example to our children. They had not even been born here, the Graduate Students, and already we knew they would make it so much further than us.

Really we had not had rain for months nor trouble for years, not since Jill Howitzer's son Jerome (4846 Winston St.) had toilet-papered half the houses on Abelard one Halloween. He had been eleven, and after a near-unanimous vote by the Neighborhood Board, we wrapped him in TP, mummified him to the stop sign at Cranbrook and Towner for an afternoon. We never had trouble with Jerome again. He joined the Peace Corps and was in some distant land we always confused with other distant lands that spring, when the county closed a two-mile stretch of Packard Avenue just

east of our neighborhood for road repairs. Concrete improvements, the county said, though none of us ever saw a worker sweating over that rutted asphalt. It was one of those ghost construction zones used only for the storage of supplies, and the rumor around the neighborhood was that Harold Grant (330 Cranbrook Ln.) was stealing drills and scrap metal and tubs of tar, then selling them across town. It gave us such comfort: though a thief lived among us, he had to go far away to fence his stolen wares.

Anyway, the rains. They came. When they left, our lawns glowed, thick and neon, and they carried away with them that flimsy old bridge on Stadium Boulevard that the county should have been repairing in the first place. The result of all this—the closure of Packard Avenue, the shuttering of Stadium Boulevard until the bridge could be rebuilt—was that, no matter where the official detour signs tried to reroute drivers, they inevitably came to use our neighborhood as a shortcut.

The first casualty was a chicken. The Bronards (Mrs. & Mrs., 87 Beacon St.) kept nine in a coop on the side of their house. The county ordinance allowed a maximum of five, but the Bronards made a deal with the Neighborhood Board: free eggs for the monthly 8 a.m. Board meetings, and the Board wouldn't report the violation. The Board was happy to comply. The Bronards, who only our youngest children still believed were actually sisters, were rolling in eggs. We'd find eggs on the soap dishes in our bathrooms, in our socks when we fished them from the drawer. The children loved it: their world was a never-ending Easter egg hunt. Our wives worried about the children's cholesterol, but our wives worried about everything.

When the chicken got drilled, it was—don't laugh, though some of us did, then, not knowing where this would all end—crossing the road. The car never stopped. We just heard the squawk from our living rooms. Every household was watching a popular reality show, and at first, we thought the squawk came from the show. By the

time we made it to our windows, chicken and car were gone. There were only feathers, sailing into the air, floating down over our lawns.

All over town that week, our children kept their eyes peeled for feathers stuck in the grill of every car; behind every wheel lurked a murderer of chickens.

We had always felt so secret.

This was why we'd bought our tiny ranch houses in Burh Park in the first place. We were mostly first-time owners, insurance salesmen and secretaries with small, babbling children, and a few pensioned divorcees whose small, babbling children had, like Jerome Howitzer, grown and flown the coop. Burh Park was a place to hide our little babblers: a few quiet streets, wide and shady, and then the tall oaks stacked thickly all around us like colonial fort walls, the enclosing creek around them like a moat, only two ways in and out. And yet, four minutes in the station wagon and we were on Route 94 or US 23, or pulling into Briarwood Mall, Pioneer Elementary, the Washtenaw Rec Center, the Arborland Whole Foods.

Now we were victims of our prime location. The 9-to-5ers treated our stop signs like suggestions on their way to their McMansions out in the newer suburbs. The Professors drifted through at indiscriminate hours, listening to journals on tape in their minivans, their heads in cloudy research, and we wondered why they even needed a shortcut. (The Graduate Students said not to worry about the Professors, they would vouch for the Professors.) The worst were the teenagers, texting and swerving on their way to the mall to buy sunglasses and hang out.

We glared at them from our porches. We spit from our gardens and mailboxes. Still they came speeding through our lives. Every day newer, more reckless drivers were in on the secret of The Burh Park Shortcut.

Lindy Simonsky (102 Wranger Rd.) put up the first sign. This was brave, because The Board had voted to outlaw signs a few election

cycles back, under the premise that they were unneighborly and generated ill will, and without them our yards *did* look cleaner, like when we finally scrubbed our bathtubs and found that underneath they were, improbably, still white. Using the inside of a Mr. Coffee Box, Mrs. Simonsky wrote: *Please bee careful–children play here.*

Why had she spelled "be" that way? She was not an immigrant, she did not keep bees. It was as if some madness had been aroused in her, as if some spasm had gone through her hand or brain and cast things a skelter. Noah Simonsky wondered was his mom a witch, was she possessed. This was in Jill Howitzer's sixth grade English class, where they were reading *The Crucible*. Great text-to-self analysis, said Mrs. Howitzer. Who else can make a connection between the book and his or her own life?

Lindy Simonsky realized her mistake immediately. But she had no more cardboard lying around for a redo—she kept a clean house, what, did we think she had scraps of cardboard just lying around?—so she taped it to a garden stake and stuck it in the front of her lawn.

We were inspired, and we followed suit:
Mrs. Bronard: *Kids@play. Chickens too!*
The Fontanas: *STAY OUT.*
Mrs. Bronard #2: *My chicken used to live here.*
Jill Howitzer: *GO SLOW: BLIND KIDS PLAYING.*
(There were no blind kids in our neighborhood.)

A trap, said Ronnie Akers (223 Towner), what about a speed trap? Speed traps were like radar guns, and if Ronnie's arm had clocked out a few MPHs faster on the radar gun, Ronnie could have made it to the big leagues instead of washing out of AAA. He still kept tubs of pine tar and his lucky baseball bat in his garage.

We didn't know the first thing about speed traps, but Burt Cassidy's brother-in-law worked for the county, and Burt (720 Abelard St.) asked his brother-in-law, Could the county set up a speed trap?, which meant a lot to us, since Burt did not usually talk to his brother-in-law about anything.

Burt's B-I-L told him no speed trap, but we could start a petition, collect signatures for speed bumps.

But by the time we got the requisite number of signatures and got the speed bumps installed, Burt asked, wouldn't the fake construction and real bridge rebuilding be over?

You never know with these things, his brother-in-law told him. You ever heard of The Big Dig? Lasted, what, fifteen years?

Burt's B-I-L seemed a bit too pleased. Burt felt he had failed us: if he had maintained cordial relations, hadn't fought about the war that one Thanksgiving, hadn't—on rare, wine-soaked occasions—flirted with his own sister, Burt could have protected us. He went back to his B-I-L, did the whole dropping-to-his-knees-and-begging thing, apologized for Thanksgiving, told his B-I-L he was right about the laboratory of democracy and the sanctity of marriage, and in return Burt secured from the county four orange cones and two signs, which said No Thru Traffic, and which we placed at both entrances to our neighborhood, the one off Packard before the closure and the other up east on Platt Avenue. The signs were ignored. The cones were trampled.

Ronnie Akers could not let go of the speed trap idea. (Ronnie Akers could never let go of anything.) He petitioned The Board, and The Board allocated funds, and Ronnie went to Home Depot and bought thick black cords, to at least give the appearance that speed was being measured and recorded. We laid the cords out, double, like the ones that had nailed us a hundred times by our wives' yoga studio on Washtenaw, and roadside we set up the video camera on which Marcy Wheeler had filmed Patricia's first step and her husband's most recent romp. Drivers were not fooled. If anything, they accelerated over that black hose. It gave them a special joy, as when our children crunched bugs like potato chips under the new sneakers we'd saved to buy. Teenagers gave the camera the middle finger.

Ronnie's next idea—Ronnie could not let go of the idea that he was an ideas man—was to fill the street with tiny sharp things, as in

certain action movies: the invaders' tires would burst, and their cars would spin helplessly to rest at the side of the road. It was a kid's dream and he was a kid of sorts, fifteen going on fifty. When he'd first moved in, only five years before, and set up a batting cage in his garage, our children took to him so quickly we suspected him a molester, but soon he had a steady stream of women strolling in and out, each with breasts larger and more ludicrous than the last, which comforted us, and then he gained custody of his own children, a beautiful boy and a girl we had not even known existed until they materialized on his lawn one morning like Christmas decorations. They were healthy and normalish—Rhonda was a dodgeball queen, Brett had braces—and our fears subsided.

The Board passed a resolution officially reallowing signs in Burh Park, along with an amendment urging a second round of signs, less welcoming than the first batch.

Ronnie Akers: *Speed on this street one more time—we DARE you.*

Marcy Wheeler gave credit for her sign to her daughter, Patricia, who had recently done a candy diorama of the Gardens of Babylon for her third grade World Wonders class: *GO SLOW: ON THIS STREET WE FOLLOW HAMMARABI'S CODE!!!*

Harold Grant's sign, written in dry-erase on a mammoth whiteboard we suspected he'd stolen from Jill Howitzer's teacher supply shed, read: *WHAT PART OF LOCAL TRAFFIC ONLY DIDN'T YOU FUCKHEADS UNDERSTAND???*

Each morning after pushups and before coffee he'd go out and change *FUCKHEADS* to *MORONS*, and the next day *MORONS* to *ASSHOLES*, and so on. He propped the sign up at the foot of his driveway with his motorcycle, on which he'd taken little Michael Kirschenbaum joyriding to Detroit the previous August. Michael Kirschenbaum (98 Beacon St.) was nine, and he had never been on a motorcycle, nor to Detroit. When they returned, Michael was clinging to the back of the motorcycle, his arms clutching Harold's long white chest hair. The boy's hilariously large goggles fell over his nose, and he seemed somehow changed, at once petrified and

thrilled, like he'd been to hell and back or found God or learned about sex. Probably the underworld he'd seen had been criminal. Probably Harold had made Michael lookout kid while he'd robbed some joints. Michael was a small boy, frail in every place but his cheeks, which were eternally rosed, as if he were coming in out of the cold. He was not. Mostly he sat in the living room window nook and read *The Hardy Boys*. If we asked him (and we always did), he gave plot summaries nearly as long as the book: *see first their dad goes missing, and Frank and Joe go to look for him in their buddy Biff's boat, and they find a secret cave, and then a secret door, and then a secret tunnel...*

Still, he was the most sensible one in the family. No one could understand his sister. Like Jerome Howitzer in his time, she was the only teenager in the neighborhood, and so we were wary of her, though she had given us no trouble yet. She was a thin but heavy-jointed girl who looked as if she might squawk instead of speak, though we'd never heard her do either, and none of our children were old enough to share a class with her and report back. When she turned her shoulders we could hear the gears grinding. Marcy Wheeler once referred to her as licentious, but since her husband had left her for Costa Rica she'd been classifying all the women of the neighborhood as harlots, and The Board warned Marcy there would be sanctions if the pattern continued. The Kirschenbaums' father worked long hours taking apart kidneys at the university hospital, and we did not understand why they lived among us. He had low-hanging ears and a droopy face; his wife had abandoned the family, supposedly for an actor, someone we would know, and as this predated their move to Burh Park, no one knew if his droopiness was cause or effect of his wife's leaving.

Anyway, signs. Burt Cassidy had his sign blown up and laminated at Kinko's. He had used Clipart to find a black silhouette of a handgun, smoke wheezing out of it. And beneath that: *Hit my kids, you won't need a lawyer.*

Burt did not have kids. He did not even have a wife, and it did not seem likely he ever would: who could compare to his sister? But he was saying: *Your kids are my kids. These are our kids.*

We banded together in other ways. We fell back into our best old habits. Again we left pies on porches. Again we picked up dog shit. Again we did not use binoculars when Bridget Buchanan changed out of her scrubs in the front window of 241 Towner after a long day sedating crazy people. We only looked regular, and from across the street through shrubbery she was nothing but a peached blur, which was itself a new sort of thrill, like seeing a new neighbor, since by then we had memorized her every nook and cranny, had transported them onto our own wives on those nights when they were feeling self-conscious and asked us to turn off the lights.

The rains had done strange things to our lawns. Some mornings we went out to get the paper and found ourselves in yards that were not our own. Orange things, not quite weed, not quite flower, were cropping up everywhere. We had not planted them. The grass ran wild; our wives were always nagging us to mow it, and we did, but we could not keep pace. We could feel slithering across our ankles above our moccasins. We had to look behind us to confirm that we'd stepped from our own front door. The air smelled tropical, though the aftersmoke of delivery trucks coiled around trees. All night, trucks full of frozen produce rumbled through, as if we lived beneath the freeway. At the foot of the driveway, where the newspaper waited with reports of meth busts in Melvindale, we'd find drivers' cigarette butts and Butterfinger wrappers.

Our children sensed our anger. It pleased us, to know they were actually paying attention, taking cues. So often it had seemed otherwise, but now they hated these invaders like they did peas and flossing, and we felt that even when they were teenagers we would be able to reach them, steer them away from blowjobs and heavy metal

and piercing their belly buttons. The future would be salvageable! And if not, the future was far away! They were still our little boys and tomboys, dragging their plastic Fisher-Price forts closer to the road, over the brimming rim of grass until their forts scraped curb, and from there they set up shop in their towers, supersoaking and nerfgunning speeding Jettas and Altimas, pelting them with rotten tomatoes from Marcy Wheeler's garden. We cheered them on like we did for dinky Little League groundouts, until we realized how close they were to the street, and we yelled at them to come back, come back!, closer to the porch, closer to us.

The Board called an emergency meeting for spitballing. Mrs. Bronard suggested tollbooths, to discourage traffic we'd set up tollbooths at the neighborhood's outskirts. But that sort of thing required county approval, and Burt was through talking to his B-I-L. Bridget Buchanan proposed that we set up lemonade stands, lace the lemonade with household poison we'd concoct (here everyone looked at Harold Grant), and give it away for free at the two neighborhood entrances.

You would give it away for free, said Marcy Wheeler, all you sluts would!, and The Board sanctioned Marcy, though The Board did so halfheartedly, imagining her husband on the beach in Costa Rica, surrounded by dancing girls.

Ethics aside, Bridget's proposal had logistical problems. Did Harold Grant have a trusty poison solution? Could he steal some? Was it warm enough for lemonade demand yet? Mrs. Bronard gave a speech in support. Though we were not yet aware, she was dying of some unspecified cancer, and she wanted to get some hurt in while she still could. Eventually, poisoned lemonade was voted down 12-3.

The Graduate Students had a plan, involving complex equations and symbols we did not recognize. What did it all do? Detonate invading cars? Turn them to ash? Open the road and swallow them? Rearrange their particles and send them to a more suitable part of the universe, like the Autobahn?

No one understood. Marcy pretended she did, but since Marcy's husband had left she'd needed someone to be right to. The Graduate Students tried again. They spoke slower, they used laymen's terms, they pointed to the road and then to the sky. It was no use. We wondered was the barrier language or science. The plan, whatever it was, was scrapped.

Mr. Fontana wondered: Did we need to put up fences? Fences, fences and the children could play safely! But cooler heads understood this would change the character of the neighborhood irrevocably. Lindy Simonsky shouted about free and open societies, about what happened when the danger of the response to the threat exceeded the danger of the threat itself. She told us if we put up fences then the speeders would win. Coming from someone with as many kids as Lindy had, this carried extra weight. Fences were voted down. In the end, we outlawed ballplaying by a 9-6 vote. The children were like dogs when it came to balls rolling in the street; they could not control themselves. No balls and the odds of disaster would be mitigated. We rounded up balls and gloves and stored them in Harold Grant's basement, though we worried these too would disappear across the county line.

You are wondering about backyards, and we don't blame you. We always wondered that ourselves. It is difficult to explain why Burh Park was built the way it was, the small lawns in the front and the houses abutting each other so closely on the sides and in the rear—back there, behind our kitchens, there was barely room for a patio on which we could drink wine while the children slept. The chicken coop, remember, was on the *side* of the Bronards' house. Every time we snuck out back for a smoke and found ourselves nose to nose with some neighbor doing the same, we'd nod to each other, respecting the need for quiet, though inevitably our thoughts turned from our wives to those strange architects who'd built our houses. What cramped ghetto beginnings had eradicated the backyards we should have had? What fever dreams—lines hung across alleys, the

neighbor in her slip touchably close—had those builders carried with them from the seaboard to the Midwest?

Later, much later, after the accident, the Graduate Students ran a simulation on the giant mainframe in their basement, which we suspected sucked power from us on those stormless nights when the lights flickered and the signal faded. The Graduate Students delivered a report to The Board on the accumulated odds that everything—the detention, the game, the car, the timing—would play out the way it did. Their calculations offended us. You cannot argue with the numbers, one of them said, and we kicked them out of the meeting, though they were only transients among us, and a few years later they completed their doctorates, vacated the corner house, and went on to professorships, sellout corporate gigs, astonishing discoveries about chromalveolata and deoxyribose mutation, which we were happy we did not have to hear about due to the obscurity of their field, whatever it was.

May 19th. As we've mentioned, the rains had caused some astonishing growth in our landscape, and the trees now formed a canopy over our streets, only in certain places letting sun slit through. After school, the children were playing a strange form of tag that involved avoiding sunlight as if it were some alien ray. One child would hold the Fontanas' mirror, using it to zap the other children with sunbeams.

At some point the children abandoned sun tag. Perhaps the mirror was too heavy, perhaps children were cheating about if they'd been tagged. Perhaps they wanted physical contact. They decided to play Red Rover, perpendicular to the street rather than parallel, and later, we would blame Jill Howitzer for this, since they were playing on her lawn, which did not have any trees and as such allowed for a larger field of play.

The teams were uneven because Rhonda Akers had sprayed bleach, which she mistook for water, at a girl she liked, and was

serving detention. She'd been having aggression problems since ballplaying had been outlawed, though really she'd been having aggression problems her whole life. Later we would blame her, too.

Michael Kirschenbaum was sitting on Jill's porch, reading.

The children said, Kirschenbaum, come play!

Kirschenbaum did not look up.

Kirschenbaum, you pussy! Don't be a pussy, we need you.

Kirschenbaum turned a page.

The children tried encouragement: Kir-schen-BAUM! Kir-schen-BAUM! Kir-schen-BAUM! Kir-schen-BAUM!

Kirschenbaum flipped another page. He read astonishingly fast, or maybe he already knew all the words.

Some parts of this become jumbled. We suspect, though cannot prove, that one of the children invoked Kirschenbaum's absent mother. We do know that Michael Kirschenbaum put his book down. Later, we read page 92, which he'd folded over, for some clue or meaning, though we could find none. He stood up and stretched, like an adult after dinner, like he had all the time in the world. He ambled over and joined the game. He linked fingers with Patricia Wheeler and Brett Akers. Later, both children said that his hands were surprisingly warm, as if they'd been over a fire.

In the distance, on Wranger Street, an engine revved.

Someone said those magic words: Red Rover Red Rover send Kirschenbaum over!

We later tried to coax then beat from our children who had called him over, but they never gave it up.

So Michael Kirschenbaum began his final journey across Jill Howitzer's lawn, as fast as he could, which was not very fast, his head down, perhaps imagining his mother, perhaps imagining he was one of the heroes in his books, on his way to solve *The Mystery At Devil's Paw,* and perhaps the imagining inspired him, for little Michael Kirschenbaum, against all odds, broke through the line, which he had never done before. His momentum took him, stumbling, then tumbling, into the street—and then the sound.

Airborne, he looked like a marionette: his limbs clacking and flopping in all different directions like they had no bones and were only wispy bits of string hanging on by thread. When he landed, his neck was twisted, like he'd been caught in the act of looking over his shoulder.

Someone screamed, and then someone else did, in a different place, and softer, like the echo of a bell. The vehicle swerved, then slowed, then accelerated, then started to slow again, almost to a stop, then sped away—in the car's wheels we could see the girl's mind struggling to work. Lindy Simonsky was taking the kids out to free pepperoni night at the Pizza Cottage, and when she saw the girl trying to get away, she screeched backward out of her driveway to block the girl's escape route, the minivan door still open and little Noah Simonsky only halfway in, clinging to a seatbelt, his legs sticking out. This image—a child's legs sticking out of a van—produced a strange sort of déjà vu, dragging us back to when little Jerome Howitzer had been kidnapped so many years before. Back then, our worry had been vehicles moving too slowly, not too fast. Drivers looking too carefully at our children, not drivers not looking at all. Though that had a happy ending: Mr. Howitzer had snatched him in a custody dispute, and father and son were in Montana, fishing.

We converged on the car, we opened the door, we unbuckled the girl's seatbelt, we dragged her from the car, and we made her sit on the curb. The dumb girl was in a daze, as if she'd been the one hit. No one had turned off the car and we could hear it chiming: someone did not have her seatbelt on, the door was ajar. The radio was playing a song about summer.

The girl was wearing denim overalls, which we had not known were back in style, though not having teenagers, we were never quite sure what was in style or wasn't. She'd been wearing sunglasses. They were giant and dark. They'd fallen in the struggle and were in the middle of the street, and Ronnie Akers picked them up and put them in his pocket.

Fifty feet away, at the other end of the street, Michael Kirschenbaum's tiny chest was still. He was dead. We did not know how to go to him, how to kneel over that little body. Rhonda Akers, back from detention a little too late, picked him up like he was a doll or a dog. She carried him to grass and set him down. It was so unlike her, this gentleness.

At our end of the street, someone said: Who is she? Does anyone know her?

No one spoke up to say they did.

How old are you, we asked the girl, for looking at her face, with all those freckles, we couldn't tell. She could have been 16, she could have been 30. We fished out her driver's license, which said she was 24, and that matter was settled.

What would we do with her? We didn't know, we knew only that there would be no Board meeting. The Board had finally failed us.

Here's what we'll do, said Mrs. Bronard. She was feeble but easily excitable, and she was dragging behind her the scythe one of the Simonsky children had used in a Halloween play. She said, We put her head on a pike, and we put it outside the neighborhood, as a warning.

She's kidding, said the other Mrs. Bronard. They looked alike; no wonder some of the younger children believed them sisters.

No, I'm not, said the first, and the other Mrs. Bronard took the scythe from her and held her back, gently, so that she would not break. Sometimes, on those nights when our wives lay locked and cold beside us, we pretended we were the Bronards, or the Bronards before they'd gone gray and decalcified. We'd swim against our wives gently, caressing instead of pinching, whimpering shyly, and it seemed to help, albeit slightly.

A beeping sound came from the girl, not from her mouth but lower, within her, and we startled. Then we laughed—it was only the girl's cell phone alarm, signaling that she was late for a meeting, or should be rising from a nap, or should not forget to take her birth

control. Well, she did not need to worry about that anymore! We fished the phone from the pocket of her overalls and gave it to the children. They were too young for cell phones but still knew they contained games and they began to play, three or four of them banging the keys at once.

It was Marcy Wheeler who said we should tar and feather the girl, though Marcy later gave credit to her daughter, Patricia, who was in the middle of an American frontier unit at school. When Marcy said this we looked to Harold Grant: we knew he had stolen tubs of tar from the construction site in his basement. Howard did not volunteer his stash, which wounded us. We remembered the two of them on the motorcycle, Michael's nose pressed against the torso of the mermaid tattooed across Harold's back.

But Ronnie Akers had pine tar, Ronnie had lots of pine tar. We thought of his old joke, which was not really a joke: *You think you hit .327 in Double A ball without a shitload of pine tar?* Ronnie left and returned with two giant containers of pine tar, and with his size 33 Louisville Slugger, which was also part of a joke that was not really a joke: *Old Louie here helped me homer off the Rocket. Triple A, 1993, Toledo Mud Hens. The Rocket was down there on rehab, and don't think—* here Ronnie would always wink*—he was the only one in that matchup juicing.*

Ronnie gave Louie to the children, and they abandoned the phone and began to smash the windows of the girl's car, while our wives undid the girl's overalls and stripped her to the waist. I'm going to be late for work, the girl said dumbly. She was still in shock but now she struggled. Bridget Buchanan restrained the girl. Bridget was a ward nurse, and she knew how to restrain girls. She had just returned from a 24-hour shift, and she was still wearing her scrubs, splattered with vomit nearly the shape of Bridget's birthmarks underneath. Our wives poured the pine tar down on the girl, emptying the canister, shaking out the last drops, spreading it with paintbrushes—paintbrushes! Who had brought those? Was there an artist among us? Mrs. Simonsky? Mrs. Fontana? Our wives did thick

goopy strokes across the girl's shoulders, back, arms, and head, and the goop ran down over her eyes, like she was disappearing. Our wives were preoccupied, and, despite our grief and our anger, we took advantage, sneaking furtive looks at the girl's breasts before our wives slathered them in pine tar, but they were blueish, as if our children had already squeezed the life out of her.

Then we turned away. We discussed spring training, as we did whenever our wives brought up childbirth or the removal of upper lip hair. Eventually we fell silent and shielded our eyes from one another. Why? Because she was a girl and we were men and so we could not use our fists, which we felt we ought to have been bred to do? Because we did not know how to cry over Michael Kirschenbaum? Because our wives were tearing the girl's back with their nails, raking in the tar, when normally they would complain at the slightest chip, using it as pretext to escape loading the dishwasher? Looking for some way to help, we told our children to stop with the car, and we sent them running to the Bronards' chicken coop. They returned with hands full, feathers sticking out like crazy extra digits, like they were our little chicken monsters. The little Simonsky girl had stuck one in her headband like she was an Indian princess. The children feathered the girl with the same diligence they applied at craft time to beading or braiding. Their little tongues dripped from their mouths.

At the other end of the street, the Graduate Students were at the scene of the accident, calculating and measuring. One of them, wearing goggles and rubber gloves, poured a beaker of brown liquid over Michael Kirschenbaum's blood, and it foamed and bubbled. A second spoke into a recording device, while a third took notes on the tire marks and the wind. Mr. Kirschenbaum and his daughter knelt by Michael slumped in the grass. Mr. Kirschenbaum looked droopier than ever, which got to us. We all went over and paid our respects. Michael's sister was chanting but we could not hear the words, and she glared at us, like we had done this. We didn't do this, we wanted to say. We love you, even though you scare us. Marcy

Wheeler whispered in Mr. Kirschenbaum's ear, and he collapsed in her arms.

It was getting late, we realized, and the air was sinking under the weight of some new purplish quality, like a gas being released somewhere into the atmosphere. Summer was close. In the distance, beyond our oak trees, we heard jackhammers rutting into the earth, giant machines beeping, and strange rolling gutturals, those *rrs* and *lls* we'd never quite mastered back in Miss Moleanaria's Spanish class. They were starting construction on Packard Avenue.

A burning was discussed. The Graduate Students still had the pit smoldering from their post-candidacy cookout. *The Crucible* was fresh in the sixth-graders' minds; the sixth-graders were in favor. But cooler heads prevailed, and here was what we settled on:

We gave the killer instructions: run. We gave her a head start. We let her go, and she ran, her overalls and her feathers flapping.

We gave a propane lighter from Burt Cassidy's grill to Kirschenbaum's sister, that lewd teenager whose name we were ashamed to realize we did not know. Kirschenbaum's sister ran as fast as her heavy joints would take her after her brother's killer. She chased the girl down Winston, then Abelard, then through the Fontanas' yard when the terrified girl cut across it.

Mrs. Fontana sneered from behind her screen door: Looking for short cuts still?

Us, we stood on our front porches and sat like teenagers on our shitty cars in our cracking driveways, watching the chase, hooting and catcalling, high fiving. We fired up our miniature grills though dinner was already made and growing cold, we popped open beers, we lit cigars, we set off firecrackers, we French kissed our wives and felt them tremble and give, we clutched our little babies, we pressed the backs of their heads into our soft-pillowed stomachs. Our children squirmed in our arms. They wanted a piece of the action, and—yes, we let them go: they weren't so little anymore, they were growing, they had seen death, why not let them taste revenge, or at

least the thrill of a May chase? We released them, and Rhonda Akers and Noah Simonsky and poor Patricia Wheeler and all our children ran after the Kirschenbaum girl running after the other girl, chasing her from the neighborhood, like she was the pied piper, or a hero gone off to war. f

Mitchell Storar

ANDACHTSBILD

Little one, we, who are among the dust, must
once daily eat our azymes with our wine, wash out our eyes
with water, and white soap split from the adipose of animals,
devour
leavened bread at dinner, and incant
a Merseberg prayer, or else—

and when we dream, we dream
of yellow oil, and ochre smeared on plaster walls, the gilt
of painted haloes, like two parted lips
pronouncing a verboten mantra: *Why?* When even the stone eyes
of our Madonna are dry—the candles lit and dribbling
from each fist—when oil, water, wax and ochre will wet the fingers,
then
the forehead, washing down the dust in drips?

But in Lourdes it's said there lies a spring
with convalescent waters, reliquaries bathed
in rose-blue light, and the pristine body
of a saint interred, they say, in glass. They say
steam flies from the spring whiter than the feathers on the wings
of hens, or even angels—whiter than the flesh of boiled hens—and
men
and women strip down to bathe, and breathe the steam, scrub clean
their soiled sons and daughters, and rinse their skins in mineral
water.

And Our Lady of the Lidless Eyes, were she made of something less
like stone, may wake once, look twice about her, sigh,
and sleep again. Or else, a statuette of salt—she might dissolve
a little each time it rains, encrust the reeds and cattails, poison
ponds,
fill wells with alkyl metals and instill our throats with thirst; our
eyes
with flecks of yellow glass, until the lids no longer seal them. And
we awaken,
staring down dead stars strung up in the Western night—all
magnified
by a dew that dims our dying vision; all enamored
of dust, and dust again.

Stephen J. West

IN DEFENSE OF FINGER GUNS

On April 19, 2010, thirteen-year-old Taylor Trostle was suspended from her suburban Houston middle school for three days after pointing a finger gun in her teacher's direction. From the numerous accounts that surfaced in the aftermath of this incident, we know very little for certain. We can confirm that she had been playing cops and robbers with several friends in class when the incident was alleged to occur. We also know through statements from school officials that the other children playing the game didn't get suspended because "they were facing the other direction and their finger guns posed no immediate threat to the teacher."

During an interview with a local news reporter, Taylor replayed the situation, explaining, "I just had [my finger gun] like this and I was like PSHYOO PSHYOOO, and then, she just turned around. They all say I'm gonna kill somebody, and I just, I don't... they know that I wouldn't do that." In considering Taylor's account of the event, the defense asks you, dear members of the jury, to hold your judgment, and to note how her voice quavered as she fidgeted uncomfortably. And when you reflect upon what could be the most damning evidence—how she drew her finger gun so quick and cool, brandishing it at the reporter as if it were just another one of her appendages—the defense implores you to consider why her nerves dissolved into a soft, sincere smile as she thoughtfully examined her weapon before firing away at the camera.

You might conclude that Taylor's actions represent a chronic depredation of America's values, a depredation most troublingly expressed in the exponential increase in gun violence among a populace estimated to own more than 200 million guns (guns that

have killed 650,000 people in the past two decades alone). From this perspective, you could, in turn, dismiss Taylor's actions as a trivial symptom of a larger and more volatile problem. But, dear jury, the defense suspects you are too smart for that, and that you know there is more to the story:

EXHIBIT A

- In Colorado, Aaron Godec, Connor Andrew, and five other fourth-grade boys were suspended for the rest of the school day after pointing their fingers like guns during a game of "army and aliens" on the playground
- In Oklahoma, seven-year-old Patrick Riley was suspended from school for pointing his finger like a gun in an undocumented direction
- In Michigan, six-year-old Mason Jammer pointed his finger gun at a fellow student and was suspended for two days
- In New Jersey, four unnamed five-year-old boys held each other at finger gunpoint when one reportedly yelled to another, "BOOM! I have a bazooka and I want to shoot you"
- In Maryland, an unnamed eight-year-old boy was disciplined for pointing and firing his finger at his classmates

And there are others. But before we examine what Exhibit A reveals about Taylor's need to fire a finger gun, the defense believes it is worth exploring what its examples share with her actions on a practical level. The defense speculates that in each instance, PSHYOO or BANG! was the sound the child-assailant used to represent the discharge of his or her finger gun. (The defense acknowledges that POW is sometimes associated with finger guns, but believes it is better thought of as an imitation of the sound a finger gun makes rather than the sound itself.) PSHYOO is more noise than word, a verbal emission akin to the natural process of breathing; PSHYOO PSHYOOO, some people do this in their

sleep, on their backs, rattling the walls of their homes and the nerves of their lovers. On the other hand, BANG! is unmistakably a word with multiple connotations that can be deployed strategically. Note the exclamation of BANG! and its intent to draw attention to the speaker and his or her finger gun; it is a word that reverberates with premeditation and politic, a message blasted from the end of one's finger that underscores some other, more pressing purpose. PSHYOO PSHYOOO is easy breezy, and, like a cucumber or the other side of the pillow, it is as cool as cool can be. BANG! BANG! BANG! and now that we have your attention: the defense believes that if Taylor's case proves unique, it is in its recalibration of the demographics we assume for finger gun violence:

EXHIBIT B-1

- The absence of females in Exhibit A

Dear members of the jury, the defense urges you to avoid the lure of thinking Taylor's novelty makes her somehow more delinquent than her male counterparts. We have all seen a female pull a finger gun in any number of situations, firing away with ease. With her thumb standing erect as the tumbler and with no sound—not even a hushed sweet nothing of a PSHYOO—any woman can transform herself into a femme fatale when she pantomimes a bullet exploding from her fingertip. But at thirteen years old, Taylor is by no means a woman, a fact that complicates diagnosing her finger gun as a reference to a clichéd fetish. And the complication doesn't end there:

EXHIBIT B-2

- The absence of teenagers in Exhibit A

Taylor is by no means a child anymore, and the defense believes it would be an error to dismiss her finger gun as a naïve prop from a game of cops and robbers. Unlike her male counterparts in Exhibit A, she is drifting into adolescence, a space where the dark swirl of adulthood untethers us from our innocence. Adolescence is when many of us begin to grope the paradox of our isolation from and desperate need for companionship with others. These needs—for acceptance, for understanding, for support—help us navigate our mortality. Maybe at thirteen years old Taylor is experimenting with adult concerns for the first time, reaching out to her peers in a form that is comfortable and familiar. Her impulse is one we all share, exacting regularly with whatever means we have on hand at the time:

EXHIBIT C

- You make the sign of the cross
- You flip the bird
- You love rock music, particularly heavy metal
- You think something is "A-Okay"
- You are a fan of *Star Trek*, particularly Spock
- You give a thumbs up
- You give a thumbs down
- You give the peace sign
- You turn your peace sign around and give someone the old fuck you
- You believe your team is number one

But the gestures listed in Exhibit C, unlike that of a finger gun, each mean only one thing. They lack the social versatility of the finger gun and its proclivity for improvisation, a characteristic that leaves open the full spectrum of our humanity to its disposal. The defense believes it is now appropriate to ask: How many bullets have you blasted from your fingertips? How many of your family members and friends have you gunned down with a steely grin, mouthing

the report of your weapon as naturally as Taylor allegedly did? The defense knows what gets you trigger-happy:

EXHIBIT D

- "Hey-how-are-you-long-time-no-see"
- "Yo-what-the-hell-is-up"
- "Don't-forget-what-we-talked-about"
- "You-know-what-I-mean"
- "You-*know*-what-I-mean"
- "I-gotcha-I-gotcha-I-totally feel-ya"
- "Great-to-see-ya-give-me-a-ring-sometime"

PSHYOO PSHYOOO sounds the report of your finger gun in situations such as those listed in Exhibit D, which is by no means a comprehensive list. If the defense may be so bold, there is little doubt that, much like Taylor, you pack your heat every day, ready to draw at any moment. You've probably rigged your pieces to reload automatically, and you fire at will with the click and suck of tongue and cheek. And you are ruthless; you never even think about it anymore when, BANG!, you end each showdown with a grin that emerges from behind the smoke you blow from the barrel of your finger, the same expression found, if you recall, in Taylor's soft smile.

The defense also finds it relevant to mention that on occasion, dear jury, you turn your finger guns upon yourselves. How many imaginary bullets have you shot through your temple, square in the middle of your forehead, or with the muzzle pushed up into the soft underside of your jaw? How often have you accentuated a conversation by leaving your self-deprecation splattered on the walls for all to witness?:

EXHIBIT E

- "I am so embarrassed"
- "I was so embarrassed"
- "I can't believe I just did that"
- "I am so stupid"
- "I was so stupid"
- "I feel so stupid"
- "I felt so stupid"
- "I would've felt so stupid"

BANG! your finger guns discharge in each example from Exhibit E before anyone can stammer a plea for better judgment. In the spirit of honesty, the defense admits to also firing a finger gun from time to time with everything from reckless abandon to calculated precision. We would like to say we remember how and when we learned to use a finger gun, but we can't with any accuracy. Like you, we probably just picked it up along the way:

EXHIBIT F

- In 1965, a plastic gun shaped like a finger that shoots actual projectiles was revealed on an episode of *Get Smart*
- In 1971, Texas Tech alum L. Glenn Dippel and his wife Roxie first saluted fellow Red Raiders fans with finger guns and the phrase, "Guns up!"
- In 1976, Travis Bickle, covered in blood and decidedly suicidal despite running out of actual ammo, fired a finger gun into his temple in *Taxi Driver*
- In 1983, Atlanta Braves pitcher Pascual Pérez finger-gunned down his strikeout victims, much to their chagrin
- In 2000, Cartman's boy band "Fingerbang" used the finger gun to gain brief fame for him and lasting infamy for *South Park*

• In 2006, Alex Shelley and Chris Sabin, known affectionately to fans of *Total Nonstop Wrestling* as The Motor City Machine Guns, started mugging for the camera and taunting their opponents with dueling finger guns
• In 2008, the character Trevor Zeitlan was introduced on *Heroes* by shattering a pair of glasses with his finger gun, only to be killed off later in the same episode
• In 2010, the finger gun iPhone app replaced the natural form of the weapon with a digitized simulation, with a TAP TAP followed by a tinny PSHYOO PSHYOO

While Exhibit F illustrates the evolution and relevance of the finger gun in its various forms over the last fifty years, maybe the impulse behind the act goes further back, hearkening to the primordial stew of our collective humanity found in a caveperson's urge to throw an imaginary rock or sharpened stick at a fellow caveperson. But as we can all agree, rocks and sticks aren't bullets, and a hand is still a hand when pantomiming a heave of anything. The finger gun is different: it is at once the appendage and the weapon, a conflation of our peculiarly American urges to reach out to help on one hand and to coldly destroy on the other.

With this relationship in mind, the defense can imagine the finger gun first appearing in 1836, when Samuel Colt, having been asked to describe his newest invention, was speechless with delight over its capability to fire multiple rounds in spite of its concealable size. Perhaps just the sound of its name as it ricocheted in his mind—*revolver*—relieved him of the need to say it aloud, when, without thinking, Colt lifted his arm, unfurled his pointer finger from the ball of his fist, lifted his thumb, puckered his lips, and exhaled a long PSHYOOOOOOO, his mouth coming to rest in a satisfied smile.

Or perhaps the finger gun originated in 1791 when Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson visited President George Washington in the Oval Office to read aloud to him a certain bill just ratified in

Congress. The defense can imagine that just as Jefferson finished reading the statement, "A well regulated militia being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed," Washington, seeing the opportunity to prank his old friend, would have shouted FREEZE! and when Jefferson looked up in surprise to find the president holding out his hand, he would have mistaken the president's gesture as the offer of a handshake and reached out to meet his embrace when BANG! he realized his mistake. For the rest of his days, Jefferson would have remembered how stunned he was as he registered the warm smile on the president's face, his finger pistol aimed at his heart.

While the defense argues that one of these two moments is the likely origin of the finger gun, we understand how their lack of documentation could be problematic to our case. Regardless of when or where it began, we must acknowledge that the real threat we face from Taylor's finger gun is that it can transform from flesh and blood into galvanized steel and gunpowder to mete out its lament, as we've witnessed 323 (and counting) times in the 323 (and counting) children shot in American schools in the last fifteen years alone: 323 (and counting) children shot to death with actual guns.

Dear members of the jury, the defense asks that you reconsider the use of Taylor's finger gun, listening closely for the meaning expressed within every PSHYOO and BANG! we exchange. Isn't it possible that cultivating a shared acknowledgment of the death that awaits each of us is the closest we can ever hope to feel to another person, and that each bullet we fire from a finger gun is a whisper of our desire to remain that way? f

Tanya Larkin

ULTRAMONTANE

...anche le cose che
ci sono già sono difficili da inventare, e lo possono fare solo gli
inventori. — Peter Bichsel

I swallowed an alp and became unlovable.
Every time I opened my mouth, a piece of cloud, silence incarnate—
when all I wanted was to count my blessings. The only math
I was ever good at. But now there's too much breath—for that
is what a mountain is made of. The hard-won breath of everyone
who's climbed it. High achievers, honeymooners, roly-poly,
peeping marmots, ibex on hind legs locking horns for a mate.
And all those who gave up on its side because the view
literally took their breath away or suggested a picnic.
Bitter pickles, bitter beer, bitter chocolate in the sweetest
of spots. From which poured a valley. Sprung a turquoise lake
in its crotch. I swallowed an alp and now have too many
shoulders. Friends who once called to check on my grief
don't know which to throw their arms around. Even I
have to put up my hood to bear the perfection.

Snow falls into that notch at the bottom of my throat.
I don't feel cold. I turn sun-wise and let it melt
down my clavicle. Like a child, I relish the hidden
gleaming. For whom it has been given
to survive there are so many pleasures,
hot water bottles, movies. Reading, reading, reading
a good book, which is the pleasure of being caught

in a fever dream without being sick. But unlike a child
nothing can put me to sleep. The mobile of the galaxy
whirs. The rinky-dink motor clicks and purrs, but I'm awake.
If only I could be one of those people who passes out
after fucking. The tick of sleet against the pane. Toy galaxy
turning. If only I could dream of something I don't understand.
I had a writing teacher who told me, Tanya, at some point
you have to stop reading, stop learning languages.

I didn't listen. Another told me the story of an inventor
who spent decades alone on the top of a mountain.
When he finally came down to the village, he found
everything he invented had already been built.
He pointed at the television in the upper corner of the bar.
"I invented that," he said. But everybody laughed
or ignored him. "Sure you did," said the bartender.
"This drink's on me." He slid the inventor a spritz.
The inventor drank and drank and then charged
his mountain like a drunk inventor. He was home now
where he proceeded to invent and destroy everything
that already was. There are lessons in this story,
but first, how do you come down from a mountain
inside you? That is what I would ask someone
who once loved me to show him I still needed him.

Joshua Young

KILLER WHALES

it's not a perfect scene—so stop talking like it is, there are assholes & fuck-ups, even after m cleans up the madison. some kids like standing near the merch tables so the touring bands can hear them talk about killer whales & the kinds of weapons to use. two of the *good* kids go missing in july & in late august their bodies bump against the concrete shore of gasworks park. the cops find fragments of skateboards in the head wounds devo plays in every store & café, & capitol records calls the kill rooms. we don't want that tension unslacking at dark, but there are *some lucky boys born with reservoirs of violence*, that, & on weeknights there's nothing to do if there isn't a show.

THE CHURN

tomorrow my shoulders & side will ache. this time, my face will grow bruises—we're in the churn, circling, bodies bloating with sweat, arms swinging, can you feel that in your hips? the bass heaves against our ribs, even when we slam our bodies around, it shoves & rattles, doesn't matter that i've heard this song through cassette fuzz & blown car speakers, & i know what it means when song wrecks, the squeal, the chug, my gut still tightens when the band plays it—there are bodies flying, let them dive, there are bass-heads slamming into chests, let them clash. i've still got the yellowish smear across my belly, from three weeks ago at the madison. the bad brains was frantic, the crowd—we could feel the foaming in the churn. i felt that show thudding in my chest for days, i slept with that drone in my ear. in window-light, i could feel the pit bumping against my legs. i know what they mean, *listen motherfucker, listen from the throne!* growl it out, take the mic, feel that handshake in your palm creases. ok, so there's blood warming in my mouth & a cut throbbing on my kneecap, doesn't matter, the song's still making turns, someone shoves me back into the center, back into that mess of boys, into that mess of limbs.

CONTRIBUTORS

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