

An abstract painting with a dark, swirling background. The colors are primarily dark blues, purples, and blacks, with vibrant streaks of green, red, and yellow. The brushstrokes are expressive and dynamic, creating a sense of movement and depth. In the upper right, there is a bright, glowing area that suggests a light source or a celestial body. The overall composition is complex and layered, with various forms and textures that invite the viewer to explore and interpret the scene.

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ABOUT THE ISSUE

During the Renaissance, it was the well-known architect Filippo Brunelleschi who rediscovered principles of the linear perspective in drawings and paintings. Using these principles, he illuminated how lines converge to create a single vanishing point along a horizon in the artwork. With one moment of vanishment, Brunelleschi changed the art world's perspective.

The voices in this issue speak to this vanishing point and the convergence of lines that lead us there. What does it mean to vanish? Is it a process—fast or slow—or a solitary moment? Does one make it slower by holding on to what is disappearing? Or is control possible?

These pieces are visceral. They strike to the core of what many individuals struggle with day in and day out. Some subtly hint toward a vanishing point, like the minds found in Rob McClure Smith's essay "Mindshot," or the space between two languages, as is the case with Hali Fuailalagi Sofala's poem "O Le Upega Le Talifa/A Net That Cannot Be Mended." Others approach the topic of a disappearance, or want of, literally, such as the character of Caliban in Nicelle Davis's "Caliban Talks To Caliban," and a loved one who disappeared months ago in Mark Kline's "A Song Singing."

This issue flips the idyllic horizon we all yearn to see upside down. A vanishing point can happen anywhere along the horizon line—threads weave in and out, lines converge, and these writers help us ask *where do we fall?*

—Jordan Durham

KIERSTIN BRIDGER

ARRIVAL

Look at the boy you say
his mylar balloon, an emerald tail,
trailing in the city wind.

You asked me to come
even while confessing the green was metallic.

Back home I am a mule deer
pine pitch on my back.
I offered my woods as library,
spider thread text hung from pine bough
where I translated dash by space a sunlit game trail.

I marked musk-smudged lines
with ribbon so you could follow,
left balsam notes folded in the air,
but you could not leave your dollar bills.

How will you find me here?

The colors are stark tinsel. They are electric lit
not the needle of spruce I know

or sandstone's cool lichen day-glow.

I see florescent street signs,
painted fingertips clawing fast cash,

hear pigeons on the roof when I assume hail.

Look at the boy you say

his string snapped clean,

his tail slipping away,

And look, that reflective shred, silver-sided—

surely it will thread a nest,

crosshatch with nettle, a blade of grass, and
scent of sage.

KATHLEEN BALMA

STOPPING TIME IS NOT AS USEFUL AS WE THOUGHT

At first we simply wander, delighted with frozen smoke curls and uplifted forks in our favorite diner; the remarkable faces of drivers mid-crash; the way pellets of rain disappear where we walk, leaving body-shaped paths in the air. We consider travel, but the roads are littered with stilled cars and neither of us flies. Even looting isn't as easy as we supposed: the thyme green sofa we ogle is burdensome to carry, so we choose a hearthrug with beige mountain shapes that reminds us of Brigadoon and the seventies. We balance the shag on our shoulders and drag two bags full of gallimaufry and farrago from that vintage garb shop down the road. The only other things we really need now are your extra-wide dress shoes, which will have to be mail-ordered post pause, and a house, which still feels remote and chimerical, like Dalí. Even good deeds are unexpectedly complex, though we eventually choose to pickpocket the fob of a petrified doctor in white coat and vest, then slip script pads in the clutch bag of a bedfast hatmaker while she freeze-weeps on an Irish "magic hanky." (Now it's a hanky. Now it's a bonnet. Now it's a hanky again.)

MINDSHOT

Ektachrome plane—I see the flies.

My six-year old sits bolt upright in bed staring wide-eyed at his arms. His hands tremble. He is terrified. I sit with him for an hour and tell him there's nothing there. But nothing will calm him. He tells me there are insects crawling and he can't get them off. I make him chocolate milk. I put the cup in front of him but I don't think he sees it. There's nothing there, I tell him. Look. This cup. This cup is real. I'm here. I'm real. What you see isn't there. It's all inside your head. But still he looks at his arms. No, there are bugs. The flies crawl black. Why can't I see them? There's something the matter with my son, or with me.

Won't you miss me?/Wouldn't you miss me at all?

Syd Barrett, for three decades a footnote in rock history as founder of Pink Floyd, was, in the aftermath of his death in 2006, reconsidered as a cultural icon. Lengthy obituaries appeared in the *London Times*, *New York Times*, *Daily Telegraph* and *Chicago Tribune*. A damaged recluse, whom in 1967 fell into a lysergic black hole from which he never emerged, Barrett was eulogized by David Bowie, Damon Albarn, Pete Townshend, Robyn Hitchcock, Michael Stipe, by rock writers Jon Pareles, Nick Kent and Greg Kot, by literary figures like Rick Moody, John Kinsella and Toby Litt. That same year, he was resurrected on stage in Tom Stoppard's play, *Rock 'n' Roll*. For Stoppard, Barrett was the lost boy of popular music, the Pan of the wildwood, prodigiously talented, forever young, "our dark archangel." "He was beautiful," says Esme, a character in the play, "he was like the guarantee of beauty," and so a useful metaphor for 60s idealism and the Prague Spring. Barrett epitomized both the era's childlike optimism and its propensity for self-destruction. Other icons of the 60s had the grace

to die. Barrett lingered, an elderly eccentric riding his bike through Cambridge, physical reminder of a spiritual death.

Often inclined to borrow/Somebody's dreams till tomorrow

You will rescue him from the romantic legend of a musician-poet gone mad, an artist incinerated in his own creative fire. Proving this narrative a myth, you will show his lyric strategies are more than drug-addled *mélange* or schizophrenic word salad, but a poetic expression, product of a particular historical aesthetic. You will write him sane again, notwithstanding his 1968 swan song for Pink Floyd, "Jugband Blues:" "It's awfully considerate of you to think of me here," Barrett intones, "And I'm most obliged to you for making it clear/That I'm not here."

In the clock they sent through a washing machine/Come around, make it soon, so alone.

The day after the bug episode my son is fine. He plays with his trash truck. He has for some time been obsessed with dragging things to the trash. Every Thursday we follow the recycling trucks. I watch him play, recreating what he has seen, a little boy preoccupied. I read about waking nightmares. Many children have them. It's not unusual. But the intensity of his vision stays with me. My wife and I have joked about his obsession with food. How he counts cookies, creeps into cupboards for Doritos, how peculiar the heaps of discarded wrappers hidden in a desk drawer. Let's keep that one away from alcohol, she tells me. It would be funnier if our families weren't riddled with alcoholism and substance abuse. Why did we ignore the signs?

I've been looking all over the place/For a place for me/But it ain't anywhere

Stoppard's fascination began when he saw photographs of the young and old Barrett and was shocked to see "literally—a different person." But in his cultural representation he has always been different people. As Barrett noted in a 1971 interview, "I've got a very irregular head. And I'm not anything you think I am anyway." The musician

revered as “crazy diamond,” founder of a genus of progressive rock, also informs the creative choices of generations of British musical bohemians: Barrett begets Bowie begets Bolan begets Blur. The gorgeous pop celebrity of 1967, hanging out in Abbey Road with The Beatles, interviewed by Dick Clark and Pat Boone on U.S. television, is also the shambolic vegetable man of 1968, father of freak folk. The writer of two hit singles in the Summer of Love is also an outsider artist prone, in a recent biography, to deliberate acts of sabotage and “sardonic gestures of defiance” against commercialism. Johnny Rotten wore an “I Hate Pink Floyd” t-shirt in 1977, while his situationist associate Jamie Reid made inquiries as to how Barrett might be lured out of seclusion to produce the first Sex Pistols record. If Barrett is “not anything you think I am,” he is also everything we think he is. Barrett is a set of contradictions, mutually cancelling images, codes, and effects.

Please lift a hand/I’m only a person/With Eskimo chain/I tattooed my brain all away

You take LSD as a freshman in a flat in Pollockshields. You like it and drop a lot that year, heavily spaced in lime and limpid green. You hear murmurings in grey river mists. Down on the Broomielaw the rain spits, a scarrow to the east of the river and on the horizon a withergloom, while you reel away, high on the banks of a Clyde where ripples lap and change texture under skies studded with hexagons, bands of dark red, and yellow globes jetting grids of blue halos. A candle coils into a one-legged man, a burning coal, a worm, then tilts and the word with it leaving a question: wax night-illumination object? You understand how LSD would have opened Barrett up, old school doses of 100 micrograms expanding neural possibilities. You feel creative on 25 mcg, writing poems, sketching. Then come the voices. You hear them on the subway—underground sounds resound, the Glasgow clockwork orange has portentous things to tell you. Staying at your father’s flat in Airdrie, he shakes you awake. “Who in hell ur you talking to? Sound like a regular heidcase, so you do.” So you stop,

alarmed, and the voices whisper on, fragments of a conversation to which you are not invited.

Let's try it another way/You'll lose your mind and play

My son makes lists. Dates crosslisted with Valium, Xanax, OxyContin, MDMA. The substances he intends to take neatly arranged with schedule, milligrams itemized. It can't be real, a sensitive child's fantasy. He has a need to itemize and compare, a curious boy. Later, he tells me he became obsessed with drugs during the D.A.R.E. sessions at his junior high school. Discussions of why not to do drugs made him all the more interested in sampling them. We send him the following year to Catholic school. I have a photograph of him at a science fair. He is Albert Einstein in a suit, gelled and disheveled hair and fake moustache. He tells the interviewer from the local paper interesting facts about Einstein, some of which he improvises. I had never before noticed what a good liar he is. A year later when I discover the baggie of pills and make a fair estimate of how much was pilfered from my wallet, he confesses everything. He has a problem. He takes pills randomly, in unsafe doses and doesn't know why. He can't stop and is afraid. He needs rehab. My son is fourteen years old. He does not need rehab. Regardless, we take him to an intake center and he fills out a questionnaire for a humorless woman who, inexplicably, wears a medical facemask. Already we enter the realm of the surreal. She reads his answers, takes off the mask, and tells us this one needs to come in right away. She tells us that what we have here is a serious case.

And I'm wondering who could be writing this song.

Rosemary Barrett said that later in life her brother would photograph a flower, make a painting of the photograph, photograph the painting, and then destroy it. "Once something was over, it was over," she explained. "He felt no need to revisit it." But revisiting the past to consider how Barrett derived the aesthetic exemplified in these acts of destructive representation is useful, as the later method is implicit in the earlier one. Barrett's various cultural significations and reconstructions, his easy appropriation by later generations, is related to his own adaptation of postmodern aesthetics. From his

days at Camberwell Art School through the countercultural shifts of the London Free School through the Floyd underground gigs at the LSD-drenched UFO Club, Barrett was at the epicenter of a cultural and artistic shift. These arenas provide us a context to consider his techniques of appropriation, pastiche and collage. Consider his lyric strategies in the context provided by a jokey booklet the 18 year old made for a friend in 1964 called *Fart Enjoy*, seven sheets of cardboard bound by sellotape with drawings, clippings and text constructed on collage principles. One page, "Divided Self," has its title clipped from the Scottish psychiatrist R.D. Laing's book and is represented concretely by a list of synonyms from a thesaurus. "Origin of Floral Structures" splices excerpts from a textbook on plants with Beatrix Potter's *Tale of Jeremy Fisher*. Playful drawings are like the word collages that surround them: abstract, evocative, whimsical and, in this, not unlike Barrett's music. There are participatory spaces, one section left blank with the admonition "Add A Mark." The phrase *Sprat Locket Patch* is centered, a curious poetic construction. The words have been excised vertically from the contents page of an illustrated 1881 *Mother Goose*. Jack Sprat could eat no fat/Lucy Locket, lost her pocket/Cross Patch, lift the latch. Sprat Locket Patch.

You feel me/Away far too empty/Oh so alone

You contemplate professional help but working class kids, even those who make it to University, do not seek psychiatrists. Scottish psychiatrist is an oxymoron. You go to class and back to your bedsit, venturing out little for six months, seeing no one, talking to no one, dating no one. Your sanity seems then a fragile thing, a daily achievement. By your second year, the voices leave you alone and you re-enter the world, chastened.

In the sad town/Cold iron hands clapped/The party of clowns outside

Twice a week we drive to Peoria to see him. The rehab counselors say he is doing better, but he does not look well. We attend family sessions where the

kids talk about their drug use, share war stories. Sometimes the parents weep. My son is the youngest. He has been adopted by his peers and is learning from them. He knows all about the varieties of Spice, Bath Salts. Banal words become sinister. He tells a captivated room about the time he took something, not sure what, and how in the shower the walls began breathing, alive as lungs. Were you scared? No, he says, I liked it. Did the voices scare you? No, he says, I always hear voices, it's as if there's a lunchroom in my head. The two counselors who lead the sessions are different. Ned is ex-army, brisk, and efficient in rimless spectacles, performing his addiction schtik for the third time that day. Jim is a former addict. He wears a wristband to remind him of triggers, talks the twelve steps. My son writes down his triggers—places, rap songs, delinquent individuals and grass. Grass? When I see grass I think of weed, he says. I guess he can't mow the lawn then. Soon he impressively regurgitates statistics about addiction. But I have my doubts and mention them to his advisor Nicki, a cold woman whose heels click the corridors decisively as she leads me to her office, opening three locked doors with an electronic key. He is drug free but still seems obsessed by drugs, I tell her. In aftercare, the other kids relapse incessantly. My son attends AA meetings twice a day and doesn't. But is this a concern? Isn't relapse part of recovery? Soon, everyone has relapsed but him. The other kids are so damaged. I know their histories of domestic chaos, violence, rape. My son is loved. Ned takes us aside. He's not sure the program is working. The hearing voices thing is obviously a concern. Could he be schizophrenic? No, my son just has an irregular head. Then he flunks a urine test and is kicked out. Nicki recommends another program better suited for dual diagnosis. In the brochure, a picture of the room he'd share with violent offenders and convicted molesters. The alternative hospital we want has a nine-month waiting period. If he can hold out till then, if we can hold him together. I accept that I am powerless, my life unmanageable.

Blinding signs flap/ Flicker, flicker, flicker/Blam, Pow/Pow

The bizarre “Jack was Diddly Dumpty/All Jolly/To Market to Buy A Plum Cake” is actually three nursery rhymes stitched associationally. Jack Horner pulled out a plum/Diddly Dumpty/The cat run up a plum tree/To market to buy a plum cake. The lines are a riddle whose

solution is plums. Even curiouser this garble: “Lieutenant Lunch-date turned back from him feeling of warm stage acts have become important whoso diggeth a pit shall fall therein they even defended British pop princes of the kingdom of Babylon such a terrible feeling of inadequacy sweeps in a curve thus saith the Lord God sex symbol good made death unto me dank corridors hear pop entries ashamed in this same confident boasting blows knobby slabs of white stone rubble its begining to affect our ear-drums Tony Cartwright and Tom Jones you can bank on this jungle print dress going straight to-his-heart.” This crazed word salad is a series of excerpts from the Book of Proverbs and phrases lifted from *Catch 22*, interspersed with randomly cut lines from magazines and advertisements. In a 1969 interview, asked about a collage quality to his lyrics, Barrett said “I do tend to take lines from other things, lines I like, and then write around them but I don’t consciously relate [the process] to painting.”

Inside me I feel/Alone and unreal

You’re on your way to becoming an alcoholic, but it’s not as if anyone notices in the West of Scotland. Then you’re rescued by the chance to reinvent yourself thousands of miles away. Barrett fell apart in the United States, stumbling through the Perry Como Show, ignoring Dick Clark’s questions, freaking out in Filmore West. In Santa Monica he tipped a tin of Brylcreem and crushed Mandrax pills onto his new Vidal Sassoon perm and, performing under hot lights, the gunk melted masklike down his face until a girl screamed, seeing his nostrils bubble, watching him decompose onstage. Asked what he liked by Pat Boone, Syd offered, after a long dreadful pause, “America!” Maybe you’ll feel the same.

Reason it is written on the brambles/Stranded on the spikes /My blood red, oh listen!

Zombified on Risperdal, he doesn’t want to do anything, a shell of his former self. The talented soccer player kicks a ball for two minutes and quits. The medications come and go, Zoloft, Adderall, Welbutrin, Intuniv. One morning

we pull him out of school; one afternoon he tells his psychiatrist he wants to die; one weekend he spends in a Chicago mental hospital from a mad poet's nightmare. He is increasingly violent. There is drug use (marijuana stops his head from spinning), physical confrontation. He throws his cellphone away in a fit of pique, swallows a bottle of Adderall and becomes a maniac, storms out our home. A young policeman sits with him, says what are you doing with your life, man, you have a nice family, a nice house, why don't you try running or working out... you don't want to end up some dooper, druggie, zoomweebie? You want to be something, right? He's sober three months when our older son, college bound athlete and scholarship student, smokes a joint with him. Maybe he's just being sociable. This the only way these brothers bond. My heart is broken. My wife says it's a physical thing, too, a broken heart, an actual ache, a throb where it shattered.

The madcap laughed at the man on the border/Heigh-ho, Huff the Talbot

Barrett applied a similar technique of cut up and association to his lyrics. While often read as abstract poetry, acid-induced nonsense verse, a song like "Octopus" uses an imagery of fairground rides to access other rhymes, poems, and songs. For example, the striking "Madam, you see before you stand/Heigh-ho! Never be still!/The old original favourite grand/Grasshoppers Green Herbarian Band/And the tune they play is "In Us Confide" simply appropriates Sir Henry Newbolt's 1912 poem "Rilloby-Rill:" "Madam you see before you stand/Heigh-ho! Never be still!/The Old Original Favourite Grand/Grasshoppers Green Herbarian Band/And the tune we play is Rilloby-rilloby." Other lyrics from "Octopus" have been mulled over by interpreters, not least the couplet: "The madcap laughed at the man on the border/Heigh-ho, Huff the Talbot!" The title of Barrett's solo album, *The Madcap Laughs*, is taken from that first line. But why is the man on the border and why does the madcap laugh? For obvious reasons most critics elide "Hey Ho, Huff the Talbot." But in *The Less Familiar Nursery Rhymes*, compiled by Robert Graves in 1927, we find "Huff the Talbot and Our Cat Tib." Huff is a mastiff

that fights against his friend, the cat Tib, on Bosworth Field in the War of the Roses. A few pages before, we find this by Edward Lear, “There was an old man on the Border/Who lived in the utmost disorder/He danced with the cat, and made tea in his hat/Which vexed all the folks on the Border.” Barrett’s two lines have the same source, if seemingly unconnected as ‘Diddly Dumpty/All Jolly/To Market to Buy A Plum Cake.’ But was it the madcap laughed or the mad cat? Did producer David Gilmour, who gave the album its title, mishear a lyric? It’s easy to see how he might, since an earlier version of “Octopus” titled “Clowns and Jugglers” included the lyric “madcap galloping chase,” a phrase Barrett borrowed from the 19th-century poet William Howitt. “The winds they blew and the leaves did wag/They’ll never put me in their bag” sings Barrett. From “The Squirrel,” a traditional folk song: “The winds they did blow/The leaves they did wag/Along came a beggar boy/And put me in his bag.” Barrett is stitching fragments from sources as varied as John Clare and Shakespeare’s *Henry VI*. This is not a demented psyche in the throes of poetic self-analysis. Barrett as poete maudite is a pop-cultural myth. What we have is a deliberate decentering of the self.

A bare winding carcass, stark/Shimmers as flies scoop up meat/An empty way...

If Barrett fell apart in America, you will go and pull myself together and an essay falls apart. A culture studies riff with detours through Frith, Deleuze and Guattari, Marcus, Benjamin is long, long gone. The theorists mash into a gibberish jumble, like an incantation to ward off the fear of originality. I can’t write that essay. The subject is dead. When in all of this did Barrett’s madness and my son’s mesh?

We don’t need you/We act like that/And if you think you’re unloved/Well we know about that

My son tells my wife its OK. He’s better now, not angry with her anymore. She has been crying. He’s playing at being a parent, calming a hysterical child. She gives him a Benadryl for his allergy, forgets to hide the packets, and he

swallows the lot. We sit by his bed in the ER all night. What are you seeing, the nurse asks. He's strapped to the IV, slurring, but enthusiastic. Shapes and colors. Do you like it? Yes, it's like Disneyland. You're a good tripper, she says. You're a real good tripper. He has never been to Disneyland. The Wisconsin hospital calls. We waited nine months, as if for birth. We drive him to Oconomowoc and leave him there. Let them take him off our hands, our minds. He's sullen and uncommunicative. He hates us. Driving back, I feel only relief. If only we never had to pick him up again.

I'll give you anything, everything/If you want things.

To identify Barrett's influences as exclusively literary and English—Lear, Carroll, Belloc, Grahame, even Joyce, whose poem, “Golden Hair,” Barrett set to music—is categorically to misunderstand his art making. His sister said he “always considered himself an artist not a musician. For him, music always went alongside art and, if anything, he was probably moved off a more obvious path by music... art was where his real love was.” Barrett's teenage heroes were Burroughs and Kerouac, Cage and Anger. He visited the Rauschenberg exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery in 1964. Gilmour recalled how he and Barrett traveled to Paris to buy *Naked Lunch*, still then banned in the U.K. Those present at the first Floyd recording sessions noted Barrett drew songs as visual representations, colored drawings resembling Venn diagrams. In the studio he frustrated his producer by saying, “Perhaps we could make the middle darker and maybe the end a bit more middle-afternoonish [because] at the moment, it's too windy and icy.” He named his band by splicing the names of two North Carolina bluesmen, Pink Anderson and Floyd Council. He was an inveterate collagist.

Its what I wear/Its what you see/It must be me/It's what I am!/ Vegetable Man

A six-year-old walks aimlessly around at Christmas, a lovely child, a little vacant, lost. He stares at the camera and says, “What?” By then you knew his idiosyncracies, the fact that he loses things, spaces out.

That year his preschool class performs a parachute exercise, flailing a sheet and screaming. It upsets him terribly. “Mom,” he says, crying, “It’s all too noisy in my head.” It’s 1967 and Barrett is singing “See Emily Play” on *Top of the Pops*. Chronologies indicate this is when his world fell apart, when his bandmates drove him to see Laing and he refused to get out the car, when he locked his girlfriend in a room for three days, feeding her biscuits under the door. But he looks good in this video, ethereal and gorgeous, strumming his mirrored Telecaster, miming with vigor. The tape has eroded badly, shaking and blurring, vertical hold gone, making it all the more psychedelic. Syd wears a long gown that touches the ground. Then, from the 1990s, a fan stalker video in which Roger Barrett walks down a street, bald, unrecognizable, an old fat man in a wifebeater, black holes where eyes should be. In 2001, the BBC made a hagiographic documentary that he watched with his sister. She reported he enjoyed hearing “See Emily Play,” but found it confusing—the music a bit too noisy. You watch all these videos.

Because of you/To see me be

The day we drive away, I feel relief and guilt. But maybe I can get my life back. Maybe do some writing. We call after a week and he refuses to answer the phone. He’s angry when we visit, sullen and uncommunicative. Why do you leave me here, he says. He shares a room and on his side has attached grainy printout photos of our cats to the wall. He misses the cats; his family not so much. They take him off the medications and start from scratch. New anti-psychotics, mood stabilizers. There is no diagnosis. Maybe he’s on the Tourette’s scale. Maybe he has OCD or is bipolar, schizophrenic. Given his history of addiction, he has to be kept off opiates. Some of the kids have serious OCD, complete with stepping rituals and repetitive gestures holding up the line at breakfast. One girl overdosed on coffee pills and is in a wheelchair. Some freak out and try to run away. One makes it outside and runs around barefoot in the Wisconsin snow. It’s stupid, he says. Where would she go? He tells us tales of escape with grim bemusement. These kids really are crazy.

No wondering, stumbling, fumbling/Rumbling minds shot together/Our minds shot together

So who was present when Pink Floyd performed at the launching of IT in 1967? McCartney and Yoko were there, but was Lennon? Marianne Faithful, but Jagger? The sound-text poet Bob Cobbing was there and the poet Spike Hawkins. Studying at Camberwell, Barrett was familiar with British avant-garde poetry and the text cut-up technique of Cobbing and Hawkins. He owned a copy of Hawkins's *Instant Poetry Broth*—a verse-recipe of cut ups. Barrett's roommate, the painter Duggie Fields, watched him play with cut-ups. Cobbing's experiments with visual puns, palindromes, anagrams, phonetics, and typography are also referenced in *Fart Enjoy*. The alphabetic cutout ABC is a reference to Cobbing's ABC in Sound as the booklet's recipient, Andrew Rawlinson, had recently worked on the radio collage *Rose Machine Buddha* with Cobbing. The wordplay of *Fart Enjoy*, "Typical-Topical...Tip up...political," is Cobbing-esque, an in-joke between the sender and recipient. For lyrics, Barrett took the nearest book, whether an astronomical atlas or the I Ching, cut it up and wrote around it, or threw dice, the same Dadaist techniques used by the Cambridge poets, in the cut-ups of Gysin and Burroughs, in Cage's chance operations. His creative process involved moving information, making him, in Marjorie Perloff's term, an "unoriginal genius." The painterly method extends to the music, notably in the influence of the experimental group AMM led by Keith Rowe who laid his guitar flat on a table, likening it to Pollock putting the canvas on the floor and Cage's prepared pianos. Films of Barrett's guitar playing in 1966 mirror Rowe's technique, including the use of cigarette lighters and ball bearings for feedback squall, and evidence the same painterly approach to sound collage. Barrett was intrigued by Luciano Berio's recordings of sped-up and slowed-down collages. He visited the BBC radiophonic workshop to meet the godmother of electronica Delia Derbyshire. "Our minds shot together/minds shot together," mumbles Barrett on a track—the working title, "Mindshot."

Mingling jets and statuettes

Under D, a list of words and concepts for integration: derive, drift, detournement. Under E, a note that the Kodak ektachrome plane had a bluish tint. Under F, a remark of Simon Frith's—"popular music is a solution, a ritualized resistance to the problems of being an intellectual [and] a site for the fantasies and anxieties of the intellectual." Fragments resistant to patchwriting you drag to the trash.

But oh, oh, my haircut looks so bad

The new psychiatrist is a calm, resigned, noncommittal presence who calls him on all his addict bullshit, referring to Valium as heroin in a pill and marijuana as an herbal toxin. Just like LSD, it is probable that marijuana can trigger the onset of mental illness in a susceptible brain. Would it have happened anyway? Feeling more together, he tries to reclaim a lost individuality and so, one weekend visit, requests that he visit a hair salon and have his hair dyed blue. We'll give him anything, everything if he wants things. It doesn't come out quite right. We go see a movie on a day pass. The new James Bond. My son has always enjoyed 007, especially Connery, and I wonder if it is because his father is Scottish. He enjoys seeing Bond return to his Scottish roots and blow them up. So do I. Sean Connery and R.D. Laing, two Scotsmen tripping together on LSD, once had a wrestling match. I'm beating James Bond, Laing cried to the onlookers.

Wandering and dreaming/The words had different meaning/Yes they did.

Dick Hebdige likens bricolage in punk to surrealist experiments with collage and spontaneity. In Barrett's case, bricolage extends to techniques of sampling in writing and music. Mutating the sounds he received, and ideas given about the function of objects and words, Barrett reclaimed them. In *Fart Enjoy*, he writes, "If you're wondering what I'm doing I just got expelled from school/I discovered there wasn't anything those creeps could teach me." But he was learning. In that context of intertextual pastiche, we can relate his later reception

and retrospective appreciation to his own postmodern methods of composition. “I was a painter,” he said in an interview, “I was trained as a painter.” Is it coincidence that an artist with an aesthetic of textual appropriation is later a figure himself so easily appropriated and repurposed? Some biographers claim Barrett was schizophrenic, a diagnosis he never received. Deleuze and Guattari argue that postmodernity demands that the subject schizophrenically live inherited meanings while recognizing the inability of such meanings to respond to the subject’s affective experiences. In this regard, Barrett the artist was without question schizophrenic.

And what exactly is a dream?/And what exactly is a joke?

You read a version of this thing at a conference, craving feedback. For one to presume that the writer of lyrics such as “I’ll have them, fried bloke/broken jardy, cardy, smoocho, moocho, paki, pufftle,/ sploshette moxy, very smelly/cable, gable, splintra, channel...” was mentally ill is to preclude the notion that...What are you trying to do? Someone asks: ‘But wouldn’t it be true to say that there are signs of mental illness here also?’ Where? What is he insinuating?

Columbus is a sad town. Rain falls in grey. My mind is shot.

Everything’s all on/ It’s rosy, it’s a beautiful day

My son stays with my wife while I fetch the tickets. He has surreal purple hair, walks with a medicated shuffle, and has picked his once beautiful face to scabs. But he’s doing better on the Seroquel and we’re at the movies and for now he is happy. He talks about the guys at AA. He respects their confidentiality but gives them nicknames: Drunk Dan, Crazy Dave, Diarrhea Claude, Vietnam John. He loves telling stories. But stories like his don’t always have a happy ending. I walk across the foyer, theater carpet red plush, considering how sane everyone would look if only they weren’t lined up to watch the new Tom Cruise movie. He sees me and smiles. It is all in pieces but he is my son, and he is loved, the star above him crystal blue.¶

ANNE BARNGROVER

VOW FOR A FUTURE LOVE

I will mistake the plop of dew on canvas
for raindrops for footfall. It will be dawn
before dawn. The sky will be no color. The birds'
wings will be pinned in trees, their warbles
unplanned, bright flares, not yet song. I will wake
with a start. I will walk to the river, its water
like watered milk, the mist thick as a layering
of hands, the fishermen in prayer. I will wait there.
It will be a bouquet of dried violets, ornaments
carved from green soap, the blueberry bush
in my childhood backyard, its wire gown glinting
in the sun and the deer gazing on, the berries
before they are berries, pink as rosebuds,
as shells buried beneath sand in hurricanes
that have turned over the sea for centuries,
for a thousand years, the grains of sand colors
beyond colors, their beauty hard-won.
It will be written in salt lines. It will be as old
as every omen, as the music of dying stars,
the soft wings unfurling from a common bird
in the known purpose of her song. I have worlds
of things to tell you. I will give you my word.

PATRICK KINDIG

THE NEGOTIATION

I start small: a pair of knitting needles. You
counter: two tickets from last Thanksgiving's
Lions game. I raise you my grandfather's
pocketknife and you see me with the Star

Trek coffee mug you stole from the neighbors.
We each take a shot of Jäger. Things begin
in earnest. I offer every sweater
my ex ever gave me, the Chopin waltzes

on my bedside table, my entire collection
of Thomas Mann. You offer jazz,
a crate of Bitburger, one small red house
on Plymouth Road. I offer a hand

and you offer a bicep, I a tract
of clavicle and you a smooth white
hip bone. We begin to discuss services:
laundry and lock-picking, copyediting

and espionage. Both of us offer ourselves
as translators. Neither of us wants to think
about what we might need translated. We
are shedding our lives like leaves in winter and

suddenly we are both naked, skin and muscle and eyes
the size of continents, some worlds heaped
between us, neither of us yet satisfied.
You believe what I want is your heart. I believe

you are mistaken. What I want from you is as simple
as waiting: carve from the cartilage in your ear
a mirror. Hold it before my mouth
and listen closely to what I have to say next.

A SONG SINGING

It's midnight, the restaurant is closed, and the cheap fluorescents outside flicker like spastic strobes. Why Dennis has made coffee he doesn't know, he'll have nerves that jingle jangle jingle. He twirls a counter stool and sits. The commotion he hears is the bugs, hundreds of brainless June bugs, headbanging the lights, the plate-glass window, on and on —'til dawn do them part, the restaurant and these bugs. Where *do* bugs go in the mornings?

Isabel's office beside the kitchen has spiders, black hairy ones with thick legs like eyelashes drenched in mascara. The first time he was in the office Isabel trapped one inside a glass, slipped a sheet of paper underneath, and walked over and stuck it out the window, lifted the glass, blew the spider off, then wadded the paper into a ball and sidearmed it into Dennis's chest.

Everyone's happy now, she said. Me, the spider, Mother, our beloved customers.

How about me? Dennis said.

Okay then, she said. Almost everyone. I can't see why you wouldn't be happy, but.

Hey, he said, I didn't say I wasn't.

What makes you happy, Dennis?

She hopped up and sat on her desk, legs crossed and rocking, straight-spined, smiling at him. Inviting him in a matter-of-fact way, a friendly challenge. She molded her palm to his chest, keeping him at half-arm's bay.

Don't tell me, she said. Shooting eight-ball with the rest of the band after you play. You like that more than being on stage.

Bull, he said. Alright, maybe some gigs.

But some not.

Mostly not, he said.

Aaaaaand, she said.

A classy drawl. Strands of black hair poked up from behind her head in reckless elegance. He'd watched her bundle up her hair, which took her ten seconds tops in front of the mirror; not once did she look herself in the eye.

Come on! she said. Talk to me, don't be such an oyster. Think happy. Like birthday parties with hats and kazoos. Trains. Haikus. Water on Mars. Think!

You have to know it all, don't you, he said. Like, let's say you plan on going somewhere you never been. You spend a month reading about it before you go, don't you?

So I like knowing something about where I'm going.

Listen, he said. You got my country pegged.

Really, she said. There was that look again. The invitational challenge.

Dennis has killed all the lights inside the restaurant except for the triangles and rectangles and just plain tangles of colored light gyrating from the jukebox. Purples, greens, reds, a tiny seed of orange, floating around the ceiling and walls. Isabel used to windex the jukebox every morning, the glass and chrome that formed its round-shouldered contour. It reminded him of the Virgin Marys carved into boulders alongside washboard Mexican roads, that humble holy form, the day-glo colors of their scarves and faces and halos. Isabel's little icon, the jukebox. My giant iPod, she said.

One night when he helped her close up the restaurant she played "The Road To Ensenada," and he told her that ain't the way to end the day, with Lyle Lovett zoned out in some shadowy pain song, a guitar careening in the background like love gone to hell. Who wants to go home with that in their head? But Isabel believed in that song, the line about listening to your heart, following with your feet. It faded out, and he stood there, amazed at how deserted the room sounded. Then she came up behind him, ready to leave, and pressed

her cheek into his shoulder and hung her arm around his neck. The song made her happy.

The bugs bang away, he hears them as a wild and wooly syncopation, a groove vamping, waiting for words and melody. Now he knows why he made coffee. He always drinks coffee while writing songs.

*

Isabel has been missing for two months. She's neither here nor there, now nor then. Isabel is, Isabel was. There's a tense hovering above past and present: suspended tense. When you're in it you're a coin, you're flipped, spinning fifty-fifty in the air, and you never land. Suspended tense, never-never land. You catch yourself driving west of Dodge City on 50 wondering if you'd closed your front door back home (then wondering if you'd even *left* from home), or standing on a sidewalk staring at a giant mural of a stagecoach, suddenly realizing: it's a stagecoach. These moments have nothing and everything to do with Isabel.

How much longer will he think of it as Isabel's office? Always. He will stare at that door and never waver, never think of it as anything but Isabel's office. Though he's never going in there again. Ever.

The view from behind the end of the counter: plate glass window straight ahead, silhouettes of oak tables and chairs, strands of New Mexico chiles hanging from the ceiling, spoons standing in a glass. The acoustics right here are unbelievable, a freak of nature. His guitar, his D-28, cracks out like wood-and-steel thunder. Even his voice sounds solid. He's never really liked his voice. It's too trebley, too echoey, he told Isabel, like a raincrow. A *rainbow*, she said, if a rainbow could sing. Like an echo of rain.

Isabel was into lyrics. When he had a song close to being finished, before he ran it by his band, The Crowflies, he let her hear it. They argued about lines, a verse or a chorus, even about entire songs, which

pissed him off sometimes. Some songs are body songs, he lectured her, not mind songs. Bodies need brains, she said.

He'd scribble out the lyrics for her. She'd lean over the counter, twiddling her pen while studying the lines, crossing them out as if they were meaningless little dribbles of ink. That hurt. It stung when she came up with better lines, too, which happened constantly. She'd never asked his permission to horn in on his songs, either; it would have been out of character for her to ask. *Their* character.

He used her lines. People asked him at songwriting workshops: once you get an idea for a song, a few lines, how do you go from there? Good question. Close your eyes and jump. Be ruthless, be brave. Use anything that comes along in your life, someone else's life. Just keep the attitude that wherever you're going with a song is okay. Just go.

*

Isabel's mother, Juanita, hates spiders. She stomps them out in her domain, the restaurant's kitchen. Also, she's suspicious of country music. But Isabel had managed the restaurant, and she'd kept the jukebox running on ninety percent country. Alternative country. And 50's.

Which singers do you love, Dennis? Isabel asked.

Love?

Yes. Love. Singers you really really love.

Isabel locked her fingers behind his neck and stared through her glasses with the thin royal-blue frames, the look that sank right into his gut, but there was her sense of humor, too, lurking behind her face.

Who do you love? she repeated.

Love. Wow. That's not easy, I go for all kinds of voices.

But voices aren't enough, she said.

Maybe not, he said. Maybe it's not even so much the voice. It's got to be someone who makes me... feel some way I'd never felt before. Lucinda Williams, John Prine.

I've never heard you listening to them, she said.

He shrugged. They're in my head, he said.

She closed her eyes and nodded slowly, more a slight bobbing. And she smiled, as if she were listening.

Now Dennis stares out the restaurant's window, out past the whirligig of bugs, with Isabel's voice in his head. Thick and brassy, rich, brazil-nutty, occasionally jacking up an octave—who DO you love. Singing without singing. He picks a chord out on his guitar, note by note, staccato. Then he's flatpicking a tune, "St. Anne's Reel," what he picks when he grabs his guitar and plays aimlessly, like jiggling coins in his pocket or fingering worry stones—that type of playing, but suddenly he's aware of the tune. He ends with an open D that slowly fades, and a line pops into his head and rides the tone: Isabel is a bell ringing and a song singing inside me. Whoever sings that line, it isn't him. Or it's him the way he'd like to sound; he's never pinned that voice down, the lone stranger in his head who writes without writing.

*

Pete, the Crowflies' steel player, had showed up at the restaurant that afternoon and told him they had canceled their local monthly gig again. They couldn't play TZ's with Isabel still missing. Not yet.

Instantly Dennis realized Pete was right. He hadn't thought about it, but of course they couldn't play TZ's. Later on she won't still be missing. Everything has an ending. It has to have.

Hey, Pete said. Don't you think?

Yeah, Dennis said. Besides, who'd bring us tortillas backstage?

Yeah, Pete said. Taco takeout is not an option.

Taco fucking Take-o, Dennis said.

Yeah, Pete said, and snorted. Taco fucking Bell.

In the kitchen, Juanita was busy chopping. Red onions, Dennis decided, from the rhythm of the knife. Chop. Chop. Chop. Chop. Chop-chop-chop-chop-chop.

Bus leaves tomorrow at eleven for Denver, Pete said, nervously scraping his fingernails and thumb on the counter, playing air steel. You sure you're ready to do this, man?

Dennis hadn't played with the Crowflies since before Isabel's disappearance; a friend had been sitting in for him, and he and the band had shared Dennis's lead vocals.

I'll be fine, he said. I've been working out on guitar, singing in the shower. I'm in great shape.

That ain't what I'm talking about, Pete said.

Pete kept plucking the counter. Juanita shut a door, opened another and shut it too. Outside, a few bikers roared by, the only traffic that time of day this far south of the tracks, on the sand streets of Dodge City.

He couldn't just cancel his life and go live under a goddamn bridge, and that felt like an excuse, but everything felt that way nowadays. Like an excuse to keep going.

I'm okay, Dennis said.

Pete shook his enormous round head. It's the royal shits, man, he said.

Look, Pete. No bullshit on stage. No doing a song for her, we don't mention her name, nothing. Okay?

Pete stared at him.

Not one word, Dennis said.

He almost added, 'ever'.

Pete nodded his head. All right, man, he said. Tomorrow, little hand eleven, big hand twelve.

He punched Dennis's shoulder, then he left. Dennis went back into the kitchen to chop habaneros.

You don't want to think about Isabel, Juanita said, without looking up.

This is no surprise to me, she added.

Dennis wrestled on his rubber gloves and cut habaneros into narrow slivers. Then he concentrated on cross-cutting the slivers into thousands of tiny diamonds.

You don't even speak her name, Juanita said.

Thousands of tiny diamonds the customers will never notice, but he will know.

*

Dennis, Isabel said.

He jerked his head up, startled. She'd been slaving away at her computer while he fingerpicked the gut-string guitar she kept in her office (her rules: no loud playing, no singing, no yodeling, no jokes while she worked). Though now, from the quiet way she'd spoken his name, he had the feeling she'd stopped working several minutes ago.

I've been wanting to tell you this. Not wanting to, but.

He lifted the guitar by the neck and set it back on its stand.

You know my father died last year, up at the elevator. What I never told you was, I found him drunk under an old grain car, on one of the deadlines. Or not drunk, not, mainly drunk. Mainly he was... just dead.

Jesus, Dennis said.

She walked over to the window and leaned against the sill, her elbows stiff. He froze to death, she said. There were rats.

Dennis winced.

Mother calls him the drunk but he wasn't a drunk, he just drank too much at the wrong time. She blames him for me finding him that way. Blame isn't the word. She hates him. Posthumously, I guess you'd say.

He walked over and stood beside her at the window, his hand light on her shoulder, cautious. Jesus, he said. What can I say?

She glanced at him, looked away, crossed her arms tightly. This isn't going right, she said. It's not what I meant to say, I should have written it out and read it to you. To explain.

Explain what?

That it's why I'm still living with Mother, why she wants me home. Why she needs me.

Yeah, he said.

What?

Nothing, except it's been a year now, and it must have been hell, but.

But what? she said.

Forget it.

So you think it's wrong to live with her?

Look, Isabel. If there's anyone I know who doesn't need that kind of help, like, someone to live with her, it's your mother.

Really! she said. You have this all figured out.

Shit, Dennis thought. But he couldn't stop now, he had to say it.

Your mother doesn't want us to live together, he said. It's that simple.

Instantly she kicked him, viciously, right on the side of his calf. His leg gave way, he scrambled to stay on his feet, and though it hurt, mostly he felt guilty. Not for what he'd said, but for what he *hadn't* said—he'd already heard the details about her father's death. A spic drunk, he'd been told. He leaned back against the wall and stood on one leg.

Look, he finally said. I'm sorry about this with your father.

She held the back of her neck. No, she said, I should have told you before.

There wasn't any reason to, he said.

Now she was eyeing him, reluctantly apologetic. Is your leg okay?

I guess so. I can't feel it, anyway.

Isabel stood close to the window, eyes focused on the glass. The streetlight caught her as a sketch, simple details: a dark, longish eyebrow, an arched mouth, a slight hollow in her cheek.

When I was little, she said, he'd lie on the floor and I'd crawl up over him, sometimes I'd even fall asleep. He wore khaki shirts with brown buttons, brown thread. He smelled sort of earthy, but not like dirt, more... something like dust. Like grain dust, of course! Because he worked at the elevator. Why didn't I ever put that together? He smelled like gunny sacks and grain dust. He let me play in the scale

room, and when the wheat trucks came in he'd hold me up, and I'd slide the scale weight back and forth, you know, to weigh the trucks? Then he'd *really* weigh the loaded truck, and when he opened the door it sounded like a windstorm, the truck being tipped up, the wheat sliding out, falling through the grill in the elevator floor. The wheat falls. And all that dust. He wouldn't let me out of the room until the dust cleared.

Outside the window, around the sand parking lot, the cottonwood leaves clicked. Like fingers snapping, polite applause in the dark.

*

Dust, khaki shirts, buttons. A week later Isabel flew to Mazatlan and rented a car, and for the first time in her life she visited the village where her father had grown up.

Two days after she arrived she called him from a nearby town because the village had no phones. No phones! Her aunt baked a hundred tortillas every morning over a wood fire outside her house, or maybe it was inside the house, Isabel couldn't tell exactly where the house ended and outside began.

The kids wouldn't leave her alone. No one would. Nobody left anyone alone. And that was good, she supposed, but it felt like she was under siege in the village, she wasn't getting what she'd come for, which maybe two days was too soon to expect miracles. To get some firm grip on her father, a firmer vision, though she wondered if she just plain wasn't superstitious enough for things like that, for visions. Maybe she was just looking for some context to his life, or her life probably, to her and Dennis.

The last thing she said, after saying goodbye: Don't expect miracles. Seven days later she hiked up in the mountains by herself and didn't come back.

*

In suspended tense you stick a finger in your coffee and you look around the restaurant and you know tables and chairs sit in the murk and jukeboxes flash even when you're not looking, but you check anyway, because you have to nail down the context in your life. You have to remind yourself who people are to you, what they mean to you. Isabel is a bell ringing and a song singing, a rhyme and a reason. To Isabel, you're the one missing.

If he allows himself to write Isabel's song—it's already *her* song—nothing and everything will change. Singing it won't cause her to magically appear. But the song would become the core of her, what people believe about her, because people are that way: coat words with music and they'll swallow them. He's no different. The song would be even more true to him because, after all, he would have written it.

Imagine Isabel coming back and hearing the song. It would be like her seeing her own tombstone. One that he'd engraved.

*

What he had hated about Mexico: scorpions, ticks, thorns like barbed wire guarding the mountains. Sweat dribbling down his legs. An abandoned church with a thick layer of dust glazing the floor. Playing catch in a circle with the kids, no gloves, throwing the baseball without smiling or talking or moving his feet, just whipping it around, the boys imitating him, and all of them feeling that they could play catch all day this way, forever, that it would break an unspoken agreement to even think of what the purpose of playing catch like this might be. Or was all this what he'd loved about Mexico?

In the village, or anywhere he and Juanita went in their search for Isabel, he'd felt bored and overloaded. One of the young men who spoke some English got drunk and mentioned tigers, then he gritted his teeth and shook his head ferociously. Isabel's aunt told Juanita that she suspected foul play from marijuana farmers. The serious, too-young-looking consulate staffer had checked likely hospitals and police departments (his eyes darted on "police"). But the policia, the

old man Juanita bulldogged for half an hour, finally said it best: a week in the mountains, she will not live without someone's help. Who is this person? Why can we not find him?

Finally Juanita broke. He was sitting outside Isabel's aunt's house that night, flipping pebbles. He wouldn't have thought Juanita could wail like that. Instantly the kids crowded around a window and stared inside, and nobody stopped them—and why should they? There were no secrets here. Later, Juanita came outside and said it was time to go home, tomorrow, as soon as possible.

The next morning he walked out of the village before sunrise and headed for the mountains. He battled thorns and tree roots and bushes, the smooth slippery stones. Humidity thickened the mountains; brilliant yellow and blue parrot feathers stuck in a tree startled him, as if they were a sign, crumbs left on a trail. The ledge above and ahead looked like a Neanderthal forehead. She might have climbed there. To get out of all this itchy shit, to find clarity. Someone had built a fire on the stone ledge, though it looked to be some time ago. He got down on his knees and investigated every inch of the ledge. Crevasses, under rocks, the shrubs drooping over the edge. He studied the naked stone of a smaller ledge below with his binoculars.

There was no wind. The heat quivered around him like a gel. He drank from his canteen then laid down with his head on his pack, his hat covering his face. Immediately came an erection. Erections had plagued him recently. He'd refused to play along with them. He'd ignored them.

One thing that had made Isabel happy: throw-off-the-blankets sex in the mornings. Then a shower, singing in the hot steamy rain. Blue songs, shades of blue, lyrics that sounded lost or pleaded a case or hinted that we'd know what's going on if we'd just drop all the pretense and listen to ourselves.

She must have felt like a bumblehead, not knowing what she was looking for, so far away from everything. Goodbye from nowhere, she'd said on the phone. Don't expect miracles.

Endangered missing, the embassy declared. Her official status. As if she were some species.

Buzzards spiraled on an updraft, their wings spread and locked, never flapping. This is how they travel, a villager had explained, his finger circling up, his palm gliding down. They eat only fresh meat, he'd added.

She might have sat here, tracking birds, adding up what she'd absorbed from her week in the village, though there wouldn't be any final tally, she would realize that. She had felt peace here, this vast valley in front of her. Then slashes of grief for her father, knife-in-the-gut pain. He wasn't coming back.

What miracle had she not expected? The miracle of understanding another human being, someone you love?

Dennis stood up, cupped his hands around his mouth, breathed deeply and screamed: Isabel! No echo. No miracle. But it had felt like the right thing to do.

*

Suddenly he hears a clock chiming somewhere in the restaurant, separate from the bug ruckus. It's the pygmy grandfather in Isabel's office. Clocks, spoons, June bugs in Junes. Isabel thought his songs rhymed too much. It's not the point, she'd said. What is the point? he'd said.

Dennis has to look away from the fluorescents to catch how they flicker. The lights flicker, the bugs bicker.

What was the point? What did she say? Christ, he can't even remember.

Four a.m. Later this morning they'll drive to Denver, six hours as the Crowflies fly. They'll settle in the bus, and before they're out of town the other guys will ask about Isabel, any news, what are them goddamn federales doing down there, rotten crooked fucking bastards, and the embassy, those chickenshits, fuckheads. The band will never give up. Never.

Dennis has to play in the band again, have others rely on him; it's the only way he cannot give up. He has to not give up; it's the only way he'll be able to play in the band again.

In the morning, after a few hours of sleep, he'll start remaking Isabel, though in a slightly new version. It happens every day. Except now this line and melody will be the first thing in his head. Isabel is a bell ringing and a song singing inside me.

He decides to not shut off the jukebox. He doesn't want to leave the restaurant dark and lifeless.

*

On their last break, before their final set in Denver, Dennis sits down at a table beside the stage, pulls a cloth out of his pocket, and wipes down his guitar strings. It's been more of a struggle playing than he'd thought it would be. The spots more blinding than he'd remembered, the crowd dimmer. The stage sound clangier, more like a construction site. Like a road crew on stage.

A thin woman, definitely over 60, probably 70, walks up to him. "I was pleased to hear you play 'True Grit,'" she says. "It's been a very long time."

"Yeah, it's been off the charts a few years."

"So have I."

She smiles. A terrific smile, fearless of wrinkles. "Have a seat," he says.

There's western money of a certain kind behind this club. Hollywood western. A hundred-foot polished walnut bar with custom-tooled saddles for barstools. She doesn't fit. No gaudy silver jewelry. Plain western slacks and blouse, nice but practical. A local journalist, maybe. An archaeologist. Retired, relaxed in the way some retirees look. Content to be free of the battles.

She watches him pinch the strings and slide the rag down the fingerboard. "It's the finger sweat," he says. "You wouldn't believe how bad it gets."

They chat for a minute. She nods at the beveled mirrors on the ceiling above the bar; a man rolls his neck to glance down the blouses of the women beside him. That amuses her. He asks her what it is about “True Grit” that she likes.

“Its innocence, I suppose.” She pauses and takes a deliberate look at him. “I met Mr. Campbell when they shot the film. It was difficult for him.”

“Mr. Campbell? Glen Campbell?”

“Yes. They shot the film here in Colorado, at Castle Rock and around. He smiled when I called him mister, I like to remember him that way.”

Dennis has a boot up on a chair. She doesn’t seem to mind, this woman who calls a man mister.

“If I may ask,” she says, “why does your band play the song?”

“I wanted to, and I own the p.a.”

She holds her palm out; there you have it, no more explanation needed.

“Why we play that song,” he says. “Okay. Great melody, nice chord progression, resolution. There’s just a lot you can do with the song, as a band, arranging it. And it says something ... positive. Someday she’s going to be happy, the world’s going to be fine.”

“Yes, precisely.”

“The pain of *it*. I’ve always wondered about that, that *it* ...”

He’s talked himself into a corner, into himself. She’s watching him again.

“I know that feeling,” she says, nodding. “Of wondering about something you normally would take for granted, but it keeps nagging at you. May I ask your name?”

“Dennis.”

“Thank you. I keep a journal, I enjoy writing down anything out of the ordinary in my life, and that’s not much these days. I promise to do you and your band justice. I’m Madeleine.”

“Madeleine. All right. I don’t know if I can do you justice, but maybe I’ll write you into a song.”

“Then I will look forward to that. You’re a songwriter. I didn’t know. Have you played any of your songs tonight?”

“A few. So did you watch them make ‘True Grit?’”

“We did see some of it. My husband and I were involved through our quarter horses. But we were very busy with our ranch. Never a dull moment. Nowadays I trap coons and tend my garden. At least I can listen more to music and not just hear it. Though that’s always been a choice, hasn’t it. Listening as opposed to hearing.”

Suddenly it dawns on him that she’s had a good life. That she knows it. Not necessarily easy, but good.

“Tell me something else about yourself. For your song.”

She leans back, all smiles. “I’ll go along with that if you’ll do the same. For my journal.”

It’s as if he’s been waiting for this. An easy conversation, about nothing in particular. The right person, uninvolved, a stack of words tumbling into place. “All right. One thing, though. I’d rather this not go any further, just you, me, and your journal.”

Her smile fades, but she nods cautiously. Then, as an afterthought, she says, “Yes. Of course.”

“I met this woman at a gig. Isabel. She ran her family’s restaurant, and afterwards she invited us all over, the band, our friends. We were all in the kitchen, and I started helping her make huevos rancheros. And something just hit us, this feeling of being totally synched in, knowing each other. Just like that.” He snaps his fingers. “I don’t know how else to explain it.”

“That covers it quite well.”

He has to concentrate now, get it right. “Her father died several months before I met her. She was the one who found him. It was gruesome. Something like that, you can’t know how it will affect you. She ended up going on this... quest I guess you’d call it, down to Mexico where her father grew up. And then.”

Dennis swallows. It feels so bare-boned to tell, so brief. It should take years to say what comes next.

“And then,” he says, “she walked up into the mountains one morning and never came back.”

“Oh no.”

“Oh yes. She never came back.”

“How long ago?”

“Two months.”

“And you’ve heard nothing?”

He shakes his head. He drums his fingers on the side of his guitar that now sits patiently on his lap, as if it’s his dummy.

“Now I help her mother in the restaurant, three days a week. She hates me. Blames me for Isabel disappearing. And she’s not really wrong, it’s complicated. We co-exist. Maybe for Isabel’s sake, I don’t know.” He shrugs.

Madeleine’s hands are folded in her lap. “I’m not sure I understand, but that hardly matters.”

They sit quietly for a while. The bar noise intensifies. “I started writing a song last night,” he says, “about Isabel. I’m not sure I can finish it.”

“Why?”

“I’m not sure I could ever sing it.”

She gazes at his hand, the flatpick he keeps turning over.

“It’s your turn now,” he says.

She leans back. “I can’t possibly ...”

“Something for your song.”

“My song,” she says, amused at the idea. Her head shakes very slightly. “All right,” she finally says, and nods at the bar. “The bartender there? He’s my son, Robert. He plays this album every time I come in.”

An old Willie Nelson song is playing low over the house system. “Blue Rock, Montana.”

“Robert thinks I like it. His father and I danced to one of the songs for him once when he was very young, a waltz. Very elegantly, as I remember. Then something magical happened, we pretended to be the couple in the album, the ones that danced. We *were* pretending,

but it felt... compelling. And we fell on the floor and died! They died smiling, but I'm afraid we died laughing."

She waves at Robert, he waves back. "He thinks I'm disappointed, him working as a bartender, no matter what I tell him. He mistakes me for his father. His *dead* father. But we all make mistakes with people we love."

She's watching Robert's every move. She doesn't appear to be the least bit sad, and Dennis can't understand how that can be.

She reaches into her purse and hands him a card. "My email and address. If there's any news about her I would like to know. Or if you... well. I know it's not my business, but once in a while we should make things our business."

Pete is plucking organ sounds out of his steel, low and wavery, like an old radio show about to air.

"Time to play," he says, and he stands up. He realizes he's still holding her card. He slips it between the strings and through the sound hole, into his guitar.

Robert yells over at Madeleine, something like, have a little mercy on these guys, Mom. His smile is sunnier than hers, and his face is much rounder, his hair lighter. Blond. Big cheeks. If they hadn't been talking about Glen Campbell, Dennis probably wouldn't have noticed the resemblance.

"If you do finish her song," Madeleine says, "you don't have to sing it. If that's really what's bothering you. No one would have to know."

She smiles. Now, for the first time, she looks sad. Just a little bit sad.

*

Finally, halfway through the last set, Dennis feels the music pull inside him, the rev in his gut, like a gyroscope. That weightless lift. He turns around and sees the other Crowflies feel it, too. They meet each others' eyes, short strafes, but focused enough to show that even

though it's impossible to know where the overdrive is coming from, they give him the credit. The genuine welcome-back look. He could yell at Pete to take another solo, keep the song going, but that would break the spell. Stick to the way they always do it. Follow the pull, how the music splits open the space you sing into, and the words appear: blue skies and teardrops, wheat straw, restless souls.

It's over, and as always the band is ready to get right into "If Lonely Was the Wind," they're poised—he can feel precisely when it will start just from a raised shoulder, the angle of drumsticks, the hitch of the bass, and automatically they're off, but for a moment he is conscious of the fact that the reason they even play this song in the first place is because Isabel asked him to, asked *them* to. He is sure that they're aware of Isabel. This is what he had feared, this Isabel presence on stage, but why? Did he think they would collapse, paralyzed by the thought of her?

They lay the intro down exactly the way they always have, except now it sounds magical and solemn, and just before he enters the first line, about the wild birds singing, he feels a rush of deep gratitude, of grace, of blessing. No one has to say it and none of them will, that this is for Isabel. **f**

NICELLE DAVIS

CALIBAN TALKS TO CALIBAN

“You taught me language, and my profit on’t is I know how to curse.”
—Shakespeare, *The Tempest*

Look at you—animal thrusting pens into the folds of
your own skirt. Frog-legged, scarred womb, asking for

your mother’s kingdom back (though she never held
land—she being island.) No one is ever going to love

you. Now stand with that weight—face the sea—and
write as though beauty has ears—as though air will fill

like wine and drown out emptiness. Say beneath these
currents, *I have seen thee and do adore thee*. You know the

names of big lights and smaller, but little good that does
when left to empty sky. Alone. You watch night expand.

Darkness hidden by darkness—a readiness to envelope—
to be enveloped—you.

ERICK PILLER

THE EXTINCTION OF THE RABBITS

My niece told me the story. She had become obsessed with death. Five years old, dressed as Peter Rabbit. “The extinction,” she warned, “could happen to you.” She scampered into another room.

This morning, a student wrote to me that several years ago she had been abducted. That she had missed the last bus of the night. Was pushed into a van. Starved for days. Raped.

On the third day, left unmonitored, she leapt from a second-story window. She ran for two miles on broken ankles. *It is very lucky to regain freedom and*

I can almost not say it

be a human again.

HALI FUAILELAGI SOFALA

THE SOUTHERN FIRE ANT

They ruined a perfectly good prom photo. Picture
four girls in skin tight satin gowns hopping from one leg

to the next, wobbling in heels too high for teen feet,
corsage petals flying as wrists and arms flailed, pulling up

yards of fabric to reveal a swarm of fire ants biting
and blistering every new conquered inch of flesh.

A friend told me once she heard one scream as she
smooshed it between her thumb and a desk, but our teacher

swore we were imagining a tiny voice where there
was none, imagining instead the scream we'd let loose

if we found ourselves on the business end of a boot
or saw a finger hurtling towards us like a flesh toned meteorite.

Yet, I didn't know how to feel the Sunday after that ruined photo
when my Daddy took a gas can to each grainy mound of red earth,

tilting it just over the opening and letting the liquid funnel
before showering the whole. I sat on the front porch,

feet bare but for the oozing bites and watched him go to each hill,
dropping a lit match onto one colony, then the next until the entire yard

was littered with tiny fires; it looked to me like a whole universe of small worlds ablaze. The air filled with screams I could not hear but imagined.

HALI FUAILELAGI SOFALA

O LE UPEGA LE TALIFA | A NET THAT CANNOT BE MENDED

—a Samoan Proverb

There are no words that are mine to speak.
My tongue wilts behind my teeth.
There is no language for the afakasi.

When I was young, my dad would teach me
Samoan verses to memorize and sing.
There are no words that are mine to speak.

He'd sit my sisters and me in a row of three
and have us count: tolu, lua, tasi.
There is no language for the afakasi.

When it was my turn, I'd flee,
hide in my room as they laughed at me.
There are no words that are mine to speak.

Each tainted word whispered palagi,
betrayed me as half-caste, half-breed.
There is no language for the afakasi.

I live in the silence of my own defeat,
severed from the twin skin of speech.
There are no words that are mine to speak.

There is no language for the afakasi.

EMILY ROSE COLE

HOW TO THROW FIRE: A WARNING

—from The Witch of the West's grimoire

Be prepared to part with your eyelashes.
Before you can squeeze oil from your bones,
you must disown water, recast your body

in feldspar. Choose this, and acquire a taste
for gin and turpentine. Your well will run
with kerosene, your fingers slim wicks bent

back. You'll carry an umbrella for shield, ride it
instead of a broom. During summer squalls, you'll long
to eat lightning, to hide it under your blackened teeth.

Make no mistake: you are not the phoenix in this story.
You are the ember caught in the woman's mouth,
the slag rising from the lip of the volcano.

GANK

Tonight's run is about food. Tyana and the baby have the WIC, but I won't use it. I hate the idea of them paying for me.

So I steal. Never mind the cameras and the paranoia everywhere. You just have to act natural, like you already paid for it. Playing the cashiers and the security almost makes it fun, or it used to, before T came along. Now it's more like work. Like a job.

That's a joke, but she doesn't think it's funny. Why don't you use the vouchers, she says.

No, baby. That's for you and little T.

I play it safe now. Safety in numbers. We stand where we can see each other. T has the stroller over by the cereals. Muley and Sasha go by the dairy and the bakery. I loiter near the meats. All the wrapped up beef is low-grade, cuts like shoulder and skirt, what most people in the neighborhood can buy. Might as well be dog food. Good taste is something the poor can't afford to have.

It's a disgrace to be poor, you know, even though everyone here is poor. The poor look down on the poorer. The suburbs look down on us all. Maybe someday we'll drive up there and do a fancy market where we can lift some filet mignon. Unless they put German shepherds by the door to smell the bags, I can get it out.

Muley looks like he's gone off his meds again. He's doing some kind of dance to impress Sasha, sliding along the tiles and bumping into the shelves, scaring the old ladies scrounging up their dinners. He's supposed to make sure I'm clear. If he keeps this up, the other customers will have the management on him before I can even start.

I don't trust him, but I need him. I give him a look that says I'm serious, and that says I'll kick his sorry ass later if he doesn't get with the plan. He just gives me his stupid grin, and with the tiger stripes on

the side of his face, he looks like he's from some voodoo tribe right out of the jungle. I know he's goofing because I never let him be the pocket. "You got to understand, man," I said. "Nobody gonna let you get close enough to try."

But guys with tiger stripe tattoos on the face don't understand. Trouble is, it's hard to find someone willing to share the gig, let alone someone who understands teamwork. Muley, he used to, until Sasha came along. She talks him into stupidity on a daily basis now. She made him sit for those stripes. I bet she made him forget the plan.

My tats are under my shirt, where they can't scare anyone. I'm proud of the scorpion and the Mayan war god, but now I wish I didn't have them. Tyana thinks they're ugly. She makes me think a lot of things that I did before are ugly. Boosting is probably one of them too, but I can't stop yet. Even though I do it more for the need than the thrill now, the thrill plays a part. Sometimes I wonder why we get such a rush by doing what we're not supposed to.

My mother's voice comes back from the dead. It tells me what I do is a sin. But I don't even know what a sin is anymore. I know what a thrill is, and the risk of getting caught, of leaving my girl and her baby to do for themselves pushes me to go for the one rib-eye that sits at the top of the case, right where the meat guy can get a good look at me. It's not the way it's supposed to go. No personal contact, no way I can get made. I should just be happy with the flank steak, but I can't do it. I want that rib-eye. T deserves it.

There's one advantage to the good stuff. Wrapped food has the plastic bar. Fresh meat just has paper and a label. I carry the X-acto blade to slice the ITF off the butcher paper, like trimming fat. Then it slips right down my coat's inside pocket.

If meat guy suspects anything he'll remember the next time I come into the store, then we'll have to drive to another neighborhood just to pinch a meal. Guys like him are the worst. They get an extra two dollars an hour and they think they own the store, like their shit don't stink no more. Then they start sticking up for the company even though they know they're still being screwed every way you can

think—bad pay, bad benefits—but they act like they got moved up to a better class. This is what I was talking about people looking down on people. That’s the true disgrace.

Why can’t more people be like the cashier in Kmart? We thought we did everything right, Tyana and me. We brought baby Teena in the stroller and put an extra blanket in there, to cover the baby clothes so nothing would show. Put the good stuff at the bottom so we could return it next day for the cash. Did it all in the bathroom where they can’t have cameras, so I could pop the tags. We even picked a couple of cheap outfits to buy to make us look legit. And when we get to the checkout, this lady leans over to make a face at little T and then she looks quick at us, like somehow she knew. But all she did was nod and say what a beautiful child the baby was. And when we were walking away, I turned around and she gives me a wink. She knew that maybe tomorrow she could get laid off and it would be her sneaking clothes under a baby’s blanket. We both knew it don’t matter to the store. It’s all just numbers to them. They jack up the prices to cover the cost of stolen goods. In a way, stealing is filling a role in business. If we didn’t, the extra money would just go to the people who run the company.

Meat guy asks what he can do for me. He’s really fat, with pouches of loose skin on his face, like he sneaks pieces of every slab he cuts up in the back all day. I wonder what they do with the meats that don’t get sold. Maybe he gets to take them home. He could show up in the neighborhood and sell them to the folks like the black market. But I’ve never seen that. Instead they make you go to the food pantry at the shelter.

“How’s that rib-eye?” I ask him.

“How is it? It’s good,” he says. “You think we sell bad meat?”

Maybe he knows something.

“Yeah, it looks good.”

“Try it with a cabernet sauce.” He makes a little smirk, and I know he’s fucking with me.

“Wrap it up,” I say, like it’s something I buy all the time.

I put the package in my basket and walk into the cookies and crackers, where there's only one other person. Tyana sees me do it. She taps twice on the stroller handle. That's the signal for Muley to make a little distraction, keep people occupied. I finger the taped end of the X-acto blade, knowing I'll have maybe three seconds to slash and stash. But then two more people come over, so my chance is gone.

I look down at the package. Thirteen dollars. That's about all I have on me and I know T don't have any. If I have to pay for this, there won't be anything else decent, so I think about where I could hide it, like in between the Oreos and the Chips Ahoy, for somebody else to find. But for the moment I keep it in the basket, thinking there might be another opportunity and thinking about what might have happened to Muley.

Tyana comes and gets me. The baby is crying and kicking up a fuss in the stroller, and anybody within fifty feet is looking at us, instead of where we wanted them to look.

"Where's that asshole?" I say.

"Him and Sasha over by the milks scamming on each other."

I think about going over and catching them in the act, and running the point of the X-acto along one of his stripes. I guess poor people can't be trusted either.

"Can't you make little T be quiet?"

"She's hungry. Why you think she's crying?"

Six months ago it was just me and Muley. I worked at the Jiffy Lube until they caught me taking a ratchet and a couple of sockets that I needed to work on my car. I would have brought them back, but the manager, a big ass guy who always wore too tight pants, he fired me. I heard he hired his cousin to take my place. Back then we ganked for fun—mostly low-end chains, where the employees didn't care. We stayed away from the mom-and-pops, mostly because they watched us like hawks, but a little because we didn't want to hit people working for themselves. Food didn't matter, even if it meant mac and cheese five nights in a row. Now, sometimes, it's all I think about, getting

the right stuff so the baby don't get to school age with some kind of mental deficiency before she even starts to learn.

Muley said we should drive up to the suburbs, maybe Ferndale or Birmingham, and see what we can get from the little boutiques. It would bring in better money than the shit we lift from Dollar Tree. He said the best part would be that the fences would turn around and sell it right back to the same stores so we could steal it again. It made sense, but then, there's that face of his. It's like he's wearing a sign that says arrest me now before I do it. Like we kill our chances before we even have them.

But now that Muley has made it clear he don't want to be part of this—at least not with me—I have to figure out how I can go it alone. What I need—what we need—is what the crooks in the old movies called the big score. Just one pick, one big pick and T and little T and me could live off it for a year. We wouldn't be greedy and start throwing money around. Just sensible stuff. Decent clothes to wear and food on the table. And a table to put the food on. But where you gonna find a diamond necklace just lying around? All the expensive shit is locked up in cases. They let you steal just enough to stay alive, like they're doing you a favor.

Tyana sees me staring down the aisle and puts her hand into mine. Maybe she's afraid I'm getting the urge to bolt like the father did. I come back to earth and give her a little kiss on the cheek. Then I hug her, and before I know it the hug is a lot tighter than I planned to give. It feels so good to have her to hold on to, and if I can't tell her in the right words, at least I can show her by what I do. I'm not going anywhere, baby.

Finally, like three minutes after everything was supposed to happen, we go over to the dairy aisle to face down Muley, and as we hit the corner there's a commotion. A bottle of red wine is smashed on the floor and the security guard has Muley in an arm bar, his stripes pressed up against the glass door to the half and halves. A brick of cheese and two packs of candy bars are on the ground too, and

Sasha is screaming her fool head off, telling them to let Muley go, he ain't done nothing. I knew that girl would be the end of him.

The manager and some other staff are telling everyone else to keep their distance and the cops are on the way. T gives me a wink and wheels the stroller down to the baby food aisle. I go off to the Asian foods and whip out the X-acto; two quick slices and we have rib-eye for dinner. On the way to the register I grab a box of Pop-Tarts and some breakfast bars that she likes. It's always good to buy few things, because who goes to the market and leaves empty handed? T meets me there and she uses the WIC to take care of the baby food and formula, and even though I know the rest of our dinner is in my pocket I feel like a complete failure when she pulls out the vouchers. It's an old-fashioned feeling, like what my father would have if it was him in this spot, and even though I know there's no need to get down when the whole economy is forcing this on millions of people, all I can think of is what a loser I am, who can't take care of his family the right way.

The cops come in and go right past us to arrest Muley, and it dawns on me that I should at least be back there for him, although I don't know what I could do. This is how the world makes us act: as soon as someone we know gets in trouble or dies, it's like we never knew him. Don't get emotional. It's what Muley did to me when he met Sasha. We're all so ready to move out of this hole.

T and me hustle out to the car and get little T into the car seat as fast as we can. I start it up, but Tyana says, "Ain't we waiting for Sasha?"

I didn't think about that. Muley gets a free ride to jail, but they came with us, so if we leave without her, Sasha is stranded. Would serve her right for all the trouble she's caused us, even without trying. And I guess that's the thing—she's just doing what everyone else does, protecting interests. As much as I want to blame her for what happened, maybe I shouldn't.

I turn the engine off and we sit there until the cops drag Muley off to jail and Sasha gets an escort to the sidewalk from the manager. She turns around as he goes back inside and tells him he's a dick and that

when Muley gets out he's coming back here to kick some ass. Sasha, she's the angry part of this neighborhood—the people that always have a finger to point and someone to point it at. I know that doesn't make her feel better about her troubles. It just makes everyone else feel bad too, which is how I feel now, and I can see it on Tyana's face.

Sasha comes up to T's window and says, "You gonna leave me here?"

"Why you think we waited?" T says. "Get in."

She does, and she sees the grocery bag with the meat and the baby food in it. "Do I get some of this?"

I thought she would give me shit about not standing up for Muley, like I could've done something. But she just keeps talking, like she's already moved on.

"I could help you cook it. I used to work in a restaurant."

"That was Del Taco," T says. "You don't know nothin' about real meat."

I look in the mirror as Sasha lowers her head and looks at little T. I can see this is trouble.

"Before that," Sasha says. "It was my uncle's restaurant." She stares at T. "A nicer place than you ever been to."

Unless she was, like twelve, and the restaurant was in El Salvador, she's making it up. Muley told me her story about running away from her mother and coming here to live in somebody's basement until he hooked up with her. Sasha's not even her real name. It's Ascension or something. But in the interest of peace I let her bullshit be. "If she wants to help cook, that's okay with me," I say to T.

That defuses them for a few minutes, but at a red light I hear the baby giggle, and Tyana turns around to see what's up. Sasha is tickling Teena's feet, and the little one starts laughing and pumping her legs.

"Hey!" says T. "Get your hands off my baby!"

"We're just playing. She likes it."

"Eddie, stop the car. I want this bitch out of here. Put her back on the street where she belongs."

"Just be quiet now," I say.

“What? Don’t you even talk—”

“It was your idea to wait for her.”

“Well, that was a big mistake,” T says.

I feel like my father again, trying to drive and keep me and my sister in line when we fought in the back seat. I’d give anything to have me there and him yelling at me now, but that’s a kid’s dream and I turn it off before it makes me lose my focus.

Sasha says to T, “That was you?”

“*He* would’ve taken off. Had the car running and everything. Yeah, that was me.”

Sasha lets go of Teena’s toes and sits back in the seat. By the next stoplight she’s crying. T asks her what’s wrong and Sasha says nothing, but I can guess. In the fifteen minutes we’ve been on the road, no one’s even mentioned Muley and what might be happening to him. He hasn’t tried to call from the station to say that he’s been turned loose or needs to make bail. Since it’s almost night they’ll probably hold him until morning to go before a plea judge. Maybe Sasha should be screaming at me to drive her down there to help him. Maybe I should drop off the three of them at the apartment and go myself. But I know I won’t.

With his record, Muley will get jail time. Whatever I do won’t solve that problem or any of the problems. And like they say, if you’re not part of the solution, you’re part of the problem, so there I am. But running away won’t make anything better either. This is the real crime—that nothing makes a difference—not going to school, or having a job, or caring. Or not caring. Yeah, I know we’re supposed to take comfort in the family around us, but sometimes that’s not enough.

Sasha stops crying when we get to our street. We let her carry the groceries. T takes the baby and we walk up the three flights of stairs. When we get to the landing we see the door to our place is open a little, like we forgot to shut it. But I know we didn’t. I move the women away, over to the far wall. My heart is pounding faster than when we was in the store.

I make them wait while I peek around the door to see if anyone's inside. When I look, the apartment is clear—the TV is there, and T's old iPod is on the counter. A closet door is open. Was that us or the intruder? But our clothes don't look touched. Then I see a drawer slid out by the stove. No way we could have left it that way because of the baby. It's like we surprised somebody before he could get anything.

But how did he get out? We didn't pass anyone on the way up, and the only other way is through the window, and being four floors up, that's not an option. I go back to the door and listen. We only have one neighbor on our floor, and she's like ninety and don't go out. But you never know.

Tyana and Sasha come in after me, and T looks like she's ready to kill.

"We been robbed?" T says. "Some motherfucker robbed us?"

"Maybe we got here just in time," I say. "There's nothing missing."

Nothing I can see, but the room feels empty. It feels dangerous, like it won't let us ever be comfortable here again. I can't make no sense of it. There's no evidence.

Tyana puts the baby on a blanket and starts looking in the bedroom drawers. But it's not like she has jewelry, just underwear and clothes. When Sasha sets the bag of groceries on the counter I go over and look inside. Rib-eye, baby food, Pop-Tarts—all there. Why I looked in there I don't know.

Then T comes back and starts counting the forks and knives. Maybe if the numbers come out right she'll be satisfied. But I doubt it. Me, I don't really care about the numbers.

After a while T calms down. She starts to heat up the baby food. Sasha has the oven on.

"Damn," T says. "We should have got a vegetable. We could afford that. Some green beans or something."

Sasha says the meat will take about a half hour. That should be enough time. She goes into the cabinet and grabs a container of all-spice. It's been in there for I don't know how long—maybe a couple years. I wonder if that kind of stuff goes bad. Then she starts shaking it all over the meat before I can say not to. She's killin' it. I just wanted to taste the meat is all. ¶

AN INTERVIEW WITH JONATHAN EVISON

NB: *In a 2012 first-person essay about the writing of The Revised Fundamentals of Caregiving, published in The Seattle Times, you said, “I’ve never had a desire to write a road novel – in fact, I was very resistant to the idea.” Yet in each of your first three novels, central characters embark on journeys through great open spaces. When it comes time to hit the road (or trail), what do your characters drag you from, or, conversely, drag you to?*

JE: I guess maybe I like to take trips without having to get out of my pajamas. I crossed the Olympic Mountains in the dead of the worst winter on record, and I was wearing slippers and drinking coffee the whole time. No frostbite here, yo! Really, though, it’s something pulling my characters, not me so much. The toughest thing about writing novels, for me, is the daily act of giving myself fully to the story. That means having to disappear in order to get out of the way of my characters. I think that’s one of the reasons writers are such famous procrastinators. I mean, I’ve got two young energetic kids, a busy career with lots of travel, a never-ending queue of unread e-mails, so when I get alone in a room, the first thing I want to do is just take some deep breaths, enjoy the solitude, and futz around a little online. It’s tough under those circumstances to deny yourself the opportunity to exist. That’s where the discipline comes in.

NB: *Do you think that your characters sometimes need the road, with its peace and relative solitude, so as to, like you, disappear from their lives in order to get out of their own way?*

JE: Yeah, that sounds fair. I’m not sure it’s about peace or solitude, though. More that the road offers us a chance to change our context.

NB: *As you said, procrastination is a problem for a large percentage writers. It can build to almost a physical barrier around the work. Are there any particular strategies that you use to help yourself transcend that barrier and re-disappear into your story?*

JE: I like to print out what I've written at the end of the day, then take a red pen to it. Make notes like "expand here" or "flesh out" or just strike stuff. Then I start the next day by addressing the notes. If I'm going to expand a passage or flesh something out, that means I'm going to be forced to immerse myself in the world beneath the page. I sort of view the words as the surface of the water. The goal is to find a good place to jump in and break the surface. Some days the water is colder than others.

NB: *Walter White from Breaking Bad and Tony Soprano (from The Sopranos) are held up as premier examples of the currently ubiquitous anti-hero. They wrap their misdeeds in vulnerable things, like small animals and children, daring us to care for them. Your central characters often do the opposite, acting out so as to hide internal vulnerabilities, effectively daring us to not like them. Every good story has villains and opponents to overcome, but when it comes to central characters (Benjamin, Trev; Ethan, Eva, Krig; Lulu, Will), do you feel drawn to creating characters that ultimately are likeable?*

JE: I want my characters to earn their redemption, so yeah, they often start out somewhat unsympathetic. The thing is, they're always trying to improve themselves, and yeah, they're usually failing. But it's hard not to like somebody who is actually making an effort, right? The people I dislike the most are the ones that aren't trying. So, it's not that I'm trying to write feel-good characters so much as I'm trying to write dynamic characters who exercise their agency and have an arc. Stasis is the enemy. Helicopter crashes are fine, so are high-speed chases, and ticking clocks, but emotional growth can basically serve the story by proxy in a similar capacity. For me, the character development is the story arc.

NB: *When beginning a new story, do you know how you want your characters to develop, and then arrange the external world's action around that development? Or is it the opposite—you know the world but are waiting to see how your characters will react? Or is it maybe a little of both?*

JE: It's some of both. But as a general principal, I try to create a fully dimensional character or characters full of memories, contradictions, yearnings, and so forth, then set them loose in a narrative landscape and let them do the navigating. As long as my character has an ideal self toward which she is striving, I can't really get too far off track. I let my characters make their own decisions, based on the information they gather. And why shouldn't I? They are people, separate and distinct from me. They have a will, just as sure as I do.

NB: *Do you think of the setting, both physical and cultural, as a separate, though omnipresent, character? I'm thinking of your second novel, West of Here, in particular, where the Pacific Northwest landscape changes so much that it feels almost like its own arc.*

JE: Everything I said formerly about character applies (in the case of West of Here) to the town of Port Bonita and its surrounding wilderness. The place is the character. All the other players are ancillary, and set in motion to serve the character arc of Port Bonita. They are essentially the circumstances that shape Port Bonita.

NB: *At a book tour reading in 2013, I heard you tell the audience that you were asked by the publisher to add a female character to Revised Fundamentals to make the story more broadly appealing. You've been critically praised since All About Lulu, but as your career continues to grow (Revised Fundamentals is being made into a Hollywood movie with an A-list cast), commercial pressures must, at least on some level, weigh heavier. What philosophy guides you as you balance the creation of your art with the less romantic realities of its sale and distribution?*

JE: As far as I'm concerned, there's only one safe way to avoid the influence of these outside pressures (which are most assuredly there), and that is to stay at least a book ahead of everybody—and by everybody I mean publishers, reviewers, and readers. This way I'm always writing exactly what I want, and outside forces are not directly influencing the work. My next book doesn't come out for eight months, and I'm nearly done with the one that comes after it. And last fall, I threw an entire book away because the center wouldn't hold, otherwise, I'd be done with the next two books. All of this makes me sound like a fast writer, but really I just never stop writing. 300 words is a good day for me. That's 100k words a year though. All that said, I usually know a couple books in advance the characters or formal challenges I want to undertake, so I'm never left wondering what to write next. And once again, the head start allows me to be mostly impervious to outside forces. I would imagine this would all be harder to pull off if I was high concept guy who was re-inventing the wheel with every story. I just need a character, or an effect I'm trying to create, and then I just run with it. Often into a brick wall.

NB: *Well, hell, I'd run (or try to, at least) through a brick wall if it meant I would eventually write like you. But something tells me it's not quite that simple... Has fatherhood changed your writing habits? And do you think it has changed the writing itself?*

JE: No doubt, being a dad has certainly changed my writing habits. And so has touring 60-90 days a year. I used to get up at 5am and sit at the same desk and write until noon, at least five days a week. I've tried writing on a daily regimen with the kids in the house, but it just doesn't work. So, now, I head to the cabin and spend two-and-a-half days a week out there by myself, working my ass off. Out of those 60 hours, I write about 30, drink about 15, and sleep about 15. But the other four-and-a-half days a week, I'm daydreaming the story, frequently making notes, and generally letting it live inside my head. I've found that by the time I get to the cabin, I can hit the ground

running. There's not nearly so much wall gazing or groping around in the dark as there used to be. When I travel, I always travel with a manuscript and a bunch of red pens. As to whether being a dad has changed the nature of the writing itself, I'm not sure. I suppose I can write kids better now.

NB: *You're answering many of these questions from the set of The Revised Fundamentals of Caregiving. What does it feel like seeing and hearing your story, especially given its personal genesis, come to life outside of your head?*

JE: Honestly, I'm just viewing the film as its own animal. When I watch the movie, I'm going to view it on its own terms. I'm not interested in comparing it to the book. The dictates are so different for 300-page novel and a two-hour film that it's almost ridiculous to compare them. So, I'm watching it all from a distance. It's fun and exciting to watch a bunch of really talented people work on something that began with you.

NB: *Including the infamous buried three, you're now in the double digits when it comes to completed novels. When you were beginning, did you consider yourself intentionally following in the paths of any specific writer(s) or literary tradition(s)? And if you could go back, is there anything you would like to tell young, novice JE embarking on his first novel?*

JE: From the beginning, I just wanted to write books that I'd like to read. That's still my objective. I only have one theme: reinvention. Whether it's an awkward adolescent, a grieving father, a little old lady, or a whole town. My narratives are always testimonies for the possibility of change. I don't think I'll ever wear that theme out—it's a durable one. The books will continue to look different every time. I'll employ different tactics, embrace different formal challenges, strive toward different effects, but the heart beating at the center will likely always be about the human capacity to change.

NB: *Your fourth published novel, This Is Your Life, Harriet Chance!, is due out this September. What makes you excited about this story? And were there any specific challenges you set for yourself in writing it?*

JE: I believe hard writing makes easy reading, and I think *Harriet Chance* may be my most readable book. It's spunkier than hell. But the first few drafts were excruciating. I was trying to get at Harriet's character from the outside in, and the results were stultifying: Harriet goes to the kitchen and puts on some tea. Harriet watches it boil. Harriet pours the hot water and looks out the window at the rain while her tea steeps. Finally, Harriet takes a sip of the tea, and a tendril of steam curls up her face. Chapter Two. Really, it was painful. Then, around the fifth draft, I broke the code, and totally -re-envisioned the novel. Different voice, different time signature, different structure. I peeled back Harriet's character layer by layer like an onion skin. I arrived at a structure by which every succeeding chapter, changes all the chapters that came before it. The novel is a series of revelations. None of that was there the first year. I'm really excited to get it out there to readers. f

from THIS IS YOUR LIFE, HARRIET CHANCE!

November 4, 1936
(Harriet at zero)

Here you come, Harriet Nathan, tiny face pinched, eyes squinting fiercely against the glare of surgical lamps, at a newly renovated Swedish hospital high on Seattle's First Hill. It's an unseasonably chilly Wednesday in autumn, and the papers are calling for snow. Roosevelt by a landslide! they proclaim. Workers grumbling in Flint, Michigan! In Spain, a civil war rages.

Meanwhile, out in the corridor, your father paces the floor, shirtsleeves rolled to the elbow. Clutching an unlit Cuban cigar, he checks his wrist-watch. He's got a three-o'clock downtown.

By the end of the week, Harriet, you'll leave the hospital wrapped in a goose-down swaddler knit by your ailing grandmother. Your father will miss his three-o'clock today. But let's not get ahead of ourselves here. They don't call it labor for nothing. Let's not forget the grit and determination of your mother. All that panting and pushing, all that clenching and straining, eyes bulging, forehead slick with sweat. Let's take a moment to appreciate the fact that she won't begrudge you any of it, though you'll always be your father's girl. Here you come, better late than never: a face presentation. Not the boy your father so desperately wanted, but here you come, anyway, all six pounds three ounces of you. Button nose, conical head, good color. A swirl of dark hair atop your little crown. And a healthy pair of lungs, too.

Listen to you wail as the doctor slaps your fanny: your cries phlegmy and protracted. Hear them? These are virtually the last sounds you will utter until well after your second birthday.

Yes, Harriet, you were an exceptionally quiet child. Too quiet.

Exhibit A: December 31, 1936. For the rest of their lives, your parents will regale you, and anyone who will listen, with a rollicking story about a certain New Year's Eve party on the north end. The story involves a bassinet into which your father, in a moment of stoned clarity and admirable foresight, fastened you by your ankles and armpits for safety, using his own necktie and a leather belt from the host's closet. The party is a triumph, as the story goes, with Bacchus leading the charge. The music is brassy, the walls are thrumming. So frenzied the celebration, in fact, that amid their merrymaking, revelers fail to notice the upended bassinet in the corner. That is, until whiz kid Charlie Fitzsimmons, the firm's youngest partner, lipstick on his collar, ladies' underpants adorning the crown of his head, nearly trips on you on his way back from the punch bowl.

It will not be the last time Charlie Fitzsimmons takes notice of you. "Would you look at that glass of milk?" he shouts.

For an instant, the party is struck dumb as everyone turns their attention to the corner. Look at Harriman Nathan's girl!

"She'll make a hell of a judge," observes Charlie.

And of course, hilarity ensues. The story never fails, and you're the punch line, Harriet.

There you are, for God only knows how long, upside down, your poker face turning from red to blue to purple, your little gray eyes gazing impassively at the world, as your parents ring in a prosperous 1937.

You never made a peep.

This is your life, Harriet. The beginning, anyway.

August 11, 2015
(Harriet at seventy-eight)

Harriet finds Father Mullinix in his stuffy office behind the chapel, his reading glasses roosting halfway down the bridge of his nose, his laptop propped open in front of him.

He's on his feet before she can cross the threshold. "Harriet, you're shivering. Sit." He lowers her into a straight-backed chair. "My goodness, you're sopping wet."

"He's here, Father," she says. "I found his slippers this morning next to mine in the breakfast nook."

Father Mullinix smiles patiently, setting his big hands on the desktop. "We've talked about this several times recently, Harriet. There's but one ghost in the Bible, and we both know who that is."

"But last week, the WD-40. And now this."

Drawing a weary breath, Father Mullinix holds it in.

"You don't understand," says Harriet. "The WD-40, that was him, telling me to quiet those hinges on the dishwasher. He hated the squeaking."

Slowly, Father Mullinix releases his breath. Clapping his hands together on the desktop, he proceeds expertly in a measured tone.

"Perhaps it is possible he's trying to speak to you through God," he concedes. "But certainly I wouldn't take the WD-40 as a sign. Perhaps you left it there on the chair, a lapse in memory. It happens to me daily. Yesterday I found these very glasses in the pantry. We're all so busy in these times, so preoccupied. And you of all people, Harriet, you are so diligent in all things, particularly for someone of your... experience."

"But I know I didn't leave it there. And the slippers."

"Well, I'm sure there's an explanation."

"I saw him Father, I felt him. Last night, we were at the Continental Buffet. He was eating corned beef."

"Ah, I see. You've had another dream."

"I wasn't dreaming. He was an actual presence."

Father Mullinix smiles sadly, but Harriet can tell his patience is wearing thin. For months, she's been eating up his time, unloading her grief on him, bludgeoning him with the details of her dream life and, most recently, trying in vain to convince him that Bernard still lingered somehow in the earthly realm. Perhaps she was mistaken in confiding in him this time, though he'd never failed her in the past.

“Do you think I’m, oh, Father... you don’t think I’m...?” “I think, perhaps, you could use some rest, Harriet.”

“But Father, I assure you I’m—”

“Please, let me drive you home, Harriet.”

September 9, 1957
(Harriet at twenty)

Look at you, Harriet, a grown woman! No longer a glass of milk but a tall drink of water. Okay, not so tall. Maybe a little on the squat side, maybe a little pudgy, to hear your mother tell it. But your hygiene is fastidious, your bouffant is formidable. And you’re still quiet, which makes you popular among lawyers and men alike. But you’ve no time for men. You’re a professional. Marriage is one negotiation that can wait. First, your own apartment. An automobile. A promotion.

The sky is the limit!

Here you are, at Fourth and Union, top floor, just three months removed from your associate’s degree. And not your father’s firm, either. Sure, you had a push, a few advantages in life, but you got here on your own. No, you’ll never be a lawyer, but a crack legal assistant is not out of the question. You love your job. Okay, maybe love is a bit strong. But prepping documents, writing summaries, filing motions, all of it agrees with you. Look at you, downtown girl: chic but pragmatic. Shopping at Frederick & Nelson! Lunching at the Continental Buffet!

Let’s be honest, though. Let’s talk about the problem that has no name. All these months later, they’re still slapping your fanny around the office. Your salary doesn’t stretch that far. The work is exhausting. As both a woman and an assistant, you’re expected to work harder. And for what? A string of pearls? A sleek automobile? A slap on the can from a junior partner? It will be six more years before Friedan exposes the “feminine mystique,” twelve more before Yoko Ono proclaims woman as “the nigger of the world.” But by God, Harriet Nathan, you’re determined to buck your disadvantages. Okay, maybe

determined is a bit strong; how about resigned to them? The least you can do is achieve independence. Tackle adulthood on your own terms. Put that associate's degree to some purpose.

Make a name for yourself, Harriet Nathan.

The truth you're not telling anyone, especially not your father, is that amid the administrative whirlwind of the office, the hustle and bustle of downtown, the ceaseless tedium of legal research, you yearn for something less exhausting: for stability, predictability, and yes, a Christmas hearth festooned with stockings.

You yearn, too, Harriet, for a man. C'mon, admit it.

So, what is it about this new young building superintendent that catches your attention in the hallway upon your return from lunch, as he explains to your boss, in layman's terms even you can understand, the difference between AC and DC? Surely, it's not his stature. He's two inches shorter than you. And it turns out, he's not all that young, at thirty-three. There is, however, a squareness to his shoulders, a symmetry to his face, a quiet confidence in his bearing. Not just the firm, but the whole building—all that concrete and steel, all that electricity, all that plumbing—is reliant upon his capability. You're not alone. The whole office is impressed by his confidence, charmed by his forthrightness. Even the partners, those pompous autocrats, bulging at the waist, those experts who defer to no one, treat this man as an equal.

But here's the thing: tending an elevator, a fan, a heating duct, in his neatly creased work trousers, penlight clutched between his teeth, as he reaches for his tool belt, exposing the gray Semper Fi tattoo on his inside wrist, he strikes you as more than their equal.

Harriet Nathan, meet Bernard Chance, your valentine for 1957. ¶

ASHLEY WONG

PLACENTA

When I shadowed on a night shift
I watched a doctor draw
a placenta from a woman's body

and thump it into a blue plastic tub.
A flat stone, soft from the brine
of blood and water, a Christmas red.

It looked out of place
in that white space, those veins once hot
with life, slowly cooling. A familiar

trajectory—but how can you remove
something so substantial and still
be okay? The cavity within her body,

the emptiness of the organ.
We lose the things that used to be essential.
The flesh uses and discards,

hair by hair, the endless
fingernail clippings dispersed into the trash,
in a landfill somewhere. Easy to mourn.

Harder to journey down the bike path
and never return, to see only once
the reddish-brown horses on the left,

the pine masts stalling in black
water, the 7-Eleven lit up like a lantern,
evening siphoning sunlight from the sky,

to pedal through darkness
even when your heart is a cold flower,
drying out after an autumn rain.

CHELSEA WAGENAAR

LINEAGE: WONDERLIER BOWL

With the onset of the post-war “baby boom,” women dedicated themselves to caring for their growing families. The “Tupperized” kitchen was born... –tupperwarebrands.com

The bowls unstack like dolls: smallest, smaller, small.
Each one is birthed from the first one’s belly.
My sister, marvelous with drool, claps her baby hands,
reaches to hold an empty bowl.

Each one is birthed from the first one’s belly:
this makes two girls sisters.
I hold up an empty bowl:
light as cotton, milky clear. Unbreakable.

This makes two girls sisters:
to fill a body’s hidden hollow, to float there
light as cotton, milky clear. Unbreakable.
To empty a woman. To do this again.

To fill a small bowl’s hollow, hide a smaller there.
My sister, marvelous with drool, claps her baby hands
for me to empty each, to do this again.
The bowls unstack like dolls: smallest, smaller, small.

KATHRYN HUNT

KISS

That country not of childhood loss, torn fields, forests,
but the bedrock bliss-dark soundings of the body. You've been
gone these many months to sea, to Bristol Bay, Alaska,
and home tonight, ashore, we thrash, we pearl upstream, we were
almost young and river-bound as fish against the hurrying tide—
Do you remember? O kissed and kissing one, you sleepwalk
from my bed to picture window, our neighbors' roofs
your landlocked sea, not the flashing backs of sockeye salmon
in the bay, but the trace of headlights climbing up the hill from
graveyard shifts and secret hook-ups. In your emptied eyes the salmon
skirt around your aims, your arms haul full, three-fathom nets, keep safe
your faithful mates, fish tangled to their gills or gathering toward
the Egegik, that final run, fresh water in their salted blood, the net
that gathers all gives all away. You're safe at home tonight and kisses
carry us beyond ourselves. May the deep and hungry sea we swim
be a passage, our liberty, slick and bruised as salmon.

J.H. HALL

CHASING PARADISE, FINDING PAUL KINGSNORTH

I recently drove twenty-four hundred miles to leave a car near my new fishing camp in Montana, consuming over a hundred gallons of gas and leaving a giant carbon footprint in the process, and not for the first time either.

My original paradise was our family farm in the Northern Neck of Virginia: several hundred acres of land along the Chesapeake Bay, with fields of corn, soybeans and bobwhite quail; two miles of beach, a bay of fish, crabs, oysters and waterfowl. Since shortly after the Civil War, my father's family made its living there fishing and farming. In the 1950s and 1960s, it was still their place of work and my playground. In 1969, in the spirit of the times, I moved to the Pacific Northwest, another paradisiacal place, but the grandeur of the Olympics and Cascades, of Seattle and the Puget Sound could not compete with the tranquil beauty of the Chesapeake. Or at least could not compete with my memories of its tranquil beauty, because sadly, if predictably, when I returned "for good" in 1972, my original paradise was terribly diminished.

Literally there was less of it. The older generation was dying off, and the land itself was shrinking. The commercial fishing I so fondly remembered had virtually disappeared; disease was killing the oysters; farms were being sold and subdivided; lawns replaced fields; hedgerows—habitat for quail—were bulldozed; remaining fields were fertilized and poisoned with herbicides and pesticides. Pollution was killing the fish and aquatic grasses. It was the beginning of the end of a healthy Chesapeake. Over the next four decades, it has only gotten worse. Newcomers hardly notice the difference. To them it still looks beautiful. If you don't look below the surface and if you don't miss

the quail, it still is beautiful: gorgeous waterfront homes with long docks, large boats and plush, green lawns extending to the water's edge. The "highest and best use" of the land has converted one of the most fertile estuaries on earth into an idyllic desert.

In 2005 this same concept aided and abetted the development plans for the nearly nine hundred acres adjacent our Bluff Point property, half of which had to be rezoned from conservation to residential in order to accommodate the grandiose plans, which included dozens of building lots, a bayside hotel, two new freshwater ponds and a deep water marina. Equally grandiose plans portrayed high-tech revetments that would hold back the Bay against the rising sea and stabilize the rapidly eroding shoreline.

Tom Horton, one the Chesapeake's most thoughtful and eloquent observers, has stated convincingly that the Chesapeake will never recover until population growth in the watershed is checked. Which, sadly, is another way of saying that the Bay is doomed, because restricting growth violates the faith and fabric of America, of mankind. Self-restraint goes against the very grain of human nature. We reshape the earth in our image; we hold back the tides. The exceptions, those rare humans who managed to live within their and the planet's means, have been romanticized but never emulated. The rest of us march on in the name of "progress." While many profess a faith in a God, our true religion is faith in our own species, which makes sense if we were created in God's image. He has given His imprimatur to our egotism. Implicitly or explicitly we believe the best and brightest of our species will save us even from ourselves. Human creativity, in the form of technology, will come to our rescue, like the U.S. Cavalry, bugles blaring, guns blazing. After all, the internal combustion engine saved us from death by horse manure, and, yes, the same engines brought air pollution and acid rain, but surely someone or something will save us from those temporary inconveniences. The sky is *not* falling, but if it is, we'll tack it back up with technology.

Most of the Chesapeake's deterioration I observed from the safety of my new natural paradise in rural Maine, to which I had retreated

in 1975. I arrived just in time to witness the sad, slow, but ineluctable decline of Maine's natural world, especially its fisheries, fresh and salt. I love to fish, but, that aside, fish are a reasonable barometer of an environment's well-being. It is not farfetched to consider fish the earth's blood cells, its circulating corpuscles. A healthy fishery means healthy waters means healthy land and sky. That our poor earth suffers a near-fatal anemia is now common knowledge, but in the late 1970s it was not so obvious. True, Maine's Atlantic salmon were on the brink of extinction, and I squandered hundreds of dollars and many gallons of gasoline unsuccessfully pursuing what was left of them in Maine's downeast rivers. Then the price of gas went, not unlike the salmon, "out of sight," and I gave up. Yet our government still spends millions attempting to resuscitate this iconic species, while the rest of us eat farm-raised salmon, though we're told we shouldn't, because aquaculture pollutes the ocean and consumes food made from other fish. These warnings go unheeded, because, our behavior says, if we can farm fish and oysters, who cares about the health of oceans? A boat sails as gracefully upon a sterile sea as on a fertile one.

Maine's fresh-water fisheries have not fared much better than its anadromous ones, especially those inhabitants of its infertile, granite-lined streams. Brook trout need clean, cold water and they are gullible and delicious—a tragic combination of attributes. In the 1970s log drives down Maine rivers were ended in part, ironically, for environmental reasons. Log drives were messy and left rivers littered with wood. But the end of log drives meant more trucking, the building of new roads through the Maine woods, making remote streams more accessible. The DeLorme Atlas did the rest. Throw in acid rain, siltation and liberal catch-limits, and native brook trout never had a chance. Abundant, expensive hatchery fish conceal the ugly truth, same as a blood transfusion temporarily relieves anemia, but does not address the underlying cause.

Slowly but surely, bass are replacing trout in Maine, even in such legendary trout waters as the Rapid River and Moosehead Lake. I enjoy fishing for bass, but a bass is not a trout, and a pond is not

a river or a stream. There is magic and mystery in flowing waters; they are intricate, vibrant entities that excite, evoke and inspire. The principal charm of still-waters is that they tranquilize. They sooth and sedate. We sit beside a pond and drink or doze. A river summons us to action. And so on. Too much ink has already been expended on the glories of flowing water, though it's only logical that flowing water should inspire fluency.

According to my reading at the time, excellent stream fishing for trout still existed in the great American West, especially Montana. So in 1982 I parlayed a visit with the in-laws in Minnesota into solo fishing trip to Montana, and my fishing life was never the same. (Neither was the marriage, but that's another story) Rivers the size of those I fished in Maine, produced more and larger fish—rainbows, browns, cutthroats and hybrids. Though rivers are indeed magic, stream fertility is simple arithmetic: mineral-rich streams produce more diatoms, more plankton, more insects and, finally, more fish. Maine's barren, granite streambeds cannot compete with Montana's mineral-rich, uplifted sea beds or the deep, rich Renova formation that nourishes Montana's southwestern waters. In point of fact, when Maine landlocked salmon are transplanted to Argentina, geologically more like Montana, they grow two or three times the size they reach in Maine.

My first drive up the Bitterroot Valley was a revelation, because in 1982 the Bitterroot seemed, was, relatively unspoiled. The upper reaches, the West Fork in particular, provided solitude, great natural beauty and fish. I was immediately smitten and wanted to move there. I did not, but many others did, too many others. In retrospect, what must have been inevitable took me by surprise. Again.

Recently a Maine friend, after listening to me bemoan the sad fate of the Chesapeake, asked, "But whoever thought the Chesapeake would be a great fishery forever?"

"I did!" I said. "And you would've too, if you'd seen what I did as a boy."

I saw pound-nets full of fish—spot, croaker, trout, rock and crabs. I saw the bay’s horizon smoky with flocks of ducks. Spring evenings would bring the whistling of bob-whites from practically every field. Come fall, of course, they’d be harder to locate, but I never thought I’d see them disappear. Who did? None of my cousins or uncles or great uncles warned me that one day soon this would all be gone. “Natural cycles” always accounted for Chesapeake’s ups and downs. Even now some people say it and with a straight face.

So I probably should not have been surprised by what happened to the Bitterroot, but I was, because this wasn’t Paradise Valley or the Madison Valley. This was the Bitterroot, a second tier river in those days. Not any more. Now there are cedar-sided trophy homes, more businesses, more fishermen, more drift-boats and finally an asphalt bike trail beside the main road. My favorite pull-out on the West Fork is now paved. In 2005, the Bitterroot Valley became the subject of the first chapter of Jared Diamond’s *Collapse, How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*. He too had visited the Bitterroot Valley unprepared for its grandeur. He too witnessed the population explosion and the transition of the Bitterroot River from pristine to “impaired stream” status due to erosion, road construction, fires, logging and fertilizer runoff. But he too still loves the place and still visits, because, like the Chesapeake, like Maine, even a diminished, altered, Bitterroot is still beautiful.

Nowadays I find myself drawn to Montana’s smaller streams, its higher elevations and headwaters. They remind me of Maine in the 1970s, and the Ruby Valley, my most recent Montana crush, reminds me of the Bitterroot in the 1980s. Now that I’m older, everything reminds me of something; every “discovery” is a cautionary tale: do not get too attached to a place. It won’t last. On other hand—the corollary—you won’t last either; so go ahead and get attached. In the case of me and the Ruby Valley, it’s too late anyway, we’re already an item. I am too enchanted by the size of its river—too small for most drift boats—and the ratio of abandoned buildings to trophy homes, the pace of life in the little towns of Alder, Laurin and Sheridan,

the friendliness of the people, the accessible small tributaries of the upper Ruby, and the perfectly adequate, if not mind-boggling, fishing. It corresponds to my vision, or, perhaps, my memory of paradise. Paradise is not bustling; it is not over-built, and it contains fish.

Last fall I bought a small, log cabin near Sheridan, bought it from the Lillys, one of the most famous families in Montana fly-fishing history. They say that real estate is all about location, but provenance counts too, and ambience: rod-racks on the outside walls, fly-fishing memorabilia on the inside—carved fish, cane rods, collectible flies. Because the cabin sometimes housed overflow from the Lilly’s nearby fishing lodge, the grounds were immaculate with an underground watering system, lush green lawn, mulched flower-beds, ornamental trees and shrubs. Because it is Montana, noxious weed suppression is required by law. Because I am the newcomer, I don’t plan to change a thing.

In the spring of 2014, I drove out to leave my “fishing car,” which meant, of course, I’d bought another car for Maine. Riding out, I heard a portion of National Public Radio’s “All Things Considered,” a program that is dear my heart, because I once read an essay—about fishing, of course— on that program. The subject of this edition was Paul Kingsnorth, who, it turns out, is a rather well-known English writer and environmentalist, or former environmentalist. He is an apostate; he has lost his faith. Kingsnorth’s pessimism runs deeper than even Tom Horton’s. Kingsnorth is convinced we’ve already done irreversible damage to our environment, that it’s too late to save it, to save us, and that we ought not to pretend otherwise. And furthermore there’s not much point in trying to do anything about it now, though he still involves himself in small local projects and, I’ve since read, that under pressure, he has slightly modified his nihilistic position, but not by much.

Later I read his *Dark Mountain Manifesto*, a title derived from a Robinson Jeffers’ poem. The *Dark Mountain Manifesto* is chock full of bleak, indisputable axioms such as, “Humans are not the point and purpose of the planet” and “The end of the world as we know it is not

the end of the world...” and so on, including a section on the “myth of progress.” Our downfall came when we humans considered ourselves apart *from*, rather than a part *of*, nature. To that charge, I plead innocent. I never saw my need to fish as other than an expression of my essential predatory instincts, a vestigial memory of the “hunter-gatherer” days, not evolutionarily all that long ago. My reaction to fish is biologic, a surge of adrenaline, deep-seated excitement, as deeply seated as the need for sex or food. It is not my fault that this reaction has outlived its evolutionary usefulness. I am in some ways the passive vessel of this need, the victim.

Looked at that way, though I was driving to Montana, I was also driven. I was in retreat, same as glaciers and the mountain goats or the coastline, because climate change and other factors had destroyed decent stream fishing in Maine. Granted my situation wasn’t life or death, but to me it was important. If staying home and settling for worse fishing would have made a significant, demonstrable difference to the planet, I would have stayed home. In that sense, by saying it was too late, Paul Kingsnorth let me off the hook.

My reaction reminded me of the fishermen in a famous Gary Larson cartoon: sitting in their little boat in the middle of a pond, two typically rotund, long-nosed, Larson-esque characters look up to see mushroom clouds on the horizon. One fisherman says to the other, “I’ll tell you what it means, Norm... no size restrictions and to hell with the limit.”

Well, I wouldn’t take it out on the resource; I wouldn’t punish the fish—I practice catch and release (for selfish reasons, I might catch them again)—but I do understand the concept of fishing “like there’s no tomorrow.”

Jared Diamond puts a slightly more palatable spin on this phenomenon, which he places in the category of the “Tragedy of the Commons:” If I don’t consume the last of the resource, be it oil, water or fish, then someone else will. He considers it a rational, if perhaps not admirable, response. Diamond even finds some grounds for optimism for our planet and our species—which optimism I found

even more discouraging than Paul Kingsnorth's dire predictions, because Diamond's optimism requires "political will," "long-term thinking," and "painful discussions about values," in other words—though Diamond doesn't say it—optimism requires a fundamental change in human nature. If one thing is clear, it's that long-term thinking and painful discussions about values are not our strong suits, and they do not win elections. Diamond's book was published in 2005, which means his research came even earlier. If anything has happened in the last decade to justify environmental optimism, I missed it.

In Montana, glaciers are shrinking, native cutthroat trout and grayling populations are in decline, and non-native smallmouth bass are advancing up the Yellowstone River. No doubt my new paradise is headed for hard times. And I'm not helping it, except short-term, by bringing a few dollars to the state. I contribute to the economy—precisely the sort of thinking that got us where we are today. But locally it lets me off the hook. Determined to be a good neighbor, I will keep a neat lawn, suppress my noxious weeds and release my fish. And when it all crashes down, I'll be extinct. When I was younger and my children took no interest in fishing, I was sorry, but now I am glad. It's the grandchildren I worry about.

Because my children have no recollection of the Chesapeake Bay in the 1950s and 1960s, and because they did not care for fishing and hunting, they never noticed what was missing. There was beach, water, boating and golf, and it was beautiful. We tend to accept the world we are born into as how the world is, was and shall be, and we live accordingly. And then we die. Probably if we lived longer, say, two hundred years instead of sometimes one, we'd live differently. We'd have to. But now we don't.

One silver lining to this sad scenario is this: because the Chesapeake's shoreline has changed so radically and so obviously and so fast, it no longer makes even short-term economic sense to erect elaborate structures such as hotels, houses, and marinas, near its beaches. The massive Bluff Point development project, eight years

in the planning, was recently abandoned. Some land was donated to a university, and the rest was placed in a conservation easement. It is one of the first examples I've seen where changes in the natural world overtook and essentially subdued a man's vanity. Even if, as Kingsnorth says, it is all late, there is something gratifying about this one surrender. Even if it only means Bluff Point will now die a more natural death—man and his pollutants being part of nature—that is still preferable to seeing it butchered and sold off in pieces. f

Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2005, 2011) 25-76.

Tom Horton, "Growing! Growing! Gone! The Chesapeake Bay and the Myth of Endless Growth." <http://www.abell.org>. (August 2008).

Tom Horton, "Ignoring Growth Won't Make it Go Away, Nor Restore the Chesapeake," *Bay Journal*, June 2014.

Paul Kingsnorth and Dougald Hine, *Dark Mountain Manifesto*, <http://dark-mountain.net/about/manifesto/>

CODY ERNST

AUTOPSY

I look into the corpse's eyes, and there, I see men tossing fish to each other.
I see an octopus

being wrestled from a human hand. Every year, books are printed
with instructions on how to swim,

and we sink anyway. We drown. What are the odds that a man cannot float?
That the air rejects him? That gravity's weight turns him into a
diamond?

What are the odds that god exists? And that there are holes on earth
big enough to be oceans? At the morgue where the corpse is deposited,

men walk sideways like crabs, sliding bodies in and out of the refrigerator.
Good heavens, the men say, these corpses contain air, light, and
free space.

M. ANN HULL

TAKING ROSENHAN'S TOUR OF THE PAIN MUSEUM

Because the girl loved the father who hit and the mother who hurt, she came to hate the house. Its windows told her *empty*, its doors *hollow*, its walls *thud*. She told Dr. Rosenhan she “would like to take a tour of the pain museum,” but he said that wasn’t appropriate; it should be called *institution*. She said, “Because I love the father who hits and the mother who hurts, I’ve come to hate the house.” He said it had to do with attribution: she felt the father hitting and the mother hurting because the windows were kept so clean, the doors closed so tight. She said it was because “she heard the walls thudding with her mother’s body.” The other doctors gave her an admission ticket stamped *schizophrenic*. She walked the clean, white corridors and said she felt “contained.” The other doctors told her her “mind was containing itself, and here in a closing house, she’d interpret every window frame as a set of bars.” The clean, white corridors were hung with paintings painted by other painful people. In one, a man tried and tried to bite the scabs pretending to be his own white teeth. In one, a woman was scratching at her wrists to release the woman underneath. Mosaics of pills were glued around the frames—purple to cure the itching of the brain, yellow to soothe the phantom pain in a scalp where every hair had been twitched out. The girl wrote to herself to remind herself she was capable of writing to herself, whatever the doctors said. A nurse said the *letter behavior* was *pathological*. The girl heard the echo of *illogical*, *illogical* until it thudded against her mother who wrote to her to say, “It’s been nineteen days. The tour has gone long enough.” But the mother stayed married for seventeen years, and the girl wasn’t sure she was sane yet. The doctors weren’t even sure she was sane. In the basement of the house she hated, millipedes

had multiplied their legs and skittered closer to where the family had sat by the fireplace. Even after she left, she remembered the kindling looked like it was made from painful painting frames. The fire looked like orange pills melting.

M. ANN HULL

THE BEAR'S ARMS WERE OPEN WIDE

Because I'd been good, Mother attached
a teddy bear light switch to my wall, said
he'd look out for me when I was asleep.

You sat, Father, in your constant seat,
the next room over, television eyes always
tied to light. I didn't know better but

to wake then rapidly dream. I was good,
had a bed my mind could make a boat.
It was the summer Sister said I wouldn't

stop sleeping. Her door had a starlet's silver
star I couldn't stop seeing even with eyes
closed. With the bear's face flicked to dark,

I watched my Mother, lit in hallway light,
waiting for a cloud to break to set the moon
face free. Father, there were streams

of shows you watched but didn't see.
You barely lifted a lid to Mother, Sister. I
couldn't see or hear the waves but could

pretend all day that they were there. I was
good, could drift like driftwood. Sister
said I needed feet on the ground, a dream

set in real life. A silver starlet's star would
put her on the screen. Flicked on like a tv,
the bear scared off static. Like Mother,

the clock ticked soundlessly underneath.
From the living room, Father, where you lived,
or so it seemed, you couldn't see the panes

press deep in frames as if between bars.
I was good, could drift. On the floor,
toys were rocks I'd hop to if I needed

the bathroom. I locked the door like I'd
been told to, washed my hands in waves.
Sister turned off the faucets as she'd been

taught, too. She was older, went to bed
after me, but lay dreamless like learning
there was no leaving. Mother must've

learned this with each of our births and
you, who seemed so lonely around us. Once,
I had sat down in your lap and you had

locked your arms around me. I was caught,
and even Mother's bear wouldn't watch.
Father, when your hands didn't unclench,

my chest clicked closed like Sister's door.
I can't remember all Mother must've said
when I told her. I know she said, *don't*

sit there. I don't think I was sleeping, though
Sister said we all were. No one watched
as I raised waves, then let them go.

DESPOT

The tomato seedlings daily grow higher and I don't have the heart to tell them I'm no gardener, crushing cigarettes into dead leaves. I plant the filters with shaking hands, nails worried to their beds. How are any of us to bear what we create? It's almost Mother's Day, and I want to tell you that I find all this blooming tyrannical. The insistence of white petals I can't name. You can't stop pulling at my mouth. *In the beginning*, you said, *clowns were always sad*, and this was the funny part. To discuss great finalities, the bottom lines, we begin with *At the end of the day...* It is the golden hour. Let's not mention the length of the shadows, the garden's weeds looming, lion-headed as the inevitable sunrise over another day without you. From the refrigerator I retrieve a bowl of store-bought cherry tomatoes and stand before the mirror, holding one in front of my nose and it's funny. I sob and sob. I am practicing.

A QUICK FIASCO

Eddie was late, weaving through the rally towards us, a plastic headlamp strapped to his forehead so that his swivelling neck threw a spotlight first over me, and then over Shaz, the pair of us shoving and batting a clipboard between us as if it were a court summons.

“Just fucking take it, Conn,” she was snapping, when Ed interrupted: “Conn, mate, I’m in serious trouble here.”

Shaz swung round to survey him. “Oh, for Christ’s sake,” she said, “he’s half cut already! You two are meant to be helping!”

“Oy,” I went, “we are helping.” Eddie blinked at me. Unstrapped the lamp. So, he was a little ragged: a late-night pallor about the cheeks, though it wasn’t quite eight; the eyes puffy; the breath and suit jacket smelling of lager and garlic. All the same: “We’re here, aren’t we?” I said. “That’s all I promised—that we’d, like, be here. And I have been helping.”

All month I’d been littering the city with her flyers, slapping posters in the windows of the shops I’d been fitting, thumbing stickers onto bus shelters and lampposts. And here we were—here we all were, thousands of punters, the grunts and the flakes, workers and union leaders, all decked with fairy lights, toting ukuleles and rallying for LIGHTS OUT, an overnight march through the city and its suburbs, a revolutionary demo, and all of it organized, headed up, dreamt up by my wife. Shaz was the deputy Union head, the fixer—not me. I didn’t want to thrust opinion polls at strangers; I didn’t want to belt out slogans. I’d said I’d walk; I’d said I’d round up support, and so here was Eddie; I hadn’t banked on fucking clipboards.

“Chicken,” I said, “listen. You’re strung out—”

Her lips retracted. Shoulders tensed. “Don’t you chicken me—”

I cupped a hand to my ear, pseudo-helplessly. Shouting, whistles, Marley on the PA, a tinny, exhausted beat, and, now, one of Shaz's co-agitators—Steve something, goatee, corduroy—was on the P.A., drowning her out. He'd clambered onto the makeshift two-by-four stage at the front of the Sainsbury's carpark and was bellowing into the loudspeaker: "Whose city?"

The mob bawled back, "Our city!"

Shaz was going, "—need to know who's here, don't I? It's a bloody opinion poll, Conn, it's just tick-boxes, you just hold it out. I mean, you could at least pretend you give a shit—Jesus!" Her phone had started to bleat. "What? Oh, Terry. Yes, yes, of course—" Handset pressed to her face, she thrust the sheaf of petitions at me, the clipboard's sharp corner a mean gut-jab. Stupidly, I grabbed it—and she was off.

Eddie was saying, "—like, properly fucked, Conn."

"Yeah," I muttered, "fucked, right."

I was thinking, screw her, my heart jerking maniacally. Up on stage, Union Steve had given way to a man in pink Lycra demonstrating warm-up exercises. Everybody around me was doing callisthenics: pensioners side-stepping, a fat white man in luminous cycling gear wagging his chubby arms and legs, pulling his ankles up behind him, one by one, legs quivering like a tanked-up flamingo, his gut slopping. Screw her. We'd reached this bewildering point, Shaz and me, where tenderness had flipped into resentment. Nights after work, I'd get back from Eddie's, and she'd be sitting up scrutinizing pension disputes or the minutiae of the anti-discrimination employment laws; we'd sidle past each other in silence. I didn't know what I ought to be doing about it, or if I ought to be doing anything about it at all. She still had that same sweet curve, the slender hands and the dirty smile, but she was strung tight as catgut, and it made my eyes water.

"I mean, what am I supposed to do," Eddie went, "smash the bloody door in and get down on my knees?"

I looked at him. "Smash the door in? What?"

"Jesus," he said, "are you even listening? Emily's—kicked—me—out."

“Like fuck, she has. What’ve you done?”

“Nothing!” He scowled. “Or, well, nothing new.” A pause. “Paulette, like, called her up.”

“And—”

“And! And what do you think, and.”

“Ah,” I said, “right.”

Paulette was Eddie’s sister-in-law—his wife, Emily’s, sister—and, about a year back, he’d fucked her. I’d found them pawing drunkenly at each other in the corridor of our local snooker club, their clothes all rucked up, her damp hair sticking to his wet mouth. I’d steered Ed, wobbling, home, Paulette had fled back to London, and they hadn’t seen each other since. Emily had classed the radio-silence from Paulette’s Acton flat as further evidence of her sister’s general fecklessness, and while Eddie’s guilt had left him shifty, it wasn’t a shiftiness you’d easily distinguish from his typical irritability.

“So,” he said, “it’s like, she’s in therapy. And she’s exorcising her demons, or whatever, so she decides to confess. Em hears her out, you know, and hangs up. She calls me at work, and man, she’s screaming. Fuck this, fuck that, she’s changing the locks—the works.”

“Shit.”

“I’m all, I’m sorry, love, I’m sorry, but she’s going, this is it, you prick! Can you believe it? You’re out, she says.”

“Well—”

“She says she’s waking up. She says if I show my face she’ll have my balls. I mean, it’s my house, man! Can you fucking believe it?” His breath was thick with hops and misery.

“Uh.” I plucked at the crotch of my trousers. Re-knotted the drawstring. “Well. It’s not like you, you know, did nothing.”

“Fuck you! It was a mistake! It was eleven months ago!”

“I know, like, but still—”

“Fuck you,” he said, but then he was silent for a minute. “Oh Jesus, Conn, whatever. I apologised, is the thing—I kept on apologising, and she’s not listening, is she?”

“I know, but—hang on, man.”

On stage, the aerobics guru was jumping down; a woman wearing a sandwich board that read MARSHAL snatched up the megaphone and started shouting instructions: “Joggers LEFT, walkers RIGHT, nobody PUSH—”

Not a chance was I jogging. I elbowed Eddie towards the walkers, and we were funnelled through a large cardboard archway made of protest banners stapled together—NO IFS! NO BUTS! NO PUBLIC SERVICE CUTS!—to meet another marshal, who signalled everyone west onto Liverpool Street. In the sallow November streetlight, Eddie looked doleful, older than his forty-three years, hoary and exhausted.

“So,” I said, finally, “you think she means it? She’s really kicked you out?”

He shrugged. “Sounds like it.”

“And, what, you thought, I know, I’ll go ponce about on a fucking demo instead of going home and finding out?”

He laughed. A harrumphing, phlegmy snort. “I have to think, mate, don’t I? I have to get my head together.”

We walked on a few paces. Crossed a junction, fell into the long shade of the Industry museum. I thought about Emily. Eventually I said, “I could go over. If you like. Talk to her.”

“You? What good would that do?”

I shrugged. “Well. It’s only—is she all right, do you think?”

He looked at me. “Is she all right?”

“Well. Yeah.”

“Jesus, Conn!”

“No,” I said, flushing, “I just mean, if she’s that upset, maybe she needs somebody to, like, talk her down. Or whatever.”

“And that somebody’s you?”

“Well—”

“Listen to me, you fat fuck.”

He’d stopped walking. I stopped, too. Uneasy. The other protesters grumbled at us—a panting, flabby, trembling roadblock, a mere five hundred yards past the starting line.

Eddie squinted at me. “You actually think I’m making excuses to your missus so that you can fuck off home? Sorry, Shaz, he’s taken up crisis counselling—didn’t he say?”

I relaxed. “Right. Okay.”

“Worry about your own marriage. Yeah? Never mind mine, fucking calamity that it is.”

“I said, okay.”

“I need to think. She needs to calm down, I need to think. All right? And you need to be a mate, and shut the fuck up.” He unzipped his backpack. I glimpsed eight, or twelve, or maybe sixteen cans of assorted supermarket-branded lagers and ciders. He peeled two open, passed me one, re-zipped the bag and shouldered it. We drank. Solidarity. “I love her,” he said. “That’s all it is. That’s all it fucking ever is.”

*

Salford-bound. We traipsed out through a drift of discarded complimentary foil emergency blankets in their transparent plastic wrappers, dead jellyfish on the depthless tarmac. Yellow street-lamps picking out the corpses as the shadow of the Imperial War Museum North slowly impaled us.

Fat fuck, I thought, hypocritical bastard. At least I got out and about, up ladders, ripping off baseboards. Eddie was propped on his haunches all day, selling train tickets at Cleaverton Station—all he ever did to get his blood circulating was shuffle stiffly to the vending machine on the Stockport platform. Plus, he lashed his meals with grease—rashers and colcannon, buttery eggs—oh, and Christ! I recalled, with a nauseating lurch, that slithery concoction, goody, as he called it, his grandmother’s legacy: a slushy, sickly layering of bread and sugar and scalding milk that he spooned from a mug for his breakfast. Eddie lugged ill health about like rancid blubber. He had an ulcer, asthma, and irritable bowels—at forty-three! I didn’t know how Emily stood it. When I imagined them fucking, he was crotchety

as a camel in that narrow old house, dry and resentful in the dark. I touched my belly. My bulk wasn't a sign of an oily, fatty diet, or laziness, or disease: it was natural. An under-appreciated bulwark. I caressed my paunch. It meant I was reliable. Appealingly regular. Tolerable, at least, no matter what Shaz might say, because, unlike Eddie, I'd fucked nobody's sister, accidentally or otherwise. I was a fucking boulder. Meanwhile he blundered on, pale under the alcohol-induced rosiness, his shirt collar dark with sweat, looking miserable and so ridiculously ill-equipped for a long hike that I felt abruptly guilty, and angrier than ever with Shaz. I tried to match my pace to his, to stop scowling.

By mile seven, though, I'd lost interest in Ed's desolation. The anti-capitalists were going for it—

“TORIES, TORIES, BIG FAT CATS,
THEY'VE TAKEN ALL OUR MONEY
AND WE WANT IT BACK!”

—and I was suffering my own torments. Throbbing feet, stiff shoulders, roiling stomach cramps: when we reached the first pit stop, and Eddie crashed to the ground with a wordless cry of relief, I pitched myself, almost weeping, into the nearest PortaLoo queue, which was shuffling forward in piddling, aching inches. When I finally gained access to the poky little cubicle, my dinner reappeared in painful liquid spurts—baked beans, a puréed Gregg's cream cake. I sat there as long as I could, despite the smell and the rough plastic seat, ignoring the pounding and griping from the other desperados outside. When I finally stood to go, my knees had trouble regaining the vertical and my face looked terrible in the little wall-mirror, in the khaki half-light: zombie, I thought, sicko. Well, Eddie looked worse: I found him where he'd slumped on the muddy verge, glowering at his mobile phone, his fingers mashing the keypad.

“It's too fucking cold for this shit.”

“Do you want me to do it?”

“No! Yes—just, redial, can you?” He stared over my shoulder at the little screen as I hit the call button twice. His face was cast in a sickly

lime glow. The screen said EMILY, but she didn't pick up. I could hear the electronic purr as it rang and rang and finally the message as it clicked through to voicemail.

"This is Emily Hamilton; I'm not here right now—"

"Fuck! Stupid, goddamn, fucking useless machines!"

"Ed—" I began, but he'd already stood up; he flung the phone to the ground, onto the hard concrete surface of the Stretford carpark, and stamped upon it. The plastic casing cracked and the screen splintered and went dark. Eddie kicked the phone and it skittered along the ground, the battery falling out, the winking shards of glass from the screen scattering, the ruined machine landing under the carriage of the chip-van parked beside the temporary septic tank.

"Uh," I said. He was breathing very hard. "So, I, uh—that's her maiden name, is it?"

"What do you think?"

There was a short silence, broken by Shaz calling out, "Conn! Conn!"

Checking up on me, hands on her hips. Baggy-eyed with fatigue, but with a caffeinated edge to her voice, she went, "So? Let's see how it's going."

"How it's—?" I frowned, realizing a second too late that I'd misplaced her precious clipboard. Dropped it, laid it down, thrust it at some eco-warrior mutineer and then sloped off—I had no idea. "Uh—"

Drained as she was, my wife still had enough energy left to get crabby. "Christ," she exclaimed, "why do I ever expect anything else?"

"Oh, here we go! Everything's always my fault."

"But this is your fault! I need tonight to go well, Conn, I need the bloody paperwork! I've worked like a fucking navy all year—"

"Don't I know it! Can't do this, can't do that, be quiet—that's all I've heard for months!"

"Oh, yeah?" She folded her arms. "Well, I'm surprised you can hear anything at all from right the way down the road in his fucking wife's kitchen."

“What?” I glanced quickly at Eddie. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You know exactly—”

“Um, Sharon? Terry’s here!” A flustered volunteer in a skin-tight denim jacket, a man’s flat cap and a pair of oversized empty glasses-frames stood before us. “We can’t, like, keep her waiting.”

“Just a minute, Izzy,” Shaz snapped. She jabbed an unsteady finger at me. Biro stains and hangnails. “You’re pathetic. You know that?”

“I’m pathetic?”

“Yes. Yes. And you know what? I don’t have time to deal with this right now. Izzy? Izzy!” She stalked away, past the PortaLoos, marshals nodding at her, Izzy and the whole dewy-eyed, glow-in-the-dark, save-the-world brigade tripping along after her like Hamelin rats.

I wheeled around and bore down upon Eddie—still grinding his teeth, his chest heaving—and snarled, “So are we getting a fucking move on, then, or what?”

*

Eight miles, then. Nine. Ten. Hours. Eddie refused to stop, to go home, and each step taunted my strained ligaments. I could barely stagger. The city—Manchester, my home—was nothing but a filthy, great, rucked-up carpet littered with trip-hazards to cripple me. I was shaking with cold and I wanted to vomit; I kept picturing silted-up, overworked arteries, wilting hearts contracting violently before cutting out, bulwark or not, and there were more than fifteen miles yet to go. Hauling myself from pothole to streetlamp, not for Shaz’s sake, but for Eddie’s, when, if he weren’t such an obstinate fucking lump, I could be at Emily’s side right now, instead of making soft, involuntary little noises of protest as the road tipped nastily up past the universities and towards the Manchester Royal Infirmary—

I folded away all thoughts of his wife—his beautiful fucking wife—and said, weakly, “Ed, man—it’s magic taxi time, hey?”

The hospital was where we'd first become mates. Eddie and me. Not because of illness or accident, but because of pure old tottering inebriation and near arrest.

"Ed," I repeated, "man. Look."

"Huh?" He looked at me blankly before the Victorian façade of the old Women's Wing registered with him, and then he went, "Heh! You're over the fucking rainbow, mate!"

It was seven years ago. No, eight—we'd just moved to Cleaverton. I'd nailed the contract for an Urban Splash development in Ancoats, Shaz was expanding the union membership base like bellows on a water balloon, and the mean Crumpsall rentals were behind us. New house and a new car: we used to run it up to the Lakes for dirty weekends, Windermere, screw on floral bedspreads in B&Bs with views of the Langdale Pikes. One day, then, I'd had a downswing—two sparks hadn't showed, a big invoice was overdue, and Shaz refused to skip out on some bullshit hearing to spot me a sympathy pint. So I'd said, fuck you, and I'd gone instead, alone, to a matinee screening of *The Wizard of Oz*. The multiplex on Peter Street used to run these showings of classic talkies aimed at pensioners, cups of tea thrown in and little three-packs of bourbon creams. Judy Garland, Frank Morgan, a gobful of biscuits? Sorted. Only one other punter had been loitering in the foyer that day: this balding, tubby, sheepish bloke, hands shoved deep in his pockets, muttering or humming to himself until he caught my eye.

"Merry old land of Oz, eh," he'd said, with an embarrassed guffaw, and then he'd frowned at me and his face bloomed scarlet. "Hey—Conor, isn't it? From Cleaverton? On Lasseter?"

I'd frowned back. "Uh," I'd said. "Conn, actually." His features shifted slowly from idler to neighbour. "Ed, right?"

"Yeah! Yeah. Number sixty-three."

We'd shaken sweaty hands. I didn't know what else to say. I remembered thinking that it wasn't, like, dignified: two grown men, *The Wizard of Oz*.

Then Eddie had said, in a rush, “I mean, but, wouldn’t you fucking love to go to Oz? I would. Magic. Snap your fingers. Imagine it. No worries at all. Whatever your heart desired.”

I’d nodded. “Roast beef every Tuesday.”

“Three-ply bog roll with pictures on it in the downstairs loo.”

“Fuck it,” I’d said, “we’d put in a downstairs loo.”

We’d skipped the movie and gotten plastered at the foyer bar, and then stumbled down to the Portland Street McDonald’s to invest in a brace of nine-piece Chicken McNugget boxes to scoff on the bus home—we weren’t simpletons, we valued our rations. Upstairs on the 197, traversing the Grosvenor Street-Oxford Road junction, Eddie had stuck his head out over the stairwell, retched hard, and brought up half a hen’s worth of masticated chunks of battered processed meat all over the Stagecoach ticket inspector. Booted off, stranded, stinking and giddy, we’d stomped through the infirmary grounds arm-in-arm, bellowing, “Because, because, because, BECAUSE, BECAUSE—”

I remember straddling an abandoned gurney in the staff carpark and egging him on as he tried to wrench open the back door of an ambulance; the pair of us, middle-aged, screeching abuse at this befuddled young paramedic: “Open the taxi! The magic fucking taxi, see? We’ve got monkeys! We’ve got flying—fucking—monkeys!”

“I hate hospitals,” said Eddie, now, morosely. “And doctors. You know Em’s Da’s a GP? Christmas round theirs—it’s brutal. Nothing but bowel movement analysis and yoga. Yoga.”

“I’m only trying to—”

“They never liked me. Shower of miserable Brummies.”

“—cheer you up.”

“Yeah?” He scoffed. “What are you, Marty Mc-bloody-Fly?” He sighed. “Fuck it, Conn, maybe you should talk to her. I don’t know. She likes you. Or, at least, she’s not threatening to castrate you, anyway.” He paused, doubled over with his hands on his thighs, coughed, and spat a thick clog of phlegm onto the footpath, then straightened to resume his pained, uneven stride.

I followed at a slight distance. She liked me? Emily Brown liked me. I was sore, my heels and ankles and little toes blistering and the back of my throat near raw, but I felt buoyed, the beneficiary of an unlikely gush of optimism and energy. I craved a drink—a toast!—but we’d finished the last of Eddie’s cans as we’d passed the crater once occupied by the BBC studios. Now, though, on the cusp of Rusholme, I recognised a narrow ginnel between two falafel joints.

I trotted faster and caught Eddie by the elbow.

“Here,” I said, “I’ll spot you,” and I led him through to a dilapidated run of shops opposite a terrace of student houses. A late-night pharmacy, a shuttered newsagents, and—ta da!—a poorly stocked off-license. I spent the last of my week’s wages on two more six-packs and a packet of Fox’s Glacier Mints.

“Look,” said Eddie when I came out. “It’s an omen.” He was staring up at the newsagent’s blinking neon sign and swaying ever so slightly. The pink tubing spelled out C L O S E D, but the timer was stuttering so that C D alternated sluggishly with L O S E.

“See?” he said. “I’m fucked. It’s written.”

“You’re a cretin,” I said.

I cracked open a tin each and we drank.

*

We drank and we moved; we moved and we drank; we reeled along after the rest of the demo’s stragglers, through Fallowfield, through Withington, the night sky bobbing overhead like the underside of a great, speckled whale. We drank as we tottered down the Curry Mile, through a foggy tunnel of grilled mutton, batter and lard, paneer, jellied sweets, turmeric. And the more we drank, the more blubberingly affectionate we became:

“You know I fucking love you,” said Eddie, “you worthless cunt.”

“Course you do, you useless prick.” I felt a surge of violent, guilty endearment for him and his trundling moves: the bandy stride, like a bantam chicken’s, sneaky and darting despite the heft of him and

the expansive torso; those scrawny arms and legs; and his stewed, cockeyed posture—

“Stop it!” he said. “What’s so fucking funny? Conn?”

My chuckle turned into a spluttering, choking wheeze. “Nothing!” I croaked.

But, quick as that, the mood had shifted: Eddie became jumpy and fearful; he kept patting his pockets before he’d remember what he’d done with his phone; he lapsed into a sullen silence. For a while, though—if for me alone—boozy farce prevailed: the curbs kept springing up to threaten us with collapse, and, as in a video game, I kept foiling them. I was Super Mario and greasy-haired Eddie was Luigi: while I stayed upright, he went down hard, twice, three times. He’d stripped off his jacket and his thin shirt, and the thermal vest underneath was a sodden ruck of cotton and perspiration. I could see the slickness of his skin and where his flabby upper arms were damp, both elbows grazed from the falls. He refused, sullenly, to put the jacket on, and finally my patience curdled.

“Right!” I halted beside the payphone at the junction where the redeveloped confusion of Wilmslow Road hitched itself to the better-heeled Palatine Road: “Give us fifty pee to call a cab—I’m bringing you home.”

“No! You fuck.” He grabbed my arm—I shoved him back and he lurched sideways over the bonnet of an idling Toyota Yaris, landing, winded, on his knees in the drain, while the poor driver gobbled like a barbed fish behind her windscreen.

“For God’s sake,” I said. “you think Emily wants some dirty prick who’s just crawled out of the bloody gutter?”

“Would you shut the fuck up?” he said, panting. “Like you know what she wants!” He was slurring badly, and wobbling as he got to his feet, but he was away again as soon as he was up, striding across the road with an ugly slopping hobble, the flab bouncing over the rim of his slacks as he tilted towards the upcoming footpath and careered blindly down Palatine.

“Eddie,” I yelled, “come on,” but he didn’t look back: “Edward Philip Brown,” I roared, “do you think I’m running after you?”

But of course I ran after him: Emily would hardly continue to like me, I reasoned, if I let her husband—estranged or otherwise—fall in front of a lorry. So I lumbered as fast as I could in his backwash, rapidly sobering, head down, mindful of the terrain—rickety paving slabs, whorls of dogshit, shallow pools of rainwater that might well be urine—fearful of mishap and paying little heed to the scene directly ahead of me, until I rear-ended Eddie and almost brought the pair of us down to the deck.

He was scrabbling with the flies of his trousers.

“What are you doing?” I demanded.

“Need a piss, don’t I? Doesn’t that suit you?”

“Not out here, it doesn’t!” We weren’t in Fallowfield any more: this was deepest Didsbury, gargantuan pillar-fronted houses looming over us like Imax 3D-film effects, arc-lit lawns flush as green paint.

“Suit yourself,” said Eddie, and he placed his hands flat on the closest garden wall, a hip-height, mossy, granite fortification, and heaved himself, with a protracted, heroic grunt, upwards. I watched, horrified, as he pitched over to the other side. Head first, like a log tumbling over the lip of a falls—down he went, the mossy crown of the wall scraping onto his t-shirt, the filthy soles of his shoes flipping up towards me.

I heard a thump, the splintery crunch of shrubbery squashed, a vegetative squelch.

“Oomph!”

“Eddie! Jesus! Ed!” I rushed to the wall and leaned over. He was on his knees in a muddy flowerbed, fumbling with the rest of his trouser’s buttons. His fingers were red and chafed, too clumsy to work the buttonholes.

“Come on,” he muttered, and bent his head lower towards his groin.

“Eddie, get up!” I hissed, “you’re in somebody’s garden!” What was he doing? What if the owner of the house came out—a psychopathic

hedge-fund manager in a wax jacket, toting a shotgun? We weren't savages! "We're not savages," I cried. "Eddie, do you hear me?"

He sat down on the ground with an aggrieved sigh. He was—he wasn't! No, oh God, he was—he was taking off his shoes and socks. He sniffed his left foot. The front lawn was illuminated by interlocking circles of luminescent lamp-light, and I could see the foot as well as he could, better than I'd have liked: a greyish slab of sodden flesh that must have smelled like a primordial shower curtain. Releasing it, he sighed again, and lay back. Laid down! In the dirt! In the freezing wet cold, in somebody's garden—

I was whining: "Get up! Get up, you idiot, Eddie, please, you can't do this to me—"

He wasn't quite foetal, but lolling to the side, curling in on himself, taking shallow, wheezy breaths. After an endless moment during which I prayed, I fucking prayed he'd come to his senses, I too climbed over the wall, my fingernails clawing for purchase at the moist hunks of moss that came away under my hands like waterlogged plaster. I leaped awkwardly down, my left hip catching painfully on the rim of the stonework, and landed in a jarred heap beside him.

His clothes, he'd wet himself, the smell—

"Oh, man," I said, "it's all over your pants, Eddie. Stand up, will you?"

No reaction. His eyes were half-lidded. I crouched and heaved him up; digging my hands in under his shoulders, I hauled him to a sitting position where he coughed, shuddered violently, and vomited a thin gruel all over his lap.

"Oh, shit," I cried, and I let go in disgust. Immediately cursing myself, I tried to grab him again, but I was too slow; I snatched, ridiculously, at his hair, which slipped greasily through my moss-slicked fingers.

Eddie's skull smacked off the stone-rimmed edge of the flowerbed.

*

For too long, I couldn't breathe; ensnared in a web of blank, strangling panic, my mind flapped, airlessly, dizzy, registering only his pallor, his limpness, before my lungs opened and I gasped, and I thought, finally, to drop my head to his chest and listen:

—da-dum—da-dum—

“Oh, thank God. Oh, my God.” I stayed slumped beside him for a minute, my knees pressing down into the loam, my ear to his expansive chest, thinking, saved, we're saved—but seconds later I was up again, berating myself: “Well, fucking do something, you fucking idiot!”

An ambulance. The hospital. Drips, oxygen masks, nurses calling Eddie pet—Jesus. No. I closed my eyes and saw him rearing up, orderlies shouting, tubes ripped free from his orifices, lashing me, pinkish fluid spraying over my face whilst he thundered abuse, you fuck, you cunt, you sent me here—

I was shuddering. I didn't know what to do, what to think, where to turn. Long minutes passed before my scurrying, overwrought brain remembered: Shaz. I rose up. I found my phone in my bag; I swept my arm about, circling, in search of a signal, and, as soon as two meager bars appeared, the battery icon flashed rapidly and the whole thing shut itself down: neat, efficient, heartless.

Okay, I thought; okay. Don't worry.

“Okay,” I repeated, aloud. “Eddie? I'll get help. I'm getting help. I promise. So, just, don't fucking move, all right? You hear me?”

I scrambled back over the wall. I got maybe ten lurching yards down the road—ten grotesquely slow yards, every nerve-ending in my spine and my skull registering each juddering, thumping step—before I realised, of course, that I had no idea where Shaz was, and that I couldn't just leave Eddie there—what if he got hypothermia? What if he got attacked—mugged, raped, killed? This sent me scuttling back to the garden to make sure his heart hadn't stopped. It hadn't; he moaned very faintly as he exhaled. I was feeling queasy and tearful. Possibly he was just exhausted—drunk and overwhelmed—but it wasn't unlikely, was it, that, after the impact—thanks to the impact—he'd had

some sort of attack, a rupture, something to do with his ulcer, his asthma, a heart attack? It wasn't unheard of at his age—at our age. Or what if he'd had a stroke? What did I know? It was my fault he was here; I'd invited him, I'd loaded him up, I'd made this happen. I imagined the headline:

FAT LOCAL DIES IN PROTEST STUNT:
ACCOMPLICE DETAINED, MANSLAUGHTER.

Okay, I thought. Okay, okay, okay. I started groping through my bag again, looking for God knows what, anything that might make a difference: spare socks, a Mars Bar, the marathon emergency kit, a grey Dulux colour chart listing string and cave and warm dust. Eddie's supplies weren't much better: the plastic loops from the six-packs, his headlamp, his work tie—

The emergency kit! I tore open the wrapping and shook out the silver blanket; I draped it over Eddie and tucked the edges underneath his legs and arms. There! But the flesh beneath his shoulder-blades gave too easily, like bin-bags full of compost, and when I stepped back to look at him, it—he—looked like a corpse that had been bundled incompetently, suspiciously, inside a carpet. The more I fiddled with it, the stupider it looked and the dirtier and more rattled I became. I started to freak: I was fucked. Eddie was fucked. I would have to tell Emily. I got Eddie wasted and very nearly killed him—

She was bound to blame me. Why wouldn't she? I dropped to my knees on the grass, in the semi-darkness, my vertebrae pulsating with pain; I screeched, "Could somebody just help us?"

"Um—hel-lo?"

I looked up, flummoxed.

From the other side of the wall, a teenage girl was gawking at me. At us. Well—at Eddie. "Is he dead?"

"No! Of course he's not—" I stopped. Pudgy arms and calves, a denim jacket at least one size too small, the empty wayfarers, the

cap: “You—you’re Shaz’s, what is it, intern!” I was on my feet, now, pointing. “I saw you! You were there. Izzy! Izzy—where’s Shaz?”

Izzy frowned. “And you’re—”

“I’m her husband! I’m Conn! Please, my friend, he’s—”

She stared at the Eddie-shaped lump in the flowerbed. “You want me to call, like, an ambulance?”

“Yes! No, I mean, no—Eddie, he’s phobic, he’d fucking kill me, wouldn’t he?” I paused to think. I was reeling. “I don’t know. I have to see Emily. His—Em, she’s—she’ll know what—” My voice was too high-pitched. I took a breath. “I need a lift. Okay? We need a lift. Shaz can get us a ride—see?”

She cocked her head. The oversized, useless glasses cast huge, looping shadows over her face as she studied me. “Aren’t you the one that lost the strike opinion polls?”

“What? That was a fucking accident!”

“I’m not even on duty,” she muttered, but she started to tap out a rapid message on her phone.

She waited. I waited. Waited! I couldn’t stand this. “Can’t you just call her?”

Izzy looked amazed. “Terry says, never tie up the line? Unless it’s like, an absolute emergency?”

“But—” I shook my head. “Who the fuck is Terry?”

“Terry Foster? Are you serious? I—” She broke off as her phone beeped. “You’re lucky. They’re passing this way. Are you really Sharon’s husband?”

“Am I—oh, Jesus.” I hunkered back down beside Eddie and laid a tender hand on his feebly rising chest.

*

“Conn? What the actual fuck?”

A white van had slowed to idle on the curb. I leaped—tottered—up, my legs buckling, the left calf cramping, the right foot now completely numb.

“Shaz!”

My wife was leaning out the driver’s window, bundled in a parka, her hair bound in an old scarf of mine. She looked sapped—bloodless, reedy. Her voice was cracked. “Have you any fucking idea how worried I’ve been? No sign of you, no phone call—you know you’re an hour behind the last of the stragglers?”

“Yeah, but—”

“I thought you’d gone. I thought you’d fucked off and left me.” She narrowed her eyes. “You’re filthy. What—”

“Sharon!” We both jumped. There was a woman beside her, in the passenger seat—fifty-ish, hair pinned tightly back from a severe face, a hands-free phone-headset clamped over the crown of her head. She rapped Shaz on the shoulder with a Parker pen. “Listen,” she announced. “Phil says he’s got two shadow MPs offering support, and that’s on top of the Gorton and Tameside councillors. He’s on hold now with an AP at the Politics Show—we need to get to the Quays pronto.” Her gaze slid briefly over me without a flicker of interest. “Sharon! Are you listening?”

“Yes! Yes, of course.” Shaz raked her fingers over her face. “Okay. Uh—Terry, this is Conn, my husband? Conn, Terry—Teresa Foster. My PR consultant.”

“Great, wow,” I said, disoriented, “but, Shaz—what about Eddie?”
“Eddie?”

“Yeah,” I said, “he’s sort of—hurt.”

Izzy piped up. “Yeah, so there’s, like, a guy? Down there?”

Shaz looked at her. “What do you mean, down there?”

Teresa leaned over the gear-stick and fastened us all with a nail-gun stare. “Is there a problem, Sharon? Are we delayed? Is there a goddamned problem?”

“He fell,” I said, “he whacked his head—he was taking a slash, you know, and then he sort of sat down in the dirt, and I tried getting him up, but he’s fucking heavy man—you know—and I, he, his head went, you know, clunk, off the floor. He’s alive,” I added. “He’s not dead.”

“And of course you didn’t call a doctor.” Shaz was already dialling. “You just sat there, dithering. Right?”

“No,” I retorted, “no, you know what he’s like, you know he hates doctors! I need to get him home, is all. I need a lift, Shaz. Please.”

She looked up. “That’s the stupidest—”

“Sharon!” Teresa was curt. “Tick-tock.”

“Please, Shaz!”

“I think he’s, like, breathing,” added Izzy.

“Oh, Christ! Fine!” Shaz tossed her phone, with some force, into the footwell. “All right! Go on, then! Get him in the back!”

Teresa said, “Sharon!”

“Well, I’m sorry, Terry,” Shaz snapped, “but what am I supposed to do? Leave him on the side of the street like a pancaked fucking hedgehog?” She turned to Izzy. “Do something, will you?”

“Ugh,” said Izzy, but she vaulted over the wall with enviable ease. She nodded at me. “Can you, like, get that end?”

I waddled obediently towards the head, my own body an excruciating aggregation of woe, stress, and exhaustion. My chest cavity was flooding with cold anxiety; I was thinking, Emily, Eddie, Emily—

We levered him up; I hooked his armpits so that his skull pressed against my torso and his chin tilted down onto his breastbone. He looked fatter, slacker and sadder than ever. A soft pouch of lard, a sheaf of brittle twigs. It took an age to shuffle around to the garden gate and then back to the van, Izzy grunting with exasperation at my geriatric pace, at Eddie’s flaccid, sagging immensity. I felt more and more depressed. He could be bleeding internally for all I knew, he could be on his way out. However fed-up Emily was, however badly he’d treated her, she’d not want him to suffer death in the back of a hired transit van, and she’d not thank me for enabling it.

“Dear God,” said Teresa, “he’s like a barbequed potato.” She banged on the partition between the van’s cab and the cargo hold. “You’ve got fifteen minutes.”

*

To Cleaverton—finally. Shaz sliced into each street-corner, the rear of the van skidding wildly, its assorted contents—unpaired trainers, bike lights, torn emergency blankets, hundreds of tattered flyers, Izzy, Eddie, me—sliding and bumping from one side of the hold to the other. I tried to brace Eddie against the partition wall to keep him from flopping around. His belly splurged out gently and whitely from under the hem of his shirt where the emergency blanket had come untucked. Izzy, pale with car sickness, averted her eyes.

“Uh, so,” she said, “is it true that you really didn’t know Terry?”

“What? No. I mean, yes.”

“Well. She’s amazing. I mean, she could have gotten, like, that dude Osama the Nobel. Only, he, uh, died, didn’t he?” She sounded almost wistful.

“And, what—she’s working with you lot? With the union? What for?”

“She’s working with Sharon. She says she can frame her as this, you know, people’s champion? For the Council campaign, like. Terry has all the contacts, she—”

“Hang on,” I said. “No. Shaz isn’t running for Council.”

“Of course she—” The van bounced over a speed bump, and Izzy’s head jerked back and clunked off the metal wall. Her kitschy glasses fell off. “Ow!”

“I mean,” I said, and the van pitched to the left and I wedged my foot against Eddie’s side to hold him in place. “I mean—I’d know about that. Not you. Me.”

Izzy touched her head and winced. “Whatever.”

Well, of course I’d fucking know, I thought, but I was too tired to properly stabilize myself against the wall, never mind to quarrel. Instead, I tried to calculate exactly where we were, tallying each rattling corner to plot our slewing course along the potholed South Manchester roads, towards Cleaverton and its shining arterial parade

of neon-lit deep-fried-chicken shops and marble-fronted banqueting halls, towards relief, towards Emily. But with each shock of the van's scant suspension, all I heard was the smack, again, of my friend's skull off the flowerbed curb.

*

"Out! Out!"

The van jounced sideways onto the footpath. There was a thump from behind the partition panel and Teresa barked, "Two minutes! Two minutes and we're gone!"

I crawled to the rear door and pulled it open. A bolt of streetlight shot across the floor and struck Eddie's expressionless face.

Izzy wrinkled her nose. "Ew."

"Hey," I said, galled, but then I caught a gust of the reeking mix of urine and vomit that must have kicked her straight in the snout as Eddie, stirring, dislodged the blanket and further exposed his sluiced lap.

"Ed! Eddie, man," I cried, scrambling back to his side, "it's me, can you hear me?"

"Can I—? Ow—oh, bollocks." He groaned and put his hand to the side of his head. It came away smeared with blood. "Conn? What the—?"

"That's nothing! You're grand—look at you!" I gripped his wrist. "Come on, bud. We have to get out."

"Get out?"

"Swing your legs over—that's it."

I helped him, protesting, out onto the footpath. At this hour, the street—our street, Lasseter Grove—looked forsaken: a tight cul-de-sac of ill-kept terraces clad in rust-coloured shingles on the upper floors and rendered below in grey, rimy cement. The Browns' plastic wheelie bins formed a dingy tricolour picket outside their sitting-room window. A dim orange glow lit up the first-floor window.

"Right!" I said, and hoisted my tracksuit bottoms decisively.

Eddie stared at me. He looked appalling: pallid skin, the hair poking out at wild angles, the scalp visibly caked with semi-dried blood. “What—why are we here? I’m not—I told you, man, I need space.” He tried to pull me back from the front step.

We tussled for a moment—two stout, wearied men struggling like a pair of feeble walruses—until I gave in.

“Fine!” I cried. “Do what you like! Piss about until you’re found dead on the fucking street! You think you haven’t put her through enough?”

“What?”

I didn’t really know what. My head ached; my bones hurt. I needed to see her; that was all. I lurched forward and banged on the door. Almost simultaneously, the horn of the truck sounded, and Shaz called out, “Conn! I have to go!”

“Would you please just give us one minute?” I screamed back.

Lights started coming on in houses up and down the road as she leaned on the button. Beeeep, beeeep—

Eddie: “Jesus, man, this is fucked—let’s just go. Please.” He was backing away. Wait, I thought, just wait—

And then the door opened: Emily. She stood rigid, red-eyed and spectacular, in the hallway, framed by the cream anaglyptic wallpaper and the downtrodden carpet, wearing a sheer pink dressing gown over Daffy Duck print pyjamas. The skin around her blue eyes was waterlogged and her loose, uncombed hair was gathered in wet clumps behind her ears.

I exhaled. “Em—”

“What did I fucking tell you?” She was glaring at Eddie. “You just don’t get it, do you? You think I’m not serious? Well, here!”

“Emily,” he said, “just, please, listen—” but she’d picked up a bulging refuse sack from behind the door and tossed it at him. He stepped forward mechanically to catch it, and as the hall-light clipped him, I saw Em take in the blood. The cruddy gash, the stench—she blanched as he moved towards her, broken, stinking like a compost

heap on the tiny strip of paving that passed for a Cleaverton front yard.

“Lookit,” he said, “I’m sorry. I am. You know I am. I fucked up. You don’t need to, like, do this.”

She shook her head. “Christ, Ed—”

“But it wasn’t anything! She’s, I mean, Em, she’s—it was nothing, yeah? It wasn’t anything—was it, Conn?”

“What?” I said. “I mean, I don’t, I wasn’t—”

“She’s my fucking sister, Eddie,” she said. “How—seriously, how is that nothing?”

“But you’re not being fair!” He was whinging. He hobbled closer. “I love you. I’ve tried. I’ve tried really hard. It was one time.” He pushed me to one side and put his hand on the doorknob.

“And that’s supposed to be all right, is it? Like, a free pass for friends and family? Get out, Ed. Don’t be a dumb fuck—just go, will you?”

Except that he didn’t budge, so she had to reach out and push him. Incapacitated, enfeebled, he fell backwards, banged into the gatepost and dropped the bag, which burst, spilling ripped t-shirts and faded red underpants and plaid pyjama-bottoms all over the cracked concrete slabs.

Eddie swore. He crouched, trying to bundle it all back together—as though that would somehow help—and, as if on cue, Shaz revved the engine. “Conn,” she called, “get in the fucking van!”

“Would you hold on,” I yelled; Emily was already closing the door. I rammed my hand into the gap, forcing her to stop. “Em,” I said, rapidly. Quietly. “Wait, please, listen.”

She raised her head to me, said nothing, but the taut set of her swollen face was a brusque what?

Well—what? I ought to have confessed, I knew that, to tell her about Eddie and his fall and my part in it, and to plead for him, too; to catalogue his agitation and contrition and to entreat her on his behalf: to be a friend. I glanced back at him—scrabbling ludicrously in the dirt—and I opened my mouth, but—nothing. I licked my lips.

The moment drew out and thinned; everything slowed. I was, as Shaz would say, dithering. Here was Emily, beautiful and almost, finally, free. But there, behind me, was Eddie—unbound, hopeless, luckless—and, behind him, Shaz, as heavily familiar as the indecision that tethered me to the doorstep. Like her, I raked my face and went, “Okay.”

“Okay, what?”

“Just—” I stepped over the threshold and thrust my face at hers. A quick fiasco of stubble and spittle; she recoiled.

“What the fuck, Conn?”

“Well,” I said, “you know—I love you.”

“You love me? Are you out of your mind?”

“No,” I said, indignantly, but she started to weep and I felt suddenly confused; I took a half-step back onto the doorstep, repelled by the force of her keening. “Em,” I went. “Please.”

“You knew,” she said, in a strangled burst, “you fucking knew—all year, you knew what he did and you said nothing, and now, what, you love me?”

“Well,” I said, “yeah—”

“Get off my fucking doorstep,” she went, “you lying cock,” and she slammed shut the door.

I took an obedient, shocked step backwards. “Right,” I managed, “sure.”

But I was trembling. Okay, I’d known—of course I’d known. Yet if I’d told her—well, I’d have lost them both, wouldn’t I? Emily and Eddie. So what was I supposed to have done?

But—another step back—what had I expected of tonight? Really? A click of her heels and a kiss and we’d both be lifted out of the stale endlessness of, oh, everything? Conn the Consoler? And a resigned handshake from Eddie?

I stood there teetering—a year’s fantasy deflating around me—and I started to wonder if I wasn’t, in fact, out of my mind. After all, I felt like keening, too, for what I’d lost, though the actual structure of that loss didn’t ratchet into focus until I turned to see Eddie staring at me,

no longer footling about by the bins, but sniffing and wiping his nose with the soggy, soil-encrusted sleeve of his coat.

“Ed,” I said, horrified, but he just stared, the awful moment stretching, weakening, until I split it wide open: “So, I better, uh, go,” I gabbled, “I’ll see you later, mate, yeah?” And I looked around, hurriedly, to signal to Shaz that I was ready.

But she’d already slipped the van into gear. It—they, she—was twenty yards gone, angling towards the main road.

“Shaz!” I yelled. “Shaz, Jesus, here!”

But she didn’t wait. Of course she didn’t. Wait for what? For her husband to finish setting his cap at his best friend’s wife? For him to slump back into his marriage like he’d tug back on a pair of dirty pants when nobody was looking? All I could see in the passenger-side wing-mirror was a frosty slice of Teresa’s face and an obscure blur that might, maybe, have been a sliver of my wife’s arm. Eddie had turned away. The loneliness clouted me—is still clouting me—like a brick to the jaw. Eddie, Shaz: the possibilities snapped like elastic bands—love, hope, the whole fucking beautiful world and all its tenderness catapulting out of my reach, shooting after the spinning back wheels of the Transit van—

“I’m here,” I screamed, “I’m here, I’m here, I’m fucking here!” f

CONTRIBUTORS

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