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"This is," the pharmacist said, "why you're here?"

JAMES SCOTT

WATERTOWN

January 11, 1929

Babe hated her. Babe hated her and they loved him. Hay and Eddie noted and imitated everything he did — tried to wear the same suits, ordered the same drinks. They wanted to keep up but never could. Babe was too fast, too rich, and too huge. After ten, fifteen drinks, he would tell them — never remembering their names — about Helen: How she was embarrassing him, how shameless she was, how she knew who he was when she married him, so how come she pretended she'd been sold a false bill of goods? — and they could tell by the way his broad nostrils flared and his wide forehead creased that he hated her.

Into the back of Hay's rusted Dodge truck they tossed a case of beer, a thick length of rope, and two shotguns.

The two hundred and fifty mile drive from New York to Watertown, Massachusetts should have taken Hay and Eddie a day, but Hay never let Eddie drive, the snow kept them at a reasonable speed, and they stopped along the way to eat and drink, tossing money around as if they were Babe, and they ended up driving into the center of Watertown as the sun was just beginning to light the sky. The empty bottles clinked in the back as their tires skidded over the ice onto Main Street, a quaint, tree-lined drive with brick buildings on either side.

While Hay went into the five and dime to inquire about Helen's whereabouts, Eddie relieved himself on the side of the building. He yawned. His hand shook. He'd been sobering up, the beer sloshing around in his head, and as he waded through the haze, he found himself in a strange town, ready to kill someone he'd never met. His hands were icy as he put himself back in his pants and buttoned them.

Inside, Hay asked the pharmacist where he might find Helen. The pharmacist straightened his white jacket, ran both of his palms over the sides of his hair — smoothing it — and sighed.

“You a newspaperman?” the pharmacist asked.

“Buddy, I couldn’t read a paper if you slapped some glasses on me and called me Professor,” Hay answered and smiled.

“Who are you then?” the pharmacist asked.

“Family friend,” Hay said. “We heard she’s in a bad way.”

This eased the pharmacist’s suspicion, and he got a boy who skulked behind the counter to fetch Hay a cup of muddy coffee while he found Helen’s address. The pharmacist and Eddie arrived at the same time, and the pharmacist blinked in quick succession, his eyelids fluttering. Then he told the two men that Helen had been staying with a dentist in town. “He keeps her in her pills,” the pharmacist said. “I stopped filling his prescriptions long ago — even for his legitimate patients.”

Hay gave what looked like a genuine, sad nod of compassion.

“This is,” the pharmacist said, “why you’re here?”

Hay nodded his head, flicked the tip of a match and held the new flame to a hand-rolled cigarette. He spit some of the loose tobacco onto the tiles of the store where it peppered the melted snow they’d tracked in on their boots. The address had been scrawled on a prescription pad. Hay took a few steps back and waited for Eddie to take the address from the pharmacist’s hand.

Eddie knew poking around and showing their faces shortly before they killed the Babe’s ex-wife would surely be their undoing. But what did he have to lose? His job cracking skulls seven nights a week for girlie bars in Manhattan? His apartment, which he left messy to give the illusion of occupation? His days spent wandering around the park, his hands jammed into his pockets? No, Eddie would miss none of this if he got sent upstate again.

The last time he’d been caught one foot in, one foot out of the window of the local hardware store. In his pocket, he’d held a wad

of cash no bigger than a woman's fist. For that, he slept on a cot in a cell surrounded by six-foot-thick cinderblock walls, and a twenty-foot fence lined with gun turrets outside of that, and beyond that, incongruous fields of sunflowers and corn. Some days, he'd stand at the edge of that fence and listen to the rustling of the stalks.

He'd never killed anyone before, but as they'd driven he realized this had more to do with opportunity and less with morals than he would've readily admitted—even to himself. So he grabbed the address, flipped it over as if the pharmacist might have written something on the other side (he hadn't), and followed Hay outside to the Dodge. They consulted the map that Hay had stuck under his coat as they'd left. Helen and her dentist friend were only five blocks away. The gap looked tiny to Eddie, no more than a fingernail. His brow began to sweat despite the chill, and he drew his forearm across it.

Hay flicked his cigarette out the window as they drove back onto the main road and on to Helen's house. It took less than three minutes.

The house stood, plain and white, in the middle of more ornate, gabled affairs. The weight of the snow seemed to threaten to crush the structure—the pillars were crooked, the porch hung in the shape of a V, and half the shingles were missing. Hay didn't cut the engine right away, and a small spark of hope alighted in Eddie's chest. It crept up his throat, and he was about to say, "Why don't we turn around?" when Hay turned the key with a spasmodic flick of his wrist and the truck ceased its rumblings.

Hay took a comb from his pocket and straightened his hair, then slapped his hat back over the whole black mess of it. They walked on a barely worn footpath in the snow to the front door.

Hay waited. He wasn't nervous. The doorknocker had fallen to the ground and Eddie thought of the shark's jawbone he'd once found on the beach at Coney Island as a kid.

Eddie knocked with his fist.

No one came.

Eddie knocked again, harder.

Footsteps—unsure, shuffling footsteps—sounded through the house. They heard the latch being undone, and the door opened slowly. In the dank, dim apartment stood a woman, her features wasted away in a manner Eddie and Hay'd seen plenty of in their Brooklyn neighborhood. Her eyes were dull, her hair like hay, missing in clumps, and her skin was oily and peppered with blemishes on her face and arms, but dried and cracked on her joints and her hands. Her robe wasn't drawn tight enough to hide the sagging neckline of her nightgown, exposing a fragile collarbone and a pale blue vein that snaked its way through the center of it.

"What?" she said.

"You Helen?" Hay asked her, and smiled. He removed his hat from his head and let his hair slide across his brow, falling just short of blocking his eyes.

"Yeah?" She shifted what little weight she had, and her hip came poking out through the thin cotton dress she wore.

"Well, ma'am, we're here from the local apothecary," Hay said, "and we wanted to ask you a few questions."

Helen scratched her arm. The skin turned strawberry red. She disappeared from the door, but left it open. They heard her mumble something about a delivery and followed her inside.

The interior of the house smelled of medicine and rot. The drapes and shades were all drawn, and the light that peeked around the edges exposed air thick with dust. Helen collapsed on an upholstered chair and sent more dust into the air. Next to her, on a small end table covered in linen, sat a cigar box. A short length of rubber tubing—black and dull—protruded from the carton. Hay and Eddie took all of this in, as a heavy-lidded Helen crossed her legs and pulled her robe over her knees. "A little too late for decorum," Hay said to Eddie under his breath. Hay leaned closer and whispered instructions to him—find the bathroom, find the bedroom, find all of the drugs and gather them up.

Happy to be excused, Eddie slipped out. The stairs popped and cracked with his steps, even when he walked on their edges. The

drapes were open in the small guest room, which had one lone window. The roof slanted down across half of the room, giving it an unbalanced feel that furthered the unease in Eddie's stomach. A pair of men's shoes were aligned next to the bed. In the closet, two white, starched shirts, two suits, and one white dentist's jacket hung from wire hangers. The dresser held nothing but men's clothing in its drawers. Eddie was not a smart man, but even he knew what this meant: Helen did not share a bed with the dentist. He didn't know if this would make Babe feel better. Would this ease some of the embarrassment? To know that he hadn't been turned over for another man?

In the master bedroom he found all of Helen's clothes — expensive, by the looks of them. Eddie leaned into the closet and let his face sink into the soft fabrics, inhaling the floral scent of Helen's perfume. In the bedside table were bottles of prescriptions, none of them full, some empty, some clinking with a few stray pills. The labels bore many different patient names and addresses, all within the quaint confines of Watertown.

The shadows cast by the trees outside the window danced in the breeze. No one moved on the snowy sidewalks.

Eddie had grown up in a town sort of like this one, on a narrow, tree-lined street in Connecticut. He'd been a rough-and-tumbler, the kind of kid who craved a little trouble. When they ran out of trouble in his town — locked doors, cops always on the lookout — he made his way to New York, where there was plenty to go around, even after he'd met Hay.

They'd somehow ended up on the same side of a scrap one night, and after they emerged from a night in jail, their eyes squinting in the early summer morning, Hay shoved a thick wad of tobacco in his cheek and said, "You want we should go to the ballgame? I know a guy."

A few minutes later Eddie found himself emerging from the tunnel and into the stadium, the field spread out before him like a blanket of rare jewels. It glowed. It took him a moment to come back to reality — people shoved at his back.

“Hold your goddamn horses,” Hay said to the crowd building behind them, appreciating Eddie’s awe, folding his arms and appraising the field as well. Even in his enraptured state, Eddie was aware of the way people actually listened, and waited until they’d had their fill.

Babe hit two homers that day, his fat body waddling around the bases much faster than Eddie thought possible for such a large man. His hands swept his forty-two ounce Louisville Slugger through the air like it was a flyswatter, nothing more.

The crack of the bat was like a gunshot.

Eddie found a pillowcase and threw all the bottles he could find inside the worn cotton. He found more underneath the bed, scattered like empty bullet casings after a shootout. More were in the pockets of coats in the closet, more stuffed inside purses.

The heft of the pillowcase grew by the minute. Eddie shook it, a satisfying rattle emerging from the fabric. But another noise grew beneath it. He set the pillowcase on the bed. Downstairs, he could hear the rumble of Hay’s voice. He sounded angry. Eddie hadn’t seen Hay angry all that often—most of the time people got scared long before Hay got too riled. Hay could also maintain calm with a frightening steadiness. In a bar one night, hoping to see Babe, Hay got into it with one of the bartenders, and before Eddie knew what happened, Hay had broken his shotglass and with a clean swipe and twist of his hand, sliced out the man’s eye. The bloody orb dangled from the man’s face, and Hay, still calm, adjusted his cuffs and dropped his coins on the slick bar.

Downstairs in the home of the dentist, Hay stood over Helen, who seemed nonplussed by his anger. It took Eddie’s eyes a moment to adjust to the darkness, but when they did he saw how truly unhinged Hay had become, his eyes wild and roaming, his hair mussed, his face crimson.

“You’re an embarrassment,” Hay said, “and you’ll deserve all that you get.”

Helen swatted a hand in front of her face, as if Hay were nothing

more than a fly. Hay lost it. He squatted, yanked her arms over his shoulders, and hefted her like a child's doll. Helen — for her part — did not squeal or scream. As she passed, Eddie looked her in the eye and the pupils were grand black pools, the irises thin as paper, the whites unshining.

Eddie followed Hay upstairs, where he dumped Helen into the bathtub, her head just missing the faucet but hitting the side, the porcelain cracking, the iron beneath echoing with a sickening ring. Hay flipped on the water. Helen fought now, thrashing about in the water like a fish in the bottom of a boat. One hand was all it took for Hay to hold her down. With the other, he yanked the curtains from the window and the sudden influx of blinding, snow-reflected sunlight made them all squint. The tub — a deep, claw-footed basin — filled with water, and the deeper it got, the less Helen struggled.

Finally, Hay shut off the water, and — though Eddie felt certain he still heard the tub ringing — the only sound in the room was the last few drips of the faucet and Helen's uneven breathing. Her robe ballooned around her, some air still trapped inside. Hay's hand produced a switchblade from somewhere — Eddie'd seen it, once or twice, the blade flashing out in the center of a brawl — and sliced her nightdress from its hem to its neckline. Then, with an almost tender motion, he pulled the fabrics out from under her, leaving her in her underclothes.

"Who are you?" Helen asked.

"We're friends of the Babe," Hay said.

"You?" Helen said. "The two of you?" She began to laugh, and the movement set the water sloshing.

Eddie felt ill. He stood in the doorway, his hand on the knob.

"He sent you to clean me up?" Helen said. "How charming."

The croak was gone from her voice, replaced by an acidic sharpness.

Hay rolled up his sleeve and reached out a large, dirty hand and dunked Helen in the water. He held her down for a moment. When he let go, she surfaced slowly. She hacked and coughed.

Water sloshed over the side of the tub and dripped through the hole in the toe of Eddie's boot. This seemed to wake him. He and Hay had tussled about a dozen times, and each ended with them both sucking wind and swearing at the other, stuck at a stalemate.

"Hello?" someone called from downstairs.

Hay nodded for Eddie to go. Eddie took a look at Helen, then left the room. He checked the clock in the hallway—a bit before noon.

The dentist sat at the kitchen table, eating a sandwich, using the deli paper as a placemat. An open bottle of milk sweated condensation. The dentist was small and soft, with thick hair he kept short. His eyebrows slunk together when he saw Eddie. The dentist weighed his options, then, taking a bite of the sandwich, he said, "I should've known when I heard the tub. I was just happy she might be bathing."

Eddie took one of the chairs from the table, flipped it around, and sat on it backwards.

"So," the dentist said, and rubbed his hands together to dust off the crumbs, "what do you want with her?"

Eddie thought for a moment. There was no way he could tell this man that they were going to kill this woman to impress the Babe, to get him to owe them, to get him to need them. It all seemed so ridiculous now, brought on by booze and idle talk that went too far before sobriety and reality regained the upper hand.

The dentist took another bite of his sandwich. He wiped his mouth with small dabs of his napkin, then replaced it in his lap. "Look," he said, "I'm going to the game tonight. I'm not going to be here." He threw the last bit of sandwich into his mouth, crumpled up the deli paper, and drank the last inch of milk with one gulp. "Do what you have to."

And with that, he left.

Eddie was left sitting backwards, his hips beginning to cramp, wondering how this man could simply hand over a woman to him, a perfect stranger.

He still hadn't figured it out as he mounted the steps and came

upon Hay's bare backside, pumping away, his pants around his ankles, Helen seated in the sink, her thin, pockmarked legs thrown over Hay's shoulders, the tap digging into her back.

Eddie went back downstairs and sat in the darkened living room. In the dim light, the room came alive, the photos on the walls glinting with slivers of reflection, the furniture indistinct shapes, the items on the shelves all mystery and menace.

Some time later, a flushed Hay shook Eddie awake. He handed him a glass, which Eddie drank down before knowing what it contained — whiskey. Eddie made a sound halfway between a yawn and a cough as the liquor swam through his system.

Eddie followed Hay as he walked outside. The sun was sinking lower in the sky. Across the street, an elderly couple hacked at the ice on their sidewalk with the edge of their shovel. They waved. Eddie and Hay waved back. In their driveway the old folks had a brand-new Ford Model A. Hay stared at the car, and Eddie could see him thinking. Eddie wanted to run into the slushy road and wave his arms to chase everyone away, to warn them about what was going to happen.

But he didn't. Instead, he opened his coat and let Hay tuck a shotgun and some rope inside it. Eddie imagined Hay prompting him, prodding him to pull the trigger, and the small crack of the gun followed in seconds by the smell of gunpowder, the slight tingle of smoke in the air. Their flight would be sober of mood but not of mind, as they'd drink themselves into a stupor before they'd even reached Connecticut. It would only be then that Eddie would allow himself to ask Hay to pull over and he would pop the door open and fall out into the soft-falling snow, where he would retch and retch until it all came up.

Eddie kicked the snow from his shoes before he walked into the house, but Hay made no such concessions.

At first glance, Eddie thought Helen was dead already, but then her eyes lifted a touch under her heavy lids. Her forehead shone

with sweat and her whole body shook. Either she'd wrapped herself in towels or Hay had. Eddie figured she must have done it, thinking they'd been done with her, dragging herself onto her bed, where her dirty feet hung off the edge. Eddie had seen men in this state — struggling to find their way back to earth after the pills wore away — but never a woman.

“Now what?” Eddie asked.

Hay laughed and shook his head. “Now,” he said, “we kill her.” Hay primed his shotgun and leveled it at Helen's head. If she knew what was happening, she made no move to stop it, no attempt to plead for her life. Hay looked at Eddie out of the corner of his eye, but Eddie stared at the woman. Her hair, still wet from the bath, dripped down into her eyes and she blinked the water away. Hay, his face drawn, lowered the gun and handed it to Eddie.

Eddie didn't even bother to lift the weapon. Instead, he let the stock slide to the floor and leaned the gun against his thigh. His stomach settled. His shoulders dropped a full six inches as he relaxed.

“We're going to have to think of another way,” Hay said, and Eddie's insides began to churn again and his shoulders climbed back up towards his ears.

They found a root cellar. The doors had nearly rusted shut but gave way to one kick from Hay's boot.

They lit matches and cupped them in their hands as they walked around. Eddie pretended to be looking for something, instead he was walking, starting — much to his surprise — to pray. He prayed that he would be able to say no to Hay. He prayed that Hay would not, using the loaded gun in the crook of his elbow, shoot him in the back and leave him in this dank, musty cellar. He prayed that someone, anyone, would give him one reason not to kill Helen.

They reemerged in the icy world, Hay's arms full of supplies. Eddie marveled at the clouds his breath created.

Back in the bedroom, Eddie and Hay sweated with the heat of the house. Hay cut four lengths of two-minute fuses.

“Help me out,” Hay said, and tossed one of the fuses to Eddie. Hay—none too gentle—grabbed Helen’s wrist and lashed it to the bedpost. After a short pause, waiting for a sign to the contrary, Eddie followed Hay’s lead. Then they each bound an ankle. They spread gasoline over the room, over the sheets and the quilts and the curtains and the papers scattered on the roll-top desk. It dripped onto the floor and made rivers and pools. The vapors seethed in the room, causing the air to go liquid and the flowered wallpaper to shimmer and the glue to begin to give way, the sound of the adhesive letting go loud and low.

Last they threw the gasoline on Helen, and the sound of the liquid hitting flesh made them both pause. Then Hay emptied the last of the can on Helen’s body. He shook his box of matches and then pressed them into Eddie’s hand. “I ain’t about to kill someone I had relations with,” Hay said. He walked out of the room and down the hall.

Eddie moved closer to the bed. Everything was damp. The smell was unbearable. Eddie’s brain swam with the stench. The box of matches came from The French Rose, an upscale bar they’d followed the Babe to one night, listening to his stories and laughing at every turn, every foul word, every step. It’d cost them each a week’s salary, but how could they say it wasn’t worth it? Even though Eddie had always assumed Hay’d taken lives with the same cold reserve with which he’d removed an eye, he now understood neither one of them had murdered anyone. At least not to his knowledge. He’d left more than a few men in the gutter or down an alley without much sense to them, but he thought for sure he would’ve noticed the life leave them, some kind of noise or feeling, like the slight breeze on his neck after he’d had his hair trimmed.

The telephone wouldn’t be too far away—perhaps he could call the cops himself, and when the sirens began to bellow in the growing darkness, Hay and Eddie would make their escape back to New

York, back home.

"Please," Helen said. "Please do it."

Eddie jumped so that the matches fell from his hand into a small puddle of gasoline that had dripped from the edges of the comforter.

Helen's eyes were open and they searched for someone, the pupils dancing wildly in an effort to latch onto something. Eddie knelt down.

"I want you to do it," she said, and she began to cry. Eddie had never been so close to a crying woman before and he didn't know what to do. He placed one of his heavy hands on her wet shoulder. She shook free from his touch.

"Why would you want to die?" Eddie said.

"Why would you want to kill me?" she said. She coughed, the violence of the spasm prompting Eddie to lay his hand on her again. This time she let it rest.

They sat like that for some time. For a moment, Eddie imagined Hay outside, rolling and smoking cigarettes, blowing on his hands and stamping his feet to keep warm, waiting for the warm orange glow to overwhelm Helen's windows, occasionally glancing at the new T across the road. But mostly Eddie felt the slow rise and fall of Helen's chest, the way her body knew what to do, how to keep going, even if she didn't.

"Do it," Helen said again.

"I don't think I can," Eddie said.

The gasoline dripped from the walls, from the bedding, slick puddles gathering on the wood.

"It burns," Helen said, "it hurts. Please, please, do it."

Eddie said nothing, but he stood.

He struck a match on the box. He would stay. He would burn with her, with the room, with the house, with the tree that scratched at the window, begging to get into the warmth of a home. He didn't want to be here, either. Not anymore.

The match hit the ground and bounced once. It came to rest in a finger-wide river of gas that led to the curtains. The flames moved

with bright-blue heat, electric in their motion. The curtain dropped from the rod in a clump. The room began to smoke and writhe. The wallpaper, already drooping, caught quickly. The walls crept with fire.

The heat seared Eddie's face. He watched the world fall down around him.

Helen did not make a sound. But the acrid burnt smell of her flesh — or was it his own? — reached his nostrils.

But then a strange impulse hit him and he found himself tearing his burning shirt from his body, ramming his shoulder against the doorjamb as he did, finally getting free of the melting fabric, and tumbling down the stairs. He ran out into the yard with his undershirt smoking but intact. Hay sat in the car, which was running, the lights on and focused on the house.

Eddie thought Hay might be laughing, but instead clapped a hand on the shoulder Eddie had cracked against the side of the door. The pain brought stars to Eddie's eyes. He let the hand stay. He watched the stars, tried to follow them but couldn't. As they drove past, the missing shingles glowed bright against the darkness of the house, the flames licked orange tongues out from under windows, and the smell of gasoline filled the car from Eddie's shoes and pants and he shimmied out of them and rolled down the window and tossed them out in a bundle.

A few months later, they found Babe at a tavern not far from the Stadium. His bulk sat at the end of the bar, and they both moved for the stool next to him. Hay took the seat, but not without looking at Eddie first. Of all the things that had stayed the same, Hay lowering the gun and placing the matches in Eddie's hand had shifted the power somewhat. Hay called the shots — of that there was no doubt — but by his looks and his tone of voice, he suddenly cared if Eddie thought they were okay.

The big man's wide forehead creased and he leaned on his elbows, his great arms enveloping the space in front of him, the beer between

them almost lost. “Whaddya say, boys?” he asked, but with little of his usual charm.

Eddie ordered a beer and his hand shook as he took the glass from the bar and lifted it to his lips. Sometimes, at night, when he slid his feet into bed, he’d smell gasoline. He scrubbed his feet until they bled, raw, scratching wounds. One of his neighbors had come into the hallway bathroom and turned on the lights to find Eddie perched on the edge of the tub, his feet leaking red streaks towards the drain, his eyes full of tears. The man had mumbled that he’d use the bathroom on the floor above and brought his hand to the chain for the light. Eddie turned back to the tub and the light went out again.

The game had been called on account of the rain that threatened to drown out conversations with its incessant pounding, but Babe, Hay, and Eddie said scarcely a word to each other. He didn’t seem to recognize them at all. Once or twice, when prompted by Hay – “Tell us about Detroit, Babe” – Babe seemed to pull himself out of it for a second, and he’d start off one of his jazzy riffs. “Yeah, yeah. Did I ever tell you about the time Brick and I were in Detroit and . . .” He’d pause to take a sip of beer, lick his lips a couple of times, shake his head and hunch back over his glass.

Eddie avoided his reflection in the mirror behind the bar, but caught sight of himself in the copper series of taps in front of him, his face distended in the middle and stretched at the top. He replayed it over and over, triggered by a puddle or an oil slick on the road or the way a bed down the hall squeaked. Sometimes he cut the restraints and ran with her in his arms and out the door. Others, he grabbed hold of one of the bedposts and didn’t let go until it went black. Always, though, he felt the shame. It had only deepened when he returned to New York and things remained as they’d been. He and Hay, the same bars, the same scrapes, the same.

After only a couple of drinks, Babe stood to leave. He signaled to the bartender with a twirling finger that he was paying for the lot of them and threw a wad of money on the table, but he didn’t throw his

arms around them and rush them off to their next destination, where the beer was always colder, the music louder, and the women looser. Instead, he tucked his hat onto his head and bade them farewell.

Hay, whose face had gone red, clenched his jaw. “Hey, Babe,” he said, “shame about Helen.” Then he winked, a slow, deliberate wink. Eddie wanted his pulse to race, but it stubbornly refused to do anything.

“Yeah,” Base said, and touched his cap, as if he were going to take it off. Eddie could feel Hay relax, thinking the big man was going to sit down again. Then Babe touched his belly and then each of his shoulders in the Sign of the Cross. “Poor kid.” He shuffled towards the door in his familiar gait. “Poor kid.”

And Eddie sat back on his stool, shelled a peanut, and felt—as he would for the rest of his days—the heat on his face, the feeling of being on fire. ■

ELEGIES ON THE PASSING OF CELEBRITY

Darken the house lights – time for the montage.
The stars watch the stars, and us, we look on
from our world separate, ageless, a kind of admiring.

Here's a dead cowboy. His hat a ghost town, a tumble
of brush, a haunted player-piano, scrolling
those holes, tinkling jubilation to the wind.

This one, born the same year as my mother.
They play your songs and I use your voice,
the one with swagger, before the rattle of pills.

And you, my father thought you beautiful.
I listen for magic. You speak frozen flowers.
Why does a man tell his wife another is pretty?

They say you hailed from Nebraska, but those curtains –
all California. The jokes and smirks, the way the men
pinched their slacks. You made sunny all those dark-home nights.

You, my mother said, weren't pretty. You should have stayed
small-town. Those kind of men and their business cards
must be refused. You were a lesson to be learned.

Now the dancer: the boy, the man that never was.
It's your shrieks we love, the way your body cuts
the air, the way your feet light what here can't be lit.

All of you, so easy to love, so easy to tarnish.
Drink and drugs, sex and guns, fiery crashes,
and one spectacular leap from a building.

Popping light bulbs. White-hot moments. All the flickers.
Let us all celebrate – every high and low light. Clap for us,
in some dark, velvet theatre. And when we exit,
let us all exit with a little shatter and dazzle.



*He was too big for the green folding chairs,
too severe for the town.*

SOME NIGHTS THE STARS DON'T SEEM THAT FAR

Once upon a Tuesday night, Che Guevara walked into my club around closing time. I'd given up on the last few assholes of the evening, and while I still wore my six-inch heels and more makeup than a nice girl, I'd put a gray sweatshirt on over my black bikini and was ordering a Diet Coke when I saw him to my right, in the mirror behind the bar. His face was clean-shaven. He wore a baseball hat, but his eyes were unprotected and unforgiving. Even when he smiled, it was confrontational, which I'd seen in Italy and France, but almost never in Los Angeles, let alone in a Los Angeles strip club. It could have been some biological blip, a freak extra step in his DNA ladder that made his eyes refract light a certain way. It could have been that he was one of the few men I'd seen who was unafraid of women.

When I noticed him, he was already sitting with a redhead, a dancer who called herself Scarlet, of course. She was one of the high-end girls who came in exclusively to meet with VIPs. The rest of us were subjected to the economic and political pressures of regular scheduling, slow nights, and hustling dances.

I considered the fact that not talking to Che Guevara would be one of the greatest failures of my life, not just as a stripper who occasionally has opportunity to chat and/or touch the penises of strange and/or powerful men, not just as a self-proclaimed socialist, and not just as an artist who should fling herself at everything new, but as all of those at once. His black hair stuck out in clumpy waves from the hat and he wore a sport coat over some dark jeans. I knew from approximately twenty seconds of observation that he did not appreciate fandom, sycophantic babbling, or even audacious interrupting hands that intended to be shaken. I would have to pay the DJ to put me on

stage and hope Che noticed me that way.

Then, the very nearly unimaginable occurred. Che's laser gaze pierced me from the mirror and he nodded his head once. In strip club sign language, this means, "come on over."

I wove around the red leather bar stools and approached him. Scarlet smiled prettily and seemed unruffled at my invasion of her work-space. She was still dressed — or rather, undressed, in expensive-looking black garters and a push-up bra. I envied her freckles and immediately was embarrassed by the two new pimples I'd acquired that day.

"Was that a 'come over here' nod?" I asked Che. In L.A., at night, a baseball hat makes someone more conspicuous, not less.

He waved the question away and leaned toward Scarlet. They talked cheek-to-cheek, into each other's ears. When she spoke, he stared at me. I stared back, but couldn't stop myself from smiling. His skin was darker than I'd imagined. His lips thicker.

"Where you from?" he asked. Everyone asked that. I never figured out what information they thought they gleaned from my answer.

"San Francisco."

He chuckled. San Francisco was some kind of joke to him. "I'm from Puerto Rico," he said.

Okay, I said.

Scarlet straightened to reach his ear. "You're going to love her," she said, this time loud enough for me to hear. "She's a writer." It was generous of her, and also, a way for her to find out if I could swim with the big fish. If she judged me worthy, she'd bring me along on other nights when high-profile customers came in a group and wanted some more girls. She'd get tipped if I became a favorite of any of her men. Like a finder's fee.

"What do you write?" he asked. In the background the music had changed to something very mellow, lounge-y. We were at the most dingy and precarious moments of the evening, when the girls didn't care anymore about smelling good and the managers weren't watching

the floor. The brass pole was smudged and our new carpet couldn't keep up with all the stilettos piercing its royal green nap.

"Mostly TV specs," I said. "But I just finished a screenplay."

"What's it called?"

"It's called *My Life in Babylon*," I said. "That's a line from a Leonard Cohen song."

He looked 20% surprised. "You like Leonard Cohen?"

"I love him." I tried to figure out how to ask Che for stories about Cuba. The lights behind the stage kept flashing through all the primary and secondary colors. It was only when the red hit him that he looked like himself.

"Okay," Che said to me, and winked at Scarlet. "Who are your top five musical artists, if you don't mind me putting you on the spot?"

"I don't mind," I said, kneeling on my stool so I'd be a little taller, "I like the spot." This time he smiled. And there was no other way to ingratiate but to be honest, since I didn't know anything about what he listened to. "Bruce Springsteen, Bob Dylan, U2," I said. In the brief pause before I went on, Che had raised his hand to high five me. He was growing a small potbelly, which was sexy to me, because it made him look like he'd been happy recently.

"You get a drink for that!" he said. Then to Scarlet, "She picked heroes. Writers." Then to me, "You like Tom Waits?"

And of course I did, or the story couldn't have gone this far. We began to discuss Tom Waits. Our drinks came. We all said, "Salud," and looked each other in the eyes as we toasted. Again, he tested me. "Favorite Waits album?"

"The 3-disc set, *Orphans: Brawlers, Bawlers, and Bastards*," I said.

"I like you," he said. "We need to hang out. You will write me a story, and I will give you hell."

I imagined what that "hell" would look like: him yelling, throwing pages around, grinding them into the floor with his big black boots. I glanced at his feet. Sneakers.

Scarlet started telling him about a French movie she just saw and

he listened for one minute as if he would devote ten, before abruptly asking me, "Have you read any Dostoevsky?"

I told him I'd read *Crime and Punishment* and *Notes from the Underground*.

"He's a prerequisite if you want to be a depressed college kid," I said.

He drank his vodka soda, looking at me sidelong. I relaxed my face.

Then a cocktail waitress came up to us with stars in her eyes. "I just wanted to tell you I love your work," she said, her hands pressed into her black apron.

"Thanks," I said.

Her breasts were pushing perfectly against her black corset. "I'm a big fan," she said, ignoring me.

Che nodded and thanked her. He did not invite her to join us. He did not say anything to encourage her, nor to discourage her. She scurried away and he turned back to me. Scarlet was called on stage.

Che and I were as alone as is possible at a strip club bar. "What's this?" he said, fingering my sweatshirt.

"Pajamas," I said.

"You smoke?"

"Weed and cigars," I said, "but not cigarettes."

He shook his head. "You don't smoke cigars."

"I'll go smoke a cigar on the patio with you right now."

He bought us two enormous Montecristos, and while he chopped their heads off he said, "I know a little bit about these things."

Scarlet returned, looking bored and checking her phone. She came outside with us. I walked in front. I kept my back straight. I hoped he noticed my calves.

The smoking patio at the club felt appropriately tropical, its banana leaf plants sprawling along the walls and white lights twinkling from the brown beams of the roof. A long table full of fat men made it difficult for us to find a private place to sit. We eventually squeezed in, and Che sat closest to the wall, with Scarlet and I perched cross-legged

facing him. He lit the cigars. He stared at me, puffing amusedly while I blew smoke away from Scarlet.

"You're a sexy fucker, aren't you," he said to me, without a question this time.

"Thank you," I said.

"Hey man," the fattest of the fat men called to him, "heads up!" and he tossed at Che a small rectangle wrapped in black plastic.

"What is this? Weed?"

"No man, it ain't weed. Open it." The fat man was wedged into the largest brown throne-chair in the club, which usually was not out on the patio.

Inside the plastic was a leather wallet, but it wasn't a wallet, it was the cover for an L.A. Sheriff's badge. "Is this real?" Che asked the fat man.

"Better believe it," the fat man said. "I know you already got some friends in the LAPD, but you can't ever have enough back-up, know what I mean?"

Scarlet and I looked at each other, hoping, maybe, to see an explanation in the other's face, and we didn't, and so we laughed. She said quietly, "That guy's a psychic. Stars pay him \$5,000 an hour for advice."

And Che pretended he was talking to a cop, drunk, slurring, saying "Lissen, ossifer, I'm a goddamn sherrif," while he fumbled with the badge, and we laughed harder. He had deep dimples. I wanted to sit in his lap and kiss him, then felt like a stupid teenager, knowing everyone else did too. "A psychic," he said. He shook his head.

I invented Che's friend in the LAPD. He was black, the son of a Panther, a detective. He busted white-collar criminals.

The fat men slowly stopped talking to us.

"What are you reading right now?" I asked Che. For the first time, I pictured touching his penis. I imagined it one of those large, reluctant types. (I was wrong.)

"Some novel by some guy that isn't very good," he said. "You send

me a story. Write me one.”

“What do you want it to be about?”

He opened his arms, indicating, *here*. “There’s this place,” he said. “There’s L.A. Come on,” and wagged a finger at me accusingly, as if to say, a writer should always have something to write about. I looked at Scarlet. She smiled reassuringly.

Another cocktail waitress came up to us. “I just wanted to say hi,” she said. “I’m a really big fan. I love your work. My boyfriend and I just think you’re like brilliant, we’ve seen all your movies. I loved you in *Traffic*. I’m sorry you guys. I just wanted to say hi.”

She was gone before Che could nod.

“How do I get a story to you?” I said.

“I’ll give you my email,” he said. “But I don’t have a pen.”

“What kind of writer would I be without a pen?” I said, and pulled a black ballpoint from my tiny purse. He tried to untwist the cap, like it was a fountain pen. Che suddenly seemed very drunk. He would not accept help from us. He held the pen very close to his face, finally pulled the cap off, and brandished it triumphantly. He seemed amused by himself. He wrote his email address on a napkin. I folded it into a triangle and slipped it in a side zipper pocket of the tiny purse, the pocket where I keep my big bills, on nights when I get one.

Scarlet wanted to get back into the conversation. “So, of all the places it was released, where did *Che* do the best?” she asked him.

“Japan,” he answered.

“Weren’t they basically fascists, like, fifty years ago?” Scarlet blinked in confusion.

“Yes,” he said, “But there are elements of the story that appeal to them.”

“Maybe fighting to the death for a principle,” I said, “for an honorable idea.”

He nodded at me. My body felt stripped of skin, raw to the air, nerves firing. “Let’s hang out,” he said. “I’m serious.” Men never looked at me like that without touching me, but he wasn’t.

"I'd love to," I said. I leaned back in the chair, sucked in my stomach, re-crossed my legs.

Our mowhawked DJ walked onto the patio, looking for us. All the other girls had gone home. "Sorry guys," he said to Che and the fat men, "the girls gotta come inside."

Scarlet and I stood, and kissed Che on the cheek, one after another. He smelled like smoke and drycleaning. "It was great to meet you," I said, then wished I'd been more creative.

"Write me," he said. "Fast."

"Lickety-split," I said.

He took my cigar and tapped out the end. "Take this with you."

"Bye honey," Scarlet said to him, and he patted her waist.

I wrote Che Guevara an email at 3:44AM, worried that he was too drunk to remember our meeting. He wrote back at 8:12PM and said he remembered my legs, my pajamas, and talking about Tom Waits.

And then he asked me out to dinner.

I spent five days in a horrified excitement, reading *The Motorcycle Diaries* and brushing up on my Spanish. He canceled on Tuesday, citing various important meetings that could not be changed.

"What are you so sad about it for?" Scarlet asked me, the following week. We leaned side-by-side into the grossly bright dressing room mirror. I realized we were both applying mascara in time with the strains of "Don't Stop Believin'" that were getting piped in from the main stage. She said, "You can't count on a guy like that."

"A lot of people have counted on him, for a long time," I said.

"That's different."

"I suppose it is."

"He did really like you." She turned to inspect her backside. She adjusted some straps. "He'll probably call you in a month and want to come in here to see you. I've known him a long time."

"I don't want to see him as a customer," I said. "I wanted to talk to him about Cuba."

"Oh honey," Scarlet said, and put a hand on my arm. "He has to

do that all the time. He comes in here to relax." She wore expensive perfume, not the candy-scent spray most girls did.

"I don't want him to relax," I said.

Scarlet shrugged, and after her final look-over, strode to the door of the dressing room. "Who knows?" she said. "Maybe you're the first woman in lingerie he'll take seriously."

I adjusted my right eyelashes. "I think he understands that lingerie is very serious. It's a uniform for a subset of the working class."

Scarlet snorted and left.

When Che Guevara did finally call, he wanted hot dogs. "Italian sausage," he said, "and not the kind you're thinking of."

We went to the 3rd and Fairfax Farmer's Market and he let the sausage grease stay on his face until he was finished. He seemed older in the daylight. He was too big for the green folding chairs, too severe for the town. People looked at him, at us, with pangs of confused recognition.

"I wore a short skirt for you," I said, and raised one leg. "Now it disgusts me that I did that."

"You've got great legs," he said. "I appreciate the skirt."

"Tell me about Cuba," I said.

"No."

"Why not?"

"Go there. Read your history. You tell me about Cuba, next time we talk."

"So what am I doing here?"

"Eating lunch."

"What are you doing here?"

"The same." He wiped his mouth, finally. "And, enjoying you."

"That's charming."

He nodded.

"It's disarming, actually."

He felt no need to respond.

"Okay," I said. "Do you want to be lovers?"

"Yes."

"Then, let's be lovers."

"You are disappointed," he said.

I didn't want to lie.

"That feeling is your fault," he said.

He reached for my hand, the first time he'd initiated any touch. His was warm, dry, enveloping. A hand without fear. I wanted to fuck immediately.

We stayed in the sunshine, not talking.

We looked at each other.

It was an act of both violence and affection between two polarized bodies of memory. ■

PAUL HLAVA

INTERGALACTIC LOVE SONG

The child tore chunks from a half moon
of yucca bread, familial salt-smell
diffusing in vapor.

He crouched behind the wooden leg
of the bed-frame tucking bread into his cheeks.
10 o'clock news. Car wrecks. Voices
banged drunk-like up the stairs. Between

the broken slats of the fence he crawled back
to the cracked bank of the reservoir.
Something struggled against the dull light
of the city. He thought he could love

those stars. That they might whisper,
Hush child, we burn too
in this strange system,

this dark and sudden machine.
Or they might flicker out
as an audience of frogs began to chirp.

—

I spoke to the Galaxy
but it did not answer.
I got down on single knee
and confessed my love
but it wore a black veil
of silence. I reached up

with both hands to hold it
but my stance was one of surrender.
It retreated. It pulled me away
from me. My body too
is mostly empty space.
In the evenings, I go to the movies
alone. I trade particles
with the man beside me. I leave
my electrons on the seat. Galaxy,
you are the expanding carbon orbs
of my sweet fountain soda.
You are the warm coins
I finger on the cab ride home.
You carry me across
the threshold of morning.

—

You are my change purse,
my film, my spinning reel. I am hypnotized
in the wash of your projected light.
You are the beaded rosary in the hands
of an old mother, you are the string
of grapes whose tender skin I peel
with my teeth. *Thy will be done*
on earth, how your gravity ages me,
how I fall into you again
and again. I am a chipped tooth in your
tiniest ticking gear. I am a rusty fastening,
a frayed wire pressed between your silver nodes.
I am melting, I am throwing sparks.
The woman in the movie cries,
a hand upon her forehead,
black mascara asters growing beneath her eyes.
At parties I worry people are secretly talking
about me. I guard the cake table,
frosting in my beard. I eye the

sprinkles with a colored greed.
Even your tiniest of cells is beautiful.
I put you in my mouth.
You shine beneath my tongue.

—

We lay beside each other,
the hem of my sleeve touching
its slender spiral arm.

Dew beaded the folded
flower petals. Night closed us
in its pocket. The Galaxy sighed.

We are so small, it said. Soon
we will disappear.

Wind lifted itself from the yellow grass
and stole moisture from our hands.

I think it's not worth it
to love anything this much, I said

but it wasn't listening.
I am drifting slowly apart, it said.

The wind took hold of a stray hair
from beneath my collar
and stumbled forward through the grass.

—

Galaxy, I find your stellar parallax,
the gold freckles of your spinning body
dizzying. The distance between us

is not objective. My gaze is inscribed
in you. Your gaze is inscribed in me.

—

It misses fresh blueberries,
wet boughs smoking in a campfire.
It misses the salty crust
of yucca bread, how my mother
brought home fresh honeycomb,
the tongue's learned familiarity
with those cold and waxy cells.
It longs for the touch of
beautiful women, to be more than
the soft stray hairs
woven into the fabric
of this fitted sheet. Can it still remember
when all matter was pressed
into a single, hot point?

—

My orphan Galaxy, my star-painted body,
where do you go to sleep?

*I am in the grove of cedar trees
where the wind plays the frozen reeds.*

My frayed Galaxy, little frightened blowfish,
will you remember me?

I am going to another place.

—

Sidereal time swings its hypnotic pendulum.
Dark matter pulls all things toward its invisible bones.
The velocity of large, stellar bodies pushes me around.
Momentum pins me to the ground.
Gravity has its way with me.
Time has its way with me.
I tripped running up the stairs.

—

A watch must be disassembled
to be understood as a whole. The Galaxy
shines from a distance, dark inside.

One radial arm mimics the spin of another.
Its winks are reflected in the runoff
of a shattered bottle in the street.

Mirrors are creepy
because they frame miniscule things.
I trim my beard in the morning. Space stretches

in front of me, behind me.
Steam rises from the sink, my breath
the glass. The Galaxy whispers,

Between another star system,
another frigid moon,

between the floating motes of dust,
I have chosen you.

—

At the onset of my journey
there was a voice.

I collected twittering stars,
I shook my paper sack
of smooth stones and shells.
Galaxy chirping with a tree-frog
in its heart, with a tribal band
of dust and ice.
Galaxy my instinctual pillow,
my perpetual feast, I gobble down
the fear of being forgotten—
I wake to swallow
strips of cold, leftover steak
in the dark, exerting
such feeble mass. Galaxy
with churchbells,
with the eye of a purple phlox,
which by being is both perfect
and flawed. Galaxy with the
head of a moose, Galaxy moaning
with glaciers, the force
which compels matter to gather
is not enough, your grasp
on astral bodies is slipping.
You hide this truth
in your collection of stones:
the mode of all systems is
diminution. Diminution, who whispers
me each night to sleep. Lie down
with me, Galaxy, my cold, severed doll.
Someone is at the door.
We must be quiet and still.

THE SOUNDING DRAFT:
A CONVERSATION WITH LAUREN GROFF

*“Even a paragraph or two seven days a week builds
into something, at some point.”*

Lauren Groff’s debut novel, *The Monsters of Templeton*, a *New York Times* and *Book Sense* bestseller, was shortlisted for the Orange Prize for New Writers and praised by Stephen King as “doing that thing all good novels are supposed to do, provide you with a magical experience.” And what a magical experience it is: a fifty-foot lake monster, a centuries-old overly-protective ghost, murderers, arsonists, prostitutes, baseball, and a family tree that spans the entire history of the United States. Her second book, *Delicate Edible Birds*, is a collection of short stories, some of which have appeared in *Best American Short Stories* (“L. DeBard and Aliette” in 2007 and “Delicate Edible Birds” in 2010), *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Ploughshares*, *Glimmer Train*, *One Story*, *Five Points*, the *Pushcart Prize* anthology, *Best New American Voices*, and elsewhere. Her new novel, *Arcadia*, is due out in 2012.

Literary accolades aside, what likely strikes the individual fortunate enough to spend some time with Lauren Groff is her graciousness, an infectious, warm and exuberant sense of understanding that permeates the conversation. I first met her in 2009, when she stopped by Tallahassee, Florida for a reading and some chitchat with the creative writing grad students at Florida State. Within minutes, sipping drinks she had bought for the whole gang, we had been thoroughly charmed and were ready to declare allegiance behind anything she said. We could readily see how she could speak the motley voices of

an entire clan, how she's able to show such compassion for each of her characters, monsters and gentle folk alike, why *Washington Times* claims it is "her sense of life as a braid of emotions, ambitions, constraints and surprises that ties everyone in place" that distinguishes her from other writers.

Type in "Lauren Groff" on YouTube and you'll see what I mean.

The following interview took place over email in early 2011.

J.W. Wang: First, can you tell us a bit about your upcoming book, *Arcadia*?

Lauren Groff: *Arcadia* began for years ago as a reaction against—or critique of—a general feeling of disengagement in the culture around me. I'd far prefer to talk to people who have passionate, even if radically different, views about the world, and for some reason it felt as if people had gotten weary, that they would rather skim the surface of an argument under the guise of politeness and balance than to be invested in discussion; that, or they would entirely escape to the massive distraction of entertainment and technology. And so I began researching, which is what I do when I'm sad. One thing led to another, and I began to get fascinated by written utopias and communitarian experiments, then went whole-hog, visiting places like The Farm, a seventies commune in Tennessee and Oneida, a nineteenth-century commune in upstate New York. I began to see patterns, and one of the most heartbreaking was that the children of these experiments were the people who were most wounded when the experiments themselves failed, as they almost inevitably did. And yet, at the same time, the kind of wholehearted passion that fueled the experiments is valuable and should be treasured. From those opposing tensions was born Bit Stone, my main character, who was raised in a communitarian experiment, and how his life was rollicked after his parents left when he was still a child.

JW: I've read in a previous interview that you go through five to seven books a week, and that you write every single day. You're also a mother of a toddler, and, well, it's a marvel you're able to find time to do all that you do. Any advice for writers starting out there who say they can never find enough time to write?

LG: Oh, no, it's not a marvel at all. I have fantastic help. My husband gets up with my son so that I can start working early; my son goes to school until three, so I have all day to work. When my brain won't function any more, I still have hours to read before he comes home and, recently, I've been squeezing a few more hours in with a babysitter after Beck comes home. That said, there have been times in my life when it has been much, much harder to write, and I've had to carve out nontraditional times: a lunch break, from four to seven in the morning, late at night after the world has gone to bed. It helps that we don't have a television, I'm afraid of technology, and my husband and I are both big readers. That alone gives me a ton of time—the average American watches four hours of TV a day, which is time I spend working or reading. Otherwise, my best advice is unsexy and utilitarian: make your writing into the biggest priority in your day, hoodwink the people around you into believing it, too, and make your work schedule into a routine.

JW: Let's talk about your revision process: first draft in long hand, then you put it aside and begin anew. Then you put that aside and begin anew: never mind those wonderful turns of phrase or delicious descriptions you thought you had; if they were that great, you'll write them again. I confess: the prospect of not working with a rough draft and writing the same story from scratch daunts the bejeezus out of me. Is there something about creating these stories anew repeatedly that lifts these stories to their final form, something you can't get out of working with an existing draft? What about the challenges of working from a blank page each time?

LG: Oh, I do know how insane it sounds. But this method really does work for me. I suppose I'd say that the first draft, for me, is the sounding draft, when you throw your voice around to see what exactly you're thinking, and don't care too much about the mechanics. The big flaws become apparent: the architecture is all wrong for the story you're telling, the main character isn't the one you believed it to be; the tone is off. None of these things can be fixed by doing line-by-line edits, and a writer can waste years on beautifying the surface of something with deep underground faults. It takes a lot of energy to start again, but when I do, I do with more confidence, and it shows. Believe it or not, this way of working saves a lot of time—and, it's true, if there is a turn of phrase that is especially apt, I will remember it, and if I don't, it wasn't meant to be. It helps to know that my prose is never so good that I can't do better.

JW: *The Monsters of Templeton* begins and ends with Glimmey, the lake monster, but Glimmey makes only brief and marginal appearances throughout the rest of the novel. I have to admit I was skeptical of Glimmey at first, treating it as a transparent metaphor, but by the end I was hooked; Glimmey had become my favorite character. The epilogue was some of the most beautiful and heartwrenching prose I've read. Can you talk a little bit about working with Glimmey and the Averell Cottage ghost, taking these risks and making believers out of your readers?

LG: Yes, yes, I, too, was skeptical about Glimmey and the ghost, and there's part of me that still is, to be honest. Heavy-handed metaphor—indeed. But. But! I suppose the process I've described above, of working through draft after draft of a novel with no expectation of publication was a purifying one, in a way: with each draft, I came closer to the slippery story I longed to tell. And the story happened to be of the Cooperstown of my childhood, and both Glimmey and the ghost were some of the largest characters in the actual town of my

youth. I have such poor eyesight I'm practically blind; even then, I'd read into the wee hours of the night and my brain would be sparked by what I'd read and, by God, there were ghosts in my house and a monster in my lake. Only when I gave up hope of publishing did I let myself allow these huge elements of my childhood into the book. And that was when the book was published.

JW: I love that you gave Glimmey a . . . mohawk? Ponytail? Spartan plume? How long did it take you to create that sketch?

LG: Heh. Glimmey got a fin, I think. One afternoon, I was fed up with the book and about to cry my wee eyes out, and so took a long walk through the snow. I ended up at the UW-Madison library, where I wandered into the art-books section and started grabbing all of the copyright-free illustration books I could find. Then sat down at a computer and, chuckling madly to myself like a 21st-Century Doctor Frankenstein, Photoshopped the disparate elements of the beast together in about two hours. It was just for fun, but I put it into the book when I sent it off to sell it, and, to my surprise, my editor liked it. The best part is that it's the cover of the Dutch edition — my crazy, stupid concoction!

JW: It seems to me a significant portion of American literature is rooted in some brand of realism, a lot of stories dealing with domestic issues and set in conventional and familiar environments, while literature that harness myth and fable are often associated with writers from other parts of the world. Going through your books I was thrilled to find a rich sense of myth and maybe even the necessity of myth behind the characters and their stories. Was this an intentional effort?

LG: I absolutely believe you're right, but I also believe that American literature is an incredibly beautiful many-handed monster, with sur-

real strains all over the place. You don't have to go deeply into our communal foundational texts – fairy tales, Greek myth, even the bible – to find these gorgeous and evocative one-off mythologies. Even people we think are super-realists are deeply effected by a murmuring undercurrent of stories – you can't *not* be.

JW: The stories in *Delicate Edible Birds* show a diverse range of story structure and points of view. Is this something you actively seek out, playing with different approaches to storytelling? Do you ever sit down and say, “Okay, today I’m going to try to write a first person omniscient story”?

LG: No, most of those stories started somewhere else, and gradually, through the drafts, evolved to take the form that they did. The marriage of the story being told with the mode of telling it – all that.

JW: “Backstory” is one of the most dreaded terms in a creative writing workshop. Apprentice writers are often beseeched to avoid backstory entirely, to stay with present action. *The Monsters of Templeton* and many stories in *Delicate Edible Birds*, however, are filled with backstory, in great, delicious heaps (in a manner that reminds me of Junot Diaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*). What would be your suggestion to writing students who can’t help but fill in copious amounts of backstory in between scenes of present day action?

LG: Yes, my god, I love Junot Diaz almost too much, and I adore backstory. I say: don't worry about it. If it feels right, include it, if it doesn't feel right on rereading or re-drafting, cut it. Think of your work as a big hunk of clay: you can craft a fine amphora or sculpture or what have you and continue working with the material until it's published, when it's shoved into the fiery kiln (where all the angry critics shriek from the flames – too much?). Some of my favorite books are almost

entirely backstory: look at the structure of *Wuthering Heights*, and you'll see a book that's almost revolutionary in its incredible nested architecture. Trust that the story will tell you how to tell it.

JW: I loved the footnotes that began appearing near the end of *The Monsters of Templeton*. How come we didn't see more of those earlier on?

LG: I have no idea. If I could only talk to the Lauren of seven years ago, who wrote the book! That's one of the questions I'd ask her.

JW: Trying to run down someone with a bush plane sounds . . . really fun. Tell me this actually happened.

LG: I wish! In many ways, and in many situations, I wish.

JW: You've said that you worked a bunch of crappy jobs before doing your M.F.A. at University of Wisconsin, Madison. What were some of them? Did you find any of them conducive to writing lots?

LG: Oh, dear. Are you ready? Bartender at a huge Philly bar (I was the worst—it helps to be able to count), canvasser for the Sierra Club, phone-bank operator for a cord-blood service, case reviewer for the Department of Human Services, weirdo new-age book editor, lonely administrator at Stanford's Center for Psychiatry and the Law, office toady at Stanford's Media X. The major thing these jobs gave me was a hunger for my MFA, when I gobbled up the two years of paid time to write under the aegis of great teachers. I was writing all along, but exhaustedly, without a great deal of guidance, and it felt glorious to get to Madison and be able to stretch my wings.

JW: What are you reading right now? Any recent favorites you'd recommend?

LG: Yes! I just finished Deborah Eisenberg's new omnibus *Collected Stories*, and think she's a genius—"Some Other, Better Otto" is my favorite short story written in the past ten years. I'm reading Nicole Krauss's new book, and last night I finished Mary Robison's *Tell Me: Thirty Stories*. The latter is an example of the way a book has to dovetail with the reader's need at the time of reading it or else it won't sink in: I know there has been a time in my life (and there will be other times in the future) when the book would have/will have blown me away. But right now, right after Eisenberg, the stories felt somewhat shallow to me. I'll put it into the To Read Again pile to see if there's a time when I can see Robison's full brilliance.

JW: What would you say is about the most unwriterly thing about you?

LG: I hate computers—does that count? I don't even like to type up my stories so I can print them out. And my husband says I'm a misanthropist, but I just say that I love humanity with all my heart, but the individuals always disappoint me.

JW: Do you have other creative outlets? Something in which you allow yourself to be a dilettante yet still be able to flex your imagination?

LG: Oh, yes, I'm a dilettante in almost everything. I'm a terrible cook, but I love to cook. I call myself a gardener, but sixty percent of my plants insist on dying. When I'm in my wee little studio and can't write and can't read, I try to paint, but have never had any training, and I'm happy to be bad. They could be hipster-ironic if I weren't so earnest about them. And—my god—you should see my poetry! It's awesomely awful.

JW: What are you currently working on? A new novel? Short stories?

LG: I'm working on a new baby, due in a month, which puts me into the kind of dreamy, unfocused mindset where I'll start writing a story in the morning and three hours later, find myself, pen in hand and two paragraphs on the paper, staring at the wall. I'm not sure I understand why, but I have very little focus or drive when I'm pregnant. I think my body absorbs all my ambition so that it can form those little fingers and neurons at the center of me. That said, I show up every day, and even a paragraph or two seven days a week builds into something, at some point. So I'm doing stories, yes, and am letting the next novel slowly gestate in some dark, warm corner of my brain. I think it'll be in fragments, and that's about as far as I've gotten. It feels nice, after the past year of immense stress and constant rewriting of *Arcadia*, to be a bit adrift. ■

287 NORTHBOUND, SUMMER

On the back of your yellow motorbike
I sweat in my jacket and weigh each moment,
dialed to the frequency of threat:
the driver who does not signal,
the chasm in the asphalt just wide enough
for one motorcycle tire. The bike dips
and I press my knees to your hips. I see myself
spread along the parkway, cars swerving,
the plumes of exhaust, burnt rubber,
torn leather and a sick brainy smell
reeling in my nostrils when my head hits hard.

On the back of your yellow motorbike
the bacon and toast in my stomach is precious
since breakfast. I examine your neck,
the fine band of skin below your helmet,
it, too, is precious.
We pass cars and trees and highway signs.
My boots vibrate on the pegs and fear
sharpens everything. The sky accordions open,
a fold-out backdrop in an old cartoon
where everyone sings, us, the engine,
even the flowers and bugs.

JOANNA NOVAK

LOVE NOTE #2

The blue-eyed chef keeps giving you things and he hasn't even seen your ponytail. You wear a black skull cap. Mornings, you drive until the speakers harden, due west, westernmost dear, dulling through a hopeful time when the tree trunks are wrapped in scabby red leaves. What will you receive today? First, it's a lighter long enough to reach the back burner without using the white cone or someone's pocket. Most recently, a Mark-a-lot. You need it sometimes, don't you? he asks, after you try to give it back. The chef is young with tight arm muscles he unwinds at the end of the night, having one, coat off, finishing up, in the same white t-shirt as your fiancée. Once you got fed up on the line and teary sank downstairs. This was some bottom of the barrel shame. I really like having you around, sitting next to you on the bench in the locker room. O, of comfort and the seventh inning stretch! Take it home, it's yours—somewhere in the middle, he gave you a knife sharpener. What does it mean?

LOVE NOTE #3

Your two-legged dog eats the snow, but my two-legged dog licks mustard straight from the spoon. A saber slicing through the neck of a champagne bottle sounds like the head cheerleader shrieking. It was quick and we were on the street, in our coats, shivering, holding hands, opening our mouths and closing our eyes. The forties happened again and again. We found ourselves in the girl's academy parking lot late, and our frozen sausage patties unthawed in the backseat while, in the windows, the globes pressed up against paper hands like ferns. Those dogs would angle towards any bare ankles they could spot. I always imagined you would end up in a field beneath dense cloud coverage, swapping Lemon Heads with all the Jessicas of Chicago. "Kill the lights," you said, and we were suddenly back in the corner apartment. There is a key in your pocket, but at the time, I am delicious and unaware.



"Whatever. I'm a good fat boy."

THE MAN WHO WORE NO PANTS

Mr. Song, a motivated buyer, completed a third lap around the dying man's house by the lake and walked across the front lawn. His shoes were shined, and he wore a dark suit and a pink tie, which, according to the saleswoman at the department store, paired nicely with his soulful brown eyes and salt-pepper-colored hair. Standing six feet tall and weighing one-hundred-ninety pounds, Mr. Song was large for a native Chinese, particularly one from the Sichuan Province where he helped re-educate many class enemies. But all that — the loudspeakers, labor camps, and atonal songs about loyalty — was behind him now. Now, thirty-seven years later, and seven-thousand-one-hundred-ninety miles from where he started, Mr. Song was a typical American. Twice divorced, he owned a car, a successful Mexican restaurant in midtown Atlanta, and, like his associates at the Better Business Bureau, he longed to get out of the city, to breathe cleaner air and see trees and water.

Conscious of his posture, he moved quickly over the plush green grass, wondering if the dying man was watching through one of the many windows flanked by red shutters. Miss Young, his real estate agent, and Christopher, his twelve-year-old son, waited for Mr. Song in the shade of a Maplewood tree. Wearing a faded green t-shirt and blue jeans, Miss Young was not appropriately dressed for a work day. Mr. Song asked her to explain the dying man's selling conditions once more, as he wanted the boy to learn how to take the upper hand in a business deal.

"The man looking out the window there is Mr. Schiff, the seller. If you want the low listing price, he comes with the house. Temporarily." She waved at the dying man in the window, and then looked at

Mr. Song and the boy. "He is very ill and refuses hospice. I've seen the medical records. They sent him home with enough morphine pills to keep him comfortable."

Mr. Song peered past the waving dying man, past the custom-built home with the low listing price. In the distance motor boats inched by on the blue-green water, the passengers too small and far away to be human. He felt a stab of longing in his chest. "This is it," he said. "We will negotiate."

"He won't live out the month, Mr. Song. I've spoken to Mr. Schiff's doctors." Miss Young checked her clipboard. "FYI: lakefront property in this neighborhood is typically twice what he's asking."

The boy waved at the dying man in the window, and Mr. Song grabbed the boy's wrist and squeezed.

"You said to be polite, sir."

"I said to be respectful. He will be our guest."

The boy stared up at Mr. Song, mouth slightly open. The boy's face was fat, his eyes ice blue; the left one had a triangular blood spot below the pupil. He wore pressed khaki pants, a yellow button-down, and a clip-on tie, but Mr. Song resisted the urge to criticize his abnormal wardrobe. Before the acrimonious divorce, the boy was a C+ student and listened to rap music. He saw a therapist and in between shouting matches with his pretty blonde mother, he played video games in which tattooed men stole cars and beat homeless people over the head with metal trashcans. But now that the boy's mother was remarried and lived in Arizona, the boy was obedient: he completed his homework every night before bed, was on a special diet, and did calisthenics.

"Could you see yourself living here?" Miss Young glanced at her wristwatch.

"Some privacy, please." Mr. Song straightened his tie, bowed, and she walked away. Steeling his insides, Mr. Song put his arm around the boy. "You will have your own bedroom here. I will park in the driveway, not on a busy street. Look at the lake: you will conquer your fear of water."

"I swim fine, sir. I just don't enjoy it."

For a moment, they stared at the house and the lake and the boats inching along. A warm breeze swept through the trees. The boy wiggled free of Mr. Song's grip. "What about Mr. Schiff? I'm curious what the detective said."

Mr. Song did not speak. His eyes moved from the boy's doughy cheeks to the house. The rain gutters appeared to be new, but what about the roof? He thought he spotted a bad shingle near the chimney: something to be checked before signing the papers. Perhaps I will ask the dying man for a credit, he thought.

"Sir?"

"You invaded my privacy."

"You hired a detective to find out about the man who owns this house."

"My father would have punished you for going through my belongings."

"What would your father have done to me?"

When he was disobedient, Mr. Song was forced to fetch water from the Yangtze River two miles away from his family home. He carried a long wooden pole across his narrow shoulders with two full buckets of water on either end. "My father hung himself from a tree," he said. "Every day for seven months little soldiers with red armbands threw rocks at him, called him a Christian Demon Bourgeois Monster. They forced my mother and I to throw rocks at him too." Hand trembling, Mr. Song gave the boy a five-dollar bill and politely asked him to go wait with Miss Young.

Mr. Song removed his dress shoes before entering the dying man's house because he did not want to scuff up the hardwood floors.

The kitchen was brand new and seemingly unused. Every surface gleamed. He pressed buttons on the microwave, turned the stove to 350 degrees, and held his hand over the burner. He rummaged through the dying man's cabinets, but there was nothing to eat: only bottles

of vitamins, spices, herbs, and boxes of tea, all meticulously stacked and neatly arranged.

The window above the sink faced the lake. Gazing out at the water, Mr. Song glimpsed into the future. He will buy a boat with a motor and teach the boy to bait a hook for fishing. Maybe he will find another wife, a brunette perhaps, but this time he will do his homework. And this time he will tell his wife everything, beginning with his real name and how he came to America.

After inspecting the bedrooms and bathrooms on the main floor, he moved down the empty hallway, wondering how a dying man kept such a clean house. He climbed the stairs, bracing himself to face death once more.

He found the dying man in a small bedroom, sitting Indian-style on the rug-less hardwood floor, a cordless telephone cradled between his shoulder and ear. The dying man's face was very white, and he had a full head of chestnut-hair: he could have been thirty or seventy. His t-shirt and pajama pants were clean. There were no bloodied tissues anywhere, no moaning. The room, naturally lit and institutional in color, contained no ceiling fan, no wallpaper, no splashes of color, no bookcases, no pictures or personalized decorations of any kind. Unbuttoning his suit, Mr. Song inhaled deeply: the room had no smell. Carefully, he removed the gift from his pocket, an envelope with three thousand dollars in hundreds inside, and placed it in the dying man's lap.

"I am aware you have other offers, but I want your house." The dying man offered to shake hands, but Mr. Song refused and went on with the speech he had been practicing ever since he first saw a picture of the dying man's house. "We will share this house until your demise. All I ask is that you do not speak to the boy."

The dying man nodded and continued speaking into the phone. Mr. Song stood erect, shoulders back, listening to the conversation. "Inga, an Oriental is talking . . . about his son. Description?" The dying man slurred his words. Drool trickled down his chin. His eyes went

red as he looked up at Mr. Song, head swaying back and forth. “He is tall . . . handsome . . . serious. Yes, bring me some . . .”

Mr. Song recognized the dying man’s Brooklyn accent from television.

The dying man dropped the phone mid-sentence and lay down on his back.

Mr. Song glanced around the room, redecorating in his head. He got out a tape measure, which he used to measure the back porch and the patio, and measured the dimensions of the room. A study? A library perhaps? Finished, he rolled up the tape and hovered over the dying man, who struggled to open a bottle of pills. Mr. Song opened the pills and tapped two out in the dying man’s palm. The dying man lifted his head up, swallowed the pills with a wince.

“I have never heard of a doctor named Inga.”

“No doctor.” The dying man smiled, revealing stained teeth and bleeding gums. He took a deep breath and sat up. “Inga is a Swedish love goddess.”

Mr. Song placed his hands behind his back and walked over to the windows facing the lake. He opened and shut them, inspected the sills and locks, confident that they will keep the cold air out during winter and the cool air in during summer.

“This is it.” Mr. Song turned around just in time to see the boy shaking hands with the dying man.

The dying man accepted Mr. Song’s first offer, which was thirty thousand below the already-low asking price. Disappointed with how quickly and smoothly the negotiations went, Mr. Song insisted that his private detective look deeper into the dying man’s past. This cost him two-hundred dollars a week.

Meanwhile, Mr. Song signed the papers and he and the boy moved into the house by the lake on a warm day in April.

Eager for a swift transition from city life, Mr. Song hired four of the Mexicans from his restaurant—two line cooks, a waiter, and a

busboy: all very reliable—to help carry in the heavy stuff, beds and furniture and kitchen appliances. As the Mexicans and Mr. Song worked on the ground floor, they conversed in Spanish, while the boy followed them around, asking questions, most of them about the Mexicans' families, their hometowns and why they came to America. The hired men had dark hair and quick smiles. They answered the boy's questions in perfect English, until Mr. Song assigned the boy a task to get rid of him.

"Go unpack your things." The six of them stood on the front lawn drinking bottled water. "Do not go upstairs. Our guest is not well today."

"Mr. Schiff said he used to raise turkeys in the backyard. Do you know what their names were?" Dressed in a red turtleneck and corduroy pants, the boy stared at Mr. Song; the boy's face, sweaty and expressionless, bothered Mr. Song, and the pride of ownership he felt just a few seconds prior vanished.

"Obey me."

"Marco and Polo. Those were their names. Marco weighed twenty-eight pounds. Polo weighed twenty-three. Tell me why I have to stay away from Mr. Schiff."

Chicos, one of the Mexicans said.

"It is a part of the contract we signed: we buy this house, we share it."

"I didn't sign anything, sir. Why won't you call Mr. Schiff by his real name?"

One of the Mexicans, the teenaged busboy, laughed and his countrymen punched him in the chest. In Spanish, Mr. Song begged for his employees' pardon and then looked up at his house: the dying man waved at him through his picture window on the second floor. While the deal was being finalized, Mr. Song heard some awful things from the detective and visited the dying man twice. On the first visit, Mr. Song brought presents: morphine tablets, a box of Earl Grey tea, and four jigsaw puzzles. While the dying man drank the tea, Mr. Song

told him his real name, and he described his first wife. "She was a slim-hipped peasant girl from Shandong," he said. "Her eyes were shaped like almonds. She was my prisoner in the camp. During the day, I made her work. At night we snuck into the woods to be alone." On his second visit, Mr. Song brought the dying man a queen-sized mattress to lie on, and the dying man sent it back, requested that Mr. Song read *The Collected Works of Anton Chekhov* aloud instead, which, of course, he refused.

"I do not know his real name," Mr. Song said to the boy. "I just know he is dying internally."

A few days later, Mr. Song used the kitchen for the first time. He prepared fish head hot pot with Szechwan peppers, garlic, dried chilies, and ginger. He felt relaxed as he strained the noodles, simmered the broth and added pig's brains and coagulated blood to the mix. As he worked, fleeting images of bamboo huts and long-gone family flashed through his mind. Breathing in the heady aromas of the soup, he remembered the first year he spent in America, working as a busboy/waiter/line cook in a shoebox-sized restaurant in lower Manhattan. Mr. Chen, the owner and operator of Chen's Palace #2, was the first real Chinese Mr. Song met in America. Mr. Chen taught Mr. Song to play chess, how to run a restaurant for profit and how to speak Spanish. Mr. Song liked Mr. Chen, liked his wrinkled skin and perfect dentures and the full grammatically correct sentences he spoke. But Mr. Chen found out that his protégé Harold Song, formerly Huan Sheng, worked for the Investigations Department from '70 to '73; he found out that Mr. Song investigated anybody with a middle school education or too many books or too loose a tongue. So Mr. Chen came after Mr. Song with a stainless steel kitchen knife.

But that was behind him now. Now, as he stood in a newly-decorated, lavish symbol of his success, he felt happy to be wearing blue jeans and a t-shirt, not a suit and tie, happy to be cooking for fun, not profit, happy to be authoring the greatest and most prosperous

chapter of His Book.

The soup smelled delightful, and he poured it into bowls, and called for the boy.

But the boy did not come.

Leaving the food on the counter, Mr. Song paced around the ground floor looking for the boy, but he was nowhere to be found. According to the contract he signed, Mr. Song and the boy had to share the kitchen and dining room area on the first floor. Otherwise, the dying man remained upstairs where he belonged. Fortunately, this had not been a problem: the dying man had been too drugged and weak to come downstairs.

Since moving into the house, Mr. Song had established a routine. He made the boy breakfast, gave him lunch money, and put him on the school bus. Then, before heading to the restaurant to begin preparing the mole sauce, Mr. Song took the dying man a cup of potent tea and spent some time listening to him. He learned things this way, things the detective did not know, things he did not enjoy knowing. For instance, he learned the reason why raising turkeys was more rewarding than keeping a cat or dog. He learned about the different types of clouds, and that the dying man was a “non-practicing Jew” and had been married once, two things he mentioned in passing and never brought up again. After a week, Mr. Song had come to a conclusion: the dying man, who had yet to mention death or despair, was the cleanest (and most pliant) patient he had ever cared for. All he had to do was shave his beard or help him to the bathroom or give him a pill with cold water to drink.

Mr. Song yelled for the boy and waited at the bottom of the staircase. Silence. He climbed the stairs reluctantly, already thinking of a suitable punishment for disobedience. Mowing the yard during the hottest part of the day? Cleaning the bathtub with a toothbrush?

Mr. Song found the boy on a step ladder, painting the dying man’s walls tangerine orange. In the middle of the room the dying man lay on a futon, which the boy’s mother used to sleep on when Mr. Song

came home late, smelling of fryer grease. He waved his arms but no one noticed him. He rapped loudly on the opened door and entered the room: neither the boy nor the dying man paid any attention.

He moved closer to the futon. The dying man's nose whistled, his breaths came in irregular bursts, and his eyes were red and inflamed at the corners. He leaned closer and whispered: "Pain?"

The dying man adjusted his head on the pillow, exhaled. Sour breath: a recognizable stench; more memories.

"Don't disturb him, sir." Mr. Song looked at the boy. His cheeks and button-down shirt were speckled with orange paint. The boy shook the bottle of pills in his hand. "I convinced Mr. Schiff to take his medicine. He'd stopped for a while. I believe he is better."

Mr. Song turned away from the boy. The dying man's face attracted his attention: the sunken cheeks, the inappropriate smile on his bloodless lips. Death, he knew, often came with a smile, and he tried conjuring up his father's face. But all he saw was the tree and the rope and the pile of excrement he stepped in when he and his uncle cut the Demon Monster down. Mr. Song watched the dying man's eyes move rapidly, and something inside him hardened. His blood swam cold in his veins, and he led the boy out into the hallway, shutting the bedroom door behind him.

"I do not enjoy punishing you," he said. "I want to protect you."

"We all die, sir. Mr. Schiff doesn't have to be alone."

"Do not say his name."

"Our guest calls the sex lines to talk to Inga because he has no one else."

"You are intelligent and losing weight so I will speak to you as I would a man." He got down on bended knee so that both he and the boy were the same height. He looked the boy in his ice-blue eyes: the triangular blood spot frightened him, and his insides softened. He wiped away a blob of orange paint from the boy's face and said: "You are mine now. I want you. Your mother did not."

"She didn't want you either."

Looking at the boy's fat face and strange clothing, his stomach turned. He stood up, making sure to be at full height and glaring down at him when he reminded the boy that he must stay away from the dying man.

"I will try to do better, sir."

"I made the special soup you like. It is in the kitchen. Go eat." He snatched the bottle of pills from the boy, and the boy descended the stairs one at a time, one hand on the railing.

Mr. Song entered the bedroom. The dying man was awake and staring slack-jawed at the walls.

"I enjoy the color," he said grimacing. "My stomach hurts."

Mr. Song shook six morphine pills into the dying man's hand. He held the water glass for him to drink.

"Your son is . . ."

"A work in progress. Stay away from him, please."

"Why don't you ever ask me any questions, Harold?" Mr. Song heads towards the door, sickened by the sound of his own name. "Wait. Tell me a joke before you go. I need a laugh."

Mr. Song faced the dying man. Long ago, when his first wife caught malaria, he told her jokes. Even as her fever sky-rocketed and sweat poured down her face, she loved to laugh.

"I can remember but one."

"Go ahead."

"A man finds a shirt in the very back of his closet, puts it on, and goes to work in the factory. He works hard all day, and his co-workers compliment him on the shirt. After work, the man stops to have a beer, and the bartender says the man looks very striking in the shirt and refuses to accept payment for the drink. Then, as the man walks home, motorists honk their horns and wave at him. 'We love the shirt,' they yell from their car windows. The man waves back, yells, 'Thank you very much.' When the man gets home, his wife takes one look at him and starts laughing hysterically. She laughs and laughs for a long time. Eventually, the man calms his wife down and asks her what is

so funny. And do you know what she says?" The dying man shook his head no. "'Husband,' she says, 'you are not wearing any pants.'"

By mid-April, Mr. Song was spending more time at home, redecorating, painting, rearranging furniture, and hanging art work. In the afternoons, after the work was complete, he watched the boy do sit-ups and push-ups in the backyard, made sure he completed his algebra homework. In the evenings, he cooked low-fat dinners and he quizzed the boy on the different kinds of food people ate in other countries.

"France?"

"Snails."

"Thailand?"

"Crickets."

"Ireland?"

"Sheep guts."

"South Africa?"

"Goat."

When the quizzing was over, the boy would ask about the dying man and what the detective found out, but Mr. Song always kept quiet. Until one night when the boy asked why his mother never called. That was when Mr. Song showed the boy the detective's emails and pictures.

"Mr. Schiff is young to have cancer. This is his family? Is that Poland?" The boy reached for the faces on the screen but stopped himself. "Were his grandparents really made into soap?"

"Of course not," Mr. Song said. "You have seen too many movies. They died of disease, just like his parents."

"So Mr. Schiff is an only child."

"You are an only child. So am I."

"Maybe you could do something for him."

"There is nothing to do."

"I hear him singing at night. I've even heard him praying. Why did you hire a detective?"

Mr. Song made the boy delete the emails.

Mr. Song prepared scrambled eggs for the boy, while gazing out the boats on the water. Cumulus clouds floated across the blue sky. The remodeling was complete, and he was happy as he flipped his tie over his right shoulder to avoid stains.

"I love the water," Mr. Song said.

After plating the eggs and sitting down, the dying man shuffled into the kitchen wearing a terrycloth bathrobe and slippers. Mr. Song had not gone upstairs in days. The dying man's beard was thick and dark. His pajamas were dirty. He sat down at the island beside the boy.

"Good morning, Harold. Good morning, Christopher."

The boy and the dying man exchanged glances.

Mr. Song sloshed coffee into a mug and served it.

"I enjoy your tie, Harold. It brings out your eyes."

"Go wait in the car."

"I'm waiting for the bus, sir."

"I will drive you to school. Go."

The boy reached into his book bag, retrieved a book — something by Ray Bradbury, Mr. Song could not see the title clearly — and passed it to the dying man.

"I liked the parts about Martians," the boy said. "If you have anything else like it, I would —"

"Go to the car."

Alone with the dying man, Mr. Song said:

"You broke our agreement."

"Christopher came to see me."

"Do not say his name. The boy talks of nothing but turkeys now."

"They make excellent companions."

"Dying men do not make excellent companions, especially for little boys."

The dying man tightened up his robe. He had a hairy chest with little red bumps on it. He slurped his coffee, wincing in pain. "You stopped visiting. A normal person would be more curious about a

stranger living in the same house.”

Mr. Song straightened his tie. As he walked towards the front door, he told the dying man that if he was well enough to get out of bed then he was well enough to shave himself.

“Wait, stay just a few minutes. Please.”

Mr. Song stood with his hand on the brass doorknob, thinking about his father’s tree. He went back into the kitchen and sat down. For an hour, he listened to the dying man ramble on about the weather and the local real estate market, his former profession. Then they played a board game called Sorry and as Mr. Song shuffled the playing cards and moved his pawn from “start” to “home,” he debated whether or not he still possessed the strength to end human suffering.

An abundance of friendly customers forced Mr. Song to leave the restaurant early one afternoon. He needed to see the boy, make sure he was steering clear of the dying man and when he opened the front door, a yeasty smell overwhelmed his senses. He tracked the smell to the kitchen. There, he found the dying man sitting in a chair in front of the oven, the boy’s legs dangling off the counter nearby.

“We’re baking sourdough bread, sir.” The boy was wearing slacks and blazer with brass buttons. “Do you want some?”

Mr. Song drew nearer and discovered that the dying man’s face was clean-shaven and very pale. Bits of bloodied toilet paper covered his sunken cheeks.

Mr. Song and the boy sat on the end of the boat slip. The boy threw pebbles into the lake. Mr. Song, home early again—this time due to the smell of ground beef and flour tortillas—offered the boy some chocolate cake from a plastic bag.

“I’m down to one-fifty, sir.”

“A little piece will not harm you. Javier made it for you. It is a treat.” The boy shook his head no, and Mr. Song dumped the cake in the water and sat down beside the boy. He removed his suit coat,

folded it, and placed it neatly in his lap. "It is quite hot today. Maybe I will buy us a boat. You could clean it. Do you get sea sick?"

"Boats are expensive and a lot of work."

"I enjoy work. We could fish together." He paused. "My uncle and I caught a Chinese paddlefish once. It had a nose like an elephant's trunk. It was over two meters long and when we got back to the village . . ."

"I've heard this story before. 'When we got back to the village, everyone chanted my name.' It was a good one, sir." The boy stood up, removed his sweater vest and dress shirt and then his khaki pants.

"We need to buy you some regular clothes."

"I dress for success. Like you."

Mr. Song caught a glimpse of the boy's protruding white belly and looked away—at the chocolate cake slowly sinking. He could feel the boy's eyes and said: "I appreciate you not going through my belongings anymore. I appreciate you staying away from our guest."

"Whatever. I'm a good fat boy."

"We can talk about sinology again if you would like."

"Maybe later."

Mr. Song felt the wood creak, heard and felt a splash, and wiped away the water from his shirt and tie. The water rippled and bubbled where the boy leapt in. Could the boy swim? Mr. Song could not recall so he waited, counted to ten, twenty, thirty before diving into the water.

When he emerged, breathless, the boy spat a mouthful of water in his face.

Boys and girls in shorts and t-shirts ran up the steps of the YMCA. Mr. Song shut off the engine. In the passenger seat the boy read a paperback, some type of science fiction novel with yellowed pages and a musty smell.

"I've been doing my exercises." The boy turned the page without looking at Mr. Song. "I've stayed away from our guest. Why do I

have to go to camp?"

"For social practice. I do not want you at home all day." Mr. Song took the book away from the boy, placed it in the glove compartment.

"What about Marco and Polo, sir?"

"I am not discussing the turkeys again."

"When was the last time you visited Mr. Schiff?"

Mr. Song pounded his fist on the steering wheel.

The boy stepped out of the car. He adjusted his shorts in the rear and moved towards the glass doors where a tall black man in a track suit welcomed him by mussing his hair.

Mr. Song's mood lightened after dropping the boy off, even though he was certain that the boy would not make a single shot in basketball or talk to a girl.

Not wanting to go home, he drove to his restaurant and sat in the near empty parking lot. He stared up at the wooden sign above the door marked MEXICO LINDO, reviewing how he got there in the first place. He spoke Spanish and had worked with Mexicans for years and had made good money from this business. He had treated his workers fairly, paid them well, been gracious and charming to his customers, many of whom called him Harold and shook his hand when they walked through the door.

But, like his new house by the lake, this place, once a refuge from his second marriage, had lost its charm. Mr. Song, inexplicably, was ashamed of what he worked so hard to build. Lately he had had to force a smile when husbands and wives and kids came into his place of business, smiling and pretending that they were all friends who drank beer together and barbecued chicken together and watched baseball games together. When he brought hot plates of fajitas or refilled the salsa bowls because the wait staff got overworked, he longed to smack the children's hands as they colored on his nice clean tablecloths. Even his employees, who were always loyal, angered him now. Every face represented some failure of his. Busboys who smoked reminded him of the bribes he had taken while working for

the Chinese government. Cooks who kept clean stations reminded him of the loudspeakers he installed across the countryside. Every hostess's face looked like the boy's mother's face, and as he examined the sign—MEXICO LINDO—he imagined that somewhere the rubble of his failures collected in some secret location: perhaps an endless colorless flattened field where nothing grew, and the wind never blew.

Mr. Song retied his tie, exited the car. He unlocked the restaurant, walked to the bar and sat down. The chair squeaked. The liquor bottles enticed him. He poured himself a whiskey and let it sit on the bar in a spotless shot glass. In the kitchen Javier banged pots and pans. Mr. Song knew precisely what his executive chef was doing: chopping cilantro for salsa, peppers and onions for fajitas, preparing refried beans, working on mole and red sauces. The smell permeated the dining area, and Mr. Song choked.

Javier called out, "Boss man? Is that you?"

Mr. Song rushed for the door, his stomach churning. He sat in his car, wondering where to go and what to do.

Loud jazz music played when Mr. Song entered his house by the lake: bass lines, saxophones and syncopated drum beats. It was late afternoon, and he had had another difficult day at the restaurant, dealing with the Board of Health this time.

Carrying children's Tylenol and an armful of poetry books (including some Chekhov), he climbed the stairs and opened the dying man's bedroom door. A woman wearing a blonde wig sat on the futon with the dying man's head in her lap.

"I'm Inga." Still cradling the dying man's head, Inga leaned over and lowered the volume on the music. "Nice to meet you, Harold. I met your son earlier."

"He said he was sick and could not go to camp today."

"He went to a friend's house down the road."

"The boy has no friends."

"You're mistaken, Harold. The friend's name is Robert. He's very

cute and polite.”

Mr. Song stared at Inga for a full minute. Despite the tiny pimples dotting her chin, she was attractive. Her eyes sparkled. She wore a skimpy black dress. “Which of the 25 provinces of Sweden are you from? Smaland? Blekinge? Vasterbotten?” She put a finger to her lips: black nail polish. Mr. Song breathed. “What is that smell?”

“Dope,” Inga said. “He was in pain. You should read to him.”

Mr. Song dumped the books and Tylenol on the futon. “Why should I read to him?”

“It is the thing to do.”

“Why?”

“It would be good for him.”

“It would not be good for me.”

“Not at first.”

“Not ever.” Mr. Song spied ashes on the hardwood floor and asked that she clean up the mess when they finished smoking.

Inga gently laid the dying man’s head down on the futon, making sure not to wake him and then she stood in front of Mr. Song. “I will dance for you if you ask. It’ll make you feel better.”

“You are disgusting. I am old.”

“I’m not talking about sex.” She tossed her blonde wig against the orange walls and moved in closer. Her real hair was black. “I’m talking about intimacy. I’m talking about making someone feel better. Simple. Do you know how to make someone feel better?”

Mr. Song felt the blood moving in his veins, cold and slow. He felt shame, and his suit hung heavy on his body. His feet were cemented in place.

She took his hands and placed them on the thin straps of her dress. She used his hands to roll the straps slowly down, down, down, finally exposing her pale white breasts. Her nipples were pink pencil erasers. She took a step back, covering herself with her hands. “You will read to my friend, Mr. Song.”

Dizzy, Mr. Song sat down on the futon. He opened up a book by

Sir Alfred Lord Tennyson and read aloud, stopping occasionally to listen to the dying man's erratic breathing or to watch Inga dance, naked. An overwhelming fear gripped him as he read "Ulysses," and he considered the meaning of the phrases "unequal laws" and "savage race." He shut the book. Watching Inga's slowly gyrating naked body, an erection crept up his leg. He told her to stop and then looked at the orange walls.

"Stop," he said, "Leave. Now."

Mr. Song sat in his luxury sedan outside Toys R Us. Through the shop window he saw the boy in the checkout line, handing a fat woman Mr. Song's credit card. The day before, the boy received a belated birthday card from his pretty blonde mother. Inside the card was a picture of the boy's mother's new family: a curly-headed man with dimples and two little girls with red hair and matching dresses. "Thinking of you," the card read. The boy composed a letter to his mother marked PRIVATE on the envelope, but Mr. Song intercepted it, read it, and edited it for grammar, not content.

"He is really dying," the detective said, and Mr. Song gripped the cell phone tighter. After clearing his throat, the detective continued in a deep baritone voice. "I spoke to his doctors. You know about his family, his finances. I'm finished."

The seat leather was hot on his back, and Mr. Song squinted into the sunlight. The boy, dressed in slacks and a powder-blue dress shirt, carried a white plastic bag across the parking lot. Mr. Song estimated that he had spent one thousand dollars and forty-one days piecing together the dying man's life to date, which was far less time and money than he spent searching for his mother when she came to the United States twenty-one years prior.

"Keep looking for something," Mr. Song said.

"The guy is not an enemy of the state. He's nobody. What is this?"

"The slow death of a bad habit," Mr. Song said and turned the phone off and blew the car horn. The boy slung his bag through the

open window on the passenger side and climbed into the car. The boy asked who was on the phone and why, and Mr. Song told him the truth.

“Mr. Schiff is very pale now, sir. His hair is turning gray. The singing has stopped.” The boy handed the American Express card back to Mr. Song and thanked him. He said, “Aren’t you mad at me for seeing him?”

“Yes, and you will be punished for it.” Mr. Song started the car. “Why did you buy Legos?”

“I’m trying to build something, sir.” The boy put down the box of Legos and stuck his nose in a paperback.

“Christopher.”

“Yes, sir.”

“To hell with her.”

“I caused her a lot of problems. Police. Guidance counselors. That thing with our neighbor’s cat.”

“I said to hell with her.”

Over the next few weeks, Mr. Song became an insomniac. He stayed up late, repainting, hanging different wallpaper, cleaning the oven, and reconfiguring the furniture arrangement in the den. He was determined to get the house right. Determined. But everything smelled like sourdough bread.

Meanwhile, the boy continued losing weight. He ran around the neighborhood in sweat pants, practiced diving off the boat slip, and one night Mr. Song caught him sprinkling ground-up laxative tablets over his broiled chicken and rice.

“I’m still fat,” the boy said, which were the first words he had spoken to Mr. Song in days.

Midnight. Noises from upstairs—talking, humming, singing. Mr. Song was in the den, pushing the couch from one corner of the room to the other. Earlier that day, while the boy was jogging around the neighborhood, Mr. Song prepared the dying man breakfast: corned

beef hash and eggs. When he carried the dishes back to the sink, he broke the plate and cut his wrist, requiring five stitches. The doctor, an Indian man with swarthy skin, sewed up the wound and said Mr. Song would have a scar.

Mr. Song dropped the ottoman he was holding. The singing grated on his nerves. The noises could wake up the boy. Mr. Song put on his slippers, went into the kitchen and boiled some water. He made a cup of very potent tea and walked to the foot of the stairs. Anxious but resigned, he climbed the stairs once more, cupping the tea cup with both hands, the steam rising, ticking his nose.

When he opened the door, the dying man stopped humming and rolled over on the futon. His hair, now gray and unwashed, spilled over the side of the pillow. They stared at each other for a moment. Mr. Song asked if the dying man wanted strong tea and the dying man nodded and Mr. Song shut the bedroom door behind him.

Holding the tea cup with both hands, the dying man asked Mr. Song to tell another joke. Mr. Song thought for a moment and said: "A man buys a house by the lake . . ."

The next day Mr. Song drove to the funeral home where he and the boy sat in a dimly-lit office. An ancient map of Israel hung on the wall beside a framed black and white photograph of a man in a baseball uniform. The funeral director, a man wearing black, sat behind a large oak desk, explaining what *shmirah* meant.

"It's about dignifying the dead. The body cannot be left alone prior to burial. A family member usually —"

"He had no family left." Mr. Song adjusted his tie, put his arm around the boy. "We are responsible now."

"Is the boy Jewish?"

"Of course not."

"Do you believe in God?"

"That is irrelevant. We respect your traditions."

The funeral director consulted with a rabbi, said the bill had been

paid in advance by the deceased. He said that Mr. Song and the boy have been granted special permission to guard the body and then he led the two of them to a viewing room where the dead man lay in a clean white coffin. A man in a black suit sat beside the body, reading the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. The funeral director and the man in the black suit shook Mr. Song's hand and then the boy's. They left, heads bowed, muttering to one another.

Mr. Song glanced at the dead man and then at the boy. He removed his suit coat, folded it, laid it across the clean white coffin, frowned, and then laid the folded coat on the carpet. The boy removed his clip-on tie, stared up at Mr. Song, mouth slightly open. The blood spot on the boy's left eye had shrunk, and it was no longer triangular in shape. The boy asked what this was that they were doing, and Mr. Song said: "This is punishment." ■

NOLAN CHESSMAN

STREET POCKET PARK

After Ed Roberson

Stone ponies crack and rear, an almost
daily beat of boredom. We cannot close

our ears to it. Their eyes are hen-
pecked, soft. Their mouths are thatched

with hay. The river is silting in, lull
of soil gently slumping, the bed

of cobble cold. A parade-ending din of blue
houses slip their stilts. We are without words

sullen plums pocked and marred, vulnerable
to each other, to any thing's tiny teeth.

JOURNAL ENTRY WITH COAL GAS GATHERING

My dear atomist,
take this
map, worry it
to your brow and feed
the wooden mouth-
piece through your lips
and breathe. Next
morning awake
bluntly, wet
feathers leaking sweet
bluish-pink beneath
your head. The diamond
uncut finds
fire, a brilliant
lightlossness caught
and kept, a cloud
of coal dust dimming
the day down
to this.



*He used this the axe to cut down clouds, to stuff them in
his ears so that he didn't have to listen anymore.*

J.A. TYLER

THIS AN ANIMAL DREAM

The man he took an axe into the woods. He buried it in the ground, under moss, replaced with soil and it sprouted into a tree, this axe. And the axe into a tree, when it grew limbs and batted at the sky, the blades of leaves began to fall and humanity below it, this one tree grown from the man's axe, it hollowed out the world in ever smaller slices, unevening it all.

The man he took an axe into the woods and used it chopping against a stone in downward motions to make what was a spark. The spark was for a fire and the fire was for the man with the axe, his chest bowing in cold. The spark that was made crept into the wood, the pile the axe-man had bundled, and slept in its boughs. And though the spark dreamt of fire exploding in naked reams, no fire came. The wood it remained only a blanket to the spark, in the dream damps, and the man with the axe his skin, caving down into the darkness.

The man he took an axe into the woods. The woods were quiet. The woods were weeping. And the man with the axe he used the axe to break the code and splintered out the language of the woods, to ask it why it was so sad. The woods heard the axe and its song, the axe-man behind the rhythms, but it didn't answer. The woods they never shed their grieved panic, even to this man with his spoken axe, the sharp of his hands in their pockets going away.

The man he took an axe into the woods and came out new. He called to a man America, America and held in his ears the refrain. He called to a man Hey friend but the axe had gone by then and the difference

had gone by then and his strength had gone by then and the world had gone by then. It was just a moment with no axe exiting the words at night and recalling daybreak, pretending surfaces, mimicking how they used to play.

The man he took an axe into the woods. The man he took an axe into the woods and set it on its side. The man he took an axe into the woods and made it tea, caressed its back, found a flower and put it in a vase and put the vase on the forest floor and threw pine needles into the air, trembling out Hallelujah. The man he took an axe into the woods and found out about the will to live and unlive it, leaving the axe behind, on a rock, in a mist, with a dead flower and the stain of sap running over its hide.

The man he took an axe into the woods and the woods they brought a level to see. They measured and cut and worked into arrangements. The woods were unkind to the rain and with the sun made blankets with holes, failures. The woods with the sun spoke wind, chimed faults, and went into great bunches. The woods, the man with the axe and the woods, shattered to pieces, broke into moments, murmured to ashes, sweat the dirty light.

The man he took an axe into the woods and the work as he thought was progressing fairly. The foliage had signed no complaint letters and the sky was open again. There was no ceiling. The woods had reworked the ceiling. The woods had gone past a ceiling, the need for one. Sky crunched beneath his shoes, this man with his axe, the woods, and no better sound than broken openness, understatement, foundations mumbling.

The man he took an axe into the woods. The man with his axe and his hands and his feet he saw the ocean rising above his waist. His axe this man he made a plate of sardines and studded the floor with its

oils, screaming to the waves We do not doubt you. The ocean said Sea and it was a day the sun turned out the light and tunneled through the ground and went to winter beneath sheets of stars, praying for forgiveness, making bubbly echoes far below the drowning.

The man he took an axe into the woods and the woods they stirred the pot to boil. And the woods they brought up seed from their hands and scattered it at their feet and waited for the end of eternity. The level was off. The marker blown out. And the woods in disbelief just stood and stupored, unwilling to accept its errors, unwilling to placate its forces, unnerved by the lack of its own clear judgments. The axe and the man, blades cut sharp, water running over it.

The man he took an axe into the woods and was quiet when the woods piled together in song. There was a surge against romance, against light, and everything was whispered: The water will be here soon. The woods they brought the level to see and camped under its arches, culling the factual buzzing, un-worried about implications. The sun, in the sky, shining. The axe makings shards of moon, the man cupping his hands, the water overboard not enough to keep the woods out of suffocation.

The man he took an axe into the woods. The sky opened and into him went. This sky of blue. Its cousin of white, father of gray, mother of rattling haze. This sky that rains, snows, crumbles down on him, the man's head, as a kite. The sky flown as a kite, in the man's hand, and his mouth open wide to swallow it. Clouds past teeth, go down, rumble thunder in an empty belly.

The man he took an axe into the woods and the sky made in his sinuses a city full of lights, protest signs. A rail system gathered round his ankles, a train. People inside travel up and to his head, this man, his axe in his hand chopping down nothing, and the sky-city in his

heart. Lungs as sails, kidneys lakes of well-water mounting, spilling. The sky a hole, the hole an opening, the opening a mouth where the man and his axe and the woods all come out, followed by a train and passengers, followed by watery remains.

The man he took an axe into the woods and with it cut down trees and built a house. A cabin. Wood openings as windows and a woman carved in trunks, massacred in bark, and the man with the axe hacking at her until she breaks until she builds up until she splatters out and down and composed of rain. The axe a tool, the woman a house, the woods a heart. The axe-building man, the sun on a planked roof, the sound of rain in this sky.

The man he took an axe into the woods. The rain was coming down and his head was dripping and his heart was of spiders, crawling upwards. There was tissue in his hands, his hands of cut paper, his fingers torn open and issuing forth. There was a river. There was a lake. There was a cabin and it was his axe that built it, took it down, burned it back into the shape it first took, when there was an axe in a man's hands entering the woods and no rain, then.

The man he took an axe into the woods on a day when it was sun and light and not the darkness or the black of night. The man he took his axe and looked through it, telescope, and did not see the stars. The axe it looked on itself and saw deep down a home, a house, made of lumber and lumbering open, with window-holes and the mortar of cracks between. The sky seeing a man with an axe going into the woods, coming out a man built with splintered features, headless imaginings. An axe-man stumbling under a sky raining.

The man he took an axe into the woods and on his face grew a beard and cut the beard when it was long so that no one in the woods would recognize him anymore. It was a feat, the growing and the cutting, did

all with his axe, this man in the woods, when the sky looked above him like snow. White and powdered stems of crystal. The man in his clunking arms, wandering away from his body. Cutting off, going down, the hair softening the ground around him, when it fell, trimming the edges.

The man he took an axe into the woods and raised it up, the handle his hands, up and above his head. Brought it down, the axe, this way the woods, the sides, all cut and down and fallen off until the woods are an island and the man the only man left on its cliffs. This when the man says Adam and the edges of the world shrink to his toes and remove all ground to walk. The axe then a sad weapon, broken in its images, laid down. The axe cannot be a boat. The axe cannot be a bridge. The man cannot be an Adam.

The man he took an axe into the woods. The man gripped the axe. The woods made a forest, the forest a tree line, the tree line a mountain. The man and his axe in the mountains, on the mountain, swinging his axe into the sky. The cuts made arranged into a message, the message is Jump. The man in the woods on a mountain swinging an axe rocketed down through the slits in the sky, cannonball towards the moon, the sun, the cotton of a forever-bed.

The man he took an axe into the woods and from out of the woods came with a different face, a different name, trimmed and svelte, cut up and dragged out into something new. The woods becoming an ocean and the axe becoming a chariot and the man becoming a prince. Or the man becoming an enemy, chimed up and sparkling for his world-crushing or domineering. Or the woods a new sky, where white is the only. Or nothing. The axe a softened rag, clinging to a shore.

The man he took an axe into the woods. The man he took the sky into his pocket. The man took the sky out of his pocket, dusted from

it the snow, and cleaned up the ice on its paws. The sky whispering, thanks. The man in the woods with his axe shaving the crystalline face of the white snow sky, the opening up of a conversation. The man in the woods and his pocket of snow. The man with an axe in his hands and the sky hiding. The man shoring up the choices, making sure the moments. The axe a carving tool, shucking ice, holding tight to frozen skies. The man's pocket, these snowed-in woods, this an ever-frost.

The man he took an axe into the woods. He used this the axe to cut down clouds, to stuff them in his ears so that he didn't have to listen anymore. He used this his axe in these the woods to cut down the trees and to make for himself a coffin, a box that his hands and arms and legs and feet can go into, for when he sleeps. And the woods in their silence and the ground in its flooring watched the man stuff up his ears and cut down his box and make of itself, the man and the axe and the woods, a grave.

The man he took an axe into the woods. There was a quiet. Then there was a noise. The noise was thunder. The quiet was rain. The lightning that cracked, it cracked open the handle of the axe, spit sparks off the blade of the axe, burned the face from the man standing in the rain listening to the thunder with ears turned clean away. The woods in a thunderstorm, lighting up the man. The axe an arm to the clouds. The gray in the woods with the man and the axe and the leftover rumble of forgotten faces and humming static.

The man he took an axe into the woods and found a river. The man he took an axe into the river and found a stone. The man he took an axe into the stone and found the heart of a woman he had left and forgotten before, when he was alive, when he was still. The man turned from the stone. The man turned from the river. The man turned from the woods. The man turned from the axe and himself, walking away, going somewhere that isn't and will never be and wasn't home. ■

SHAWNTE ORION

POEM YET TO BE WRITTEN BY BILL CAMPANA

After opening a package of Ramen
I realized that I didn't have three extra minutes
so I ate that petrified brick of noodles
dry and crunchy and beige

Then I drank a glass of boiling water
burned my esophagus like a fuse
before sprinkling the mysterious
contents of the seasoning packet
onto a coffee table mirror

Chopped those granules
into parallel lines with a maxed out
credit card and snorted that MSG dust
through a rolled up food stamp

Then I did some jumping jacks



*The sporadic house or abandoned structure
appeared, disappeared.*

COUPLE

You couldn't see it but it was out there, the ocean, to their left and down, way down, concealed behind the dome of fog that had descended suddenly and cinematically and that for the last few miles had made driving increasingly problematic. He, for his part, concentrated on navigating the twists and turns of the sleepy two-lane highway as carefully as he could, slowing the car to less than ten miles per hour, then five, lurching forward grandma-like so that his nose almost touched the glass (and he could feel the coldness out there, too, the temperature dropping rapidly) as the whiteness consumed more and more of the world outside their windshield; and she, for her part, elicited a series of non-verbal murmurs meant to indicate her mounting fear and panic, having forgotten about her earlier bout of nausea/car sickness and their mild disagreement on the subject of the artistic merits of Wim Wenders, leaning back further and further into the factory-fresh plushness (the car was new, a recent present to himself) of her fully reclineable chair. Soon it got to where they couldn't discern oncoming traffic, the road's dotted yellow line, anything.

"Stop," she said finally. "Stop the car. Pull over. I can't see a damn thing. It's like a dream. We could go off the road and not even know it."

But just then the fog broke a little, then a little more, and they could once again see their headlights weakly illuminating the road, the strips of yellow demarcation and the curving landscape ahead of them. By then, however, they were in the other lane, the wrong lane. He swerved back, the motion startling her even though the car wasn't moving fast. Fortunately no cars had been coming from the other direction. Since this was a vacation, a coveted three-day weekend that they'd managed despite inflexible schedules and staggering workloads, they tried not

to think about it too much, death.

"How much longer you think?" she asked, knowing it was at least another half hour, perhaps longer, but wanting to say something, to put the chill of mortality behind them.

"Probably about another half hour, I'd say. You okay?"

"Yeah, fine."

"I could still pull over."

"No, it's fine. I'm fine."

They continued driving, watching the grim whiteness eventually recede. And there it was: the ocean. Dark, melancholy. The sky was growing dark, too, frosted with the first evidence of stars and moon.

"Are you sure you're sure?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. "I'm fine. Really. I wouldn't say it if I wasn't."

~

They were a couple, together. One of them had been married before. One of them had been in a long-term relationship that the person didn't like to talk about much. They were in no hurry. And so they lived in a tastefully decorated apartment, had an exotic-named cat, many plants and prints and hobbies (individually, collectively), but he, the man, had been having his doubts as of late, as men tend to do, and she, the woman, sensed these doubts and was doing all she could to try to understand them, as women tend to do.

~

His boss had said this is totally last minute but his cabin up the coast was available for the weekend, this weekend, and if you don't have anything else going on then why not get out of town, escape, relax, debrief, come up for air. Actually, they did have something going on, but after an exchange of emails they agreed to cancel their plans and take advantage of the cabin, because how often do those kinds of offers

pop up (from your boss, no less), and true, they had been a little burnt out on the city and definitely could use a quick, revitalizing getaway. His boss had said cabin then corrected himself. "I say cabin because it's out in the woods, the middle of nowhere actually, but you've got all the amenities, all the comforts – TV, microwave, stereo, DVD player, espresso machine. It's yours if you want it."

Once they'd headed inland, away from the coast and the heavy ocean air, they made a wrong turn and then had to backtrack several miles. By now it was overwhelmingly dark. Street signs were few and far between, and even the ones that were there were difficult to see anyway. The sporadic house or abandoned structure appeared, disappeared. They slowed and argued. Where was this place? He turned off the radio to concentrate better. The headlights seemed inadequate, a dated technology. Nature was winning, would always win. She read the directions over and over, scrutinizing the piece of paper like it was a poem, seeking hidden meanings, deeper levels of language and mystery.

~

All along it had been clear who needed whom more, and it was only a matter of time before this knowledge would be too much.

~

Eventually they found it. Or thought they found it. It had to be it. There was nothing else. This seemed to be the right dirt road, the one that curved left and then right and then went straight for another two miles or so and then kind of dead-ended. Quoting the directions verbatim. They parked and walked up the gravel path that led to the cabin that wasn't really a cabin. The cold night air caused them both to shiver, accelerate their pace.

But the key wasn't in the boot. The key was supposed to be in the

boot that was underneath a bench on the front porch, but it wasn't there. There was no key. His boss said the key would be there. He kept looking and looking and looking. No key. The boot was empty.

"What do we do?" she asked.

"Try the door?" he suggested.

He tried the door. Locked. It was dark inside, outside, everywhere. Never in his life had the absence of light been so profound.

"Now what are we going to do?" she said.

"Please don't start," he said.

Next he went around the back, almost tripping twice on his way. He couldn't see a fucking thing. It was black and quiet and still, and he remembered why he didn't like the outdoors all that much, even though he had all the gear: tent, stove, inflatable mattresses. He inched along until he located what he hoped was the back door. Which was open. He found a light in the kitchen and then walked through the cabin turning on lights as he went and then opened the front door for her.

"This feels weird," she said, not coming in yet.

"He probably just spaced and forgot to put the key in the boot. That's all."

She came inside and he returned to the car to get their luggage, his footsteps amplified on the gravel path, rising out into the night like a distress signal.

~

But the woman was having her doubts, too. It was more mutual than the man suspected, and when he delivers his speech, which is coming, which is constantly being honed and revised and replayed in his head, softened and hardened and softened again, she will be relieved as well.

~

The first thing they did: have sex. This was the ritual. Whenever they vacationed and arrived at the hotel or bed and breakfast or wherever they happened to be staying, they immediately retreated to their room, locked the door, disrobed and made love. They couldn't say for sure when it had started (Kauai? Corsica? Venice?), but now it was as much a part of their traveling itinerary as seeing ruins and sipping cocktails at sunset. The fucking more drawn out, more intense and aching than the everyday fucking they did at home in their own apartment in their own bed. The different context added an edge, another presence almost. Vacation sex, they called it. And the first coupling of the trip was invariably the best: the most release, the most pleasure, the most raw and pure giving of themselves and their bodies to each other.

Afterward they explored their surroundings. Which, turns out, was really more like a cabin than his boss had led him to believe. The uncarpeted wooden floors creaked, were uneven. Air from outside penetrated the thin walls. Dust-shrouded knickknacks here and there, and lots of plaid. It was just a kitchen, a living room, a bathroom, a bedroom. Minimal furniture. There was a fireplace, but where was the TV? The stereo? The DVD player? The lone source of entertainment was a transistor radio, an object from another era. He turned it on and it was tuned to a big band station, static mingling with the buoyant, anachronistic horns. His boss and his boss's wife had been here the previous weekend, and his boss had said that there was plenty of food and plenty of wine and to please help themselves. But there was no food. There was no wine.

"How old are these people again?" she asked.

"Just a little older than us. He's thirty-five, maybe thirty-eight, I don't know exactly."

"Weird."

"Maybe they're just going for the authentic rustic thing."

"Maybe."

Later, when she was brushing her teeth in the bathroom, she called him over to the medicine cabinet.

"Look at this," she said.

It was all old people stuff: Ben-Gay, Doans, Metamucil.

"Maybe his wife is older," he said. "Maybe that's how he got the money to start the company."

"You've never seen her?"

"No, just heard. She kayaks and does yoga. That's all I know, basically."

They got into bed, depleted from the drive and the vacation sex. They had to pile several blankets on the bed to stay adequately warm. When they switched off the lights, the darkness again asserted itself: total consuming blackness. As obscuring as the fog from the drive. They couldn't see each other. They couldn't see anything.

~

He was distant. He admitted this. He apologized about this. Repeatedly. She said it didn't matter if he said it all the time, that he was sorry about being distant (and remote, and, at times, unknowable), it still didn't change the fact that he was distant. I'm sorry, he'd say, yet again, like a mantra.

~

In the morning they did not want to get out of bed because getting out of bed entailed driving back to the coast and heading south and stopping in the nearest town to buy food and coffee and supplies. So they lingered. It was a vacation after all. They drifted off to sleep again. The morning continuing outside, beyond them, unfathomable as a distant planet.

Footsteps. They woke to the sound of footsteps. In the living room. In the kitchen. The putting of cans on shelves. Water running, shutting off. They didn't look at each other. They didn't move.

Then the door to the bedroom opened. There was a woman stand-

ing there, an older woman. She let out a gasp and then a man rushed up behind her. He was older too.

“Who are you?” said the man. “What are you doing here?”

They were both naked. They couldn’t explain. He tried. She tried. They apologized. It was a mistake, a misunderstanding. They got lost but thought this was the right cabin. The key wasn’t in the boot. They should have known. All the clues. Looking back now. Sorry. So sorry. So very very sorry. The older woman was breathing heavily like she might have a heart attack or stroke. The older man tried to calm her, to tell her it was all right, it was nothing, these things happen, this is the world we live in now.

They grabbed their belongings as quickly as they could, scrambling like discovered adulterers, and ran out of the cabin.

~

The drive back to the city was mostly silent. They were stunned. They were processing. But occasionally they’d say things like “Weird” or “What a trip” or “Did that really just happen?”

~

And more than once (in fact, many, many times), while driving home, he thought of what he knew he must do but had not yet been able to bring himself to do, how he kept putting it off and making excuses and not now and soon and the timing’s not right and her birthday’s next week and the week after that it’s Valentine’s Day and then something else, always something else. Because this is what you do when you love someone but not enough.

~

And more than once (in fact, many, many times), while driving home, she thought of the older woman and older man. How they seemed as one. As if one could not exist without the other. How was that possible? What was their life like? Were they happy? Were they sad? Did they really, truly know each other? How had they been able to make love last a lifetime? What was the secret? Or did they pretend just like everyone else?

~

Getting closer, only a few more turns and blocks, she estimated, at a stoplight, waiting. Her eyes were closed and had been for some time, from before the bridge, before you got that postcard first glimpse of the city beckoning like a lover in the distance. The car didn't even make a sound, idling there.

"Are you awake?" he asked quietly, almost a whisper, the third time he'd voiced the gentle inquiry.

She didn't answer. Then the light must have turned green, because the car floated forward, back to life, sleek, smooth advancement.

But she was in fact awake. Had been the whole time she had her eyes closed. But when asked if she was awake, she wasn't ready to respond, to reenter the tunnel of their lives. Soon she would do that. There would be unpacking and dinner and Sunday and then work the day after that. But not yet. For just a little longer she wanted to be free, alone in her reveries and ruminations, feeling the car edge one way and then another, not knowing what was coming next, her body reacting to a force larger and greater than itself, herself.

So she kept her eyes closed and the car glided into another left and they waited at another stoplight and her eyes were still closed and she thought yet again of the older woman. The older woman with her long gray hair tamed by a long braided ponytail that was draped across her shoulder and down her chest. Her body short and squat and powerful. A woman of the past, from the past. She reminded her

of her grandmother, who also had long hair as an older woman and who told her to never cut her hair, no matter what she does, never ever cut her hair short like a man's. The older man was less vivid in memory, but she still could conjure a general composite: bald, thick-necked, flannel shirt, stronger than his years would indicate.

~

It felt good to be home, a spilling relief, like they'd been away for weeks instead of less than a day. They parked their car in the garage below their apartment building, took the elevator to their floor. The door to the apartment was, curiously, unlocked. Had they forgotten to lock it? Probably, the way the whole weekend had been going. But they were hoping to salvage the situation by having dinner at their favorite neighborhood restaurant tonight. First, however, a nap, a much-needed, much-deserved, perspective-changing nap. It was still early. They went inside.

"I'm so tired I can't see straight," he said.

"I know," she said. "Me too. Everything's a blur."

Turning on the lights. Shedding baggage and clothes and keys. Checking in with the cat, who was more excited and affectionate than usual. Ignoring mail and messages on the answering machine. And then, finally, collapsing into their bedroom.

But they didn't get far before they noticed something was off, wrong. The hardwood floor seemed to sway. The walls began to spin. In their bed was another couple, a man and woman they didn't know, had never seen before, about their age, speechless, afraid, and ready to flee. ■

BOBBY GREEN

Radios walked us everywhere
and —late —the music
we heard from Chi / from Buffalo
/ from raids moms made
on the Goody stacks downstate —on
Wilkens' shop —at Madison
and Townsend —where seventy-eights
meant Orioles —meant
Ravens and Five Keys —sounds
in the dark —from Harlem
/ Boston or “da Burgh” —the music
like dreams / the *gist*
of dreams and —sure — whole
neighborhoods inspired —when
Mr. Rhythm balanced his sweet wax
on summer weather / and
songs like these would
sweeten the night air
in Syracuse.

*

Night-times

were candle-scents / were chill —
windows left open —advancing
the spices and factory-summoned
summertime —were
dance-steps in church-lots / Saturdays
/ and spot-lit tunes
the ballplayers showed another grace for —

ready or not to wait –
but sure – shared in the air around –
what we heard in songs
boys ached to learn
the words for.

See how the moon – like a coin so thin
the slot can't see its value –
holds its own tonight – and – clarifying! –
shines – on these kids
still peddling seventy-eights in school yards –
forty-fives from the stage-steps –
from cartons after singing. And what's this
from Kabul? Maybe a breath?
Lips moistened a little / closed – when
the laughter seems / or the unlacing
seems first cue / and we improve
on smiling – improvise to say
how we will be tonight / how
you will be tonight – until
we are side by side
and answering
the hunger!

I'm getting home Elizabeth – and
picking the right thing out –
through miles my thoughts for you
must occupy – beginning
the day's drive earlier – the *medium*
depending (as poems) on miracle –
entered again as points / again
as complimentaries – from
the first (unskilled) first steps
done out-of-kilter – knowing
so much so long / from
that first glide

in arms / your arms
/ and *that* first
impulse to be
singing.

*

Dangerous (somedays) or simply
out of place deciding
rivals —some four or five -somes populate
their jokes about tight places.
Then the smile your brother flashed
and blues for half a century
speak for all of them —bright
as these sunflowers
I missed just days ago / lining
the drought-burned
shoulders west
of Canton.

*

Fingers hip back ache —sharpening
every sea-change phrase
I might discover —with poems
to begin / be drawn by —
and love I'd have lived without —
only seasons ago —
when every reason to doubt
weighing on creation
seemed reason enough —
and so! more
than I wanted
(after)
once!

*

How could I imagine love — or
sense *love* somewhere

in the music — in the change and chance —
and (who knows?) earlier —

with the first light filling in creation —
cued by desire / journeying —

when *any* (*every*) *where* began to feel —
and what would have been

first light sprawled widely on duration —
straight to your smile today —

and how you ask / how I keep close
a little longer — to feel

such promise love — as sunflowers
rise and turn — if only

to see about a morning — bringing
me from and back — unable

to say or to deny
their influence.

*

Lodging for less. The best in family recreation.
Believing in tread
I know is wearing away to history. And
voices the Lord assumes —
when verse and megaverse make points
by repetition. First light
was all the more and lovelier. And
these — ruing the lengths
of shared four lanes

and news and
speed-bars!

But since I am home almost – and
home in ways
no family talents had predicted – to be
with you's my schoolroom –
to be in love and fifty-five – remembering
how the kids' rooms glowed
on Hickory / West Onondaga – on
Seneca / Tioga. But
how can I say / serve – when horrors
abbreviate – when newscasts
stick all kinds of knowledge
to the children – setting
their sights on blood – with
cruisers / stun-guns
/ the shadowed sideyards
no greening
has relieved for
centuries?

Then think of the whole outdoors alive
with music and night-skating –
moments before the skating changed –
and the grey –skewed blue –
blue-black and stars –and galaxies
/ spanning the winter blocks
and bungalows –no nearer
to Sebring now
than the northside porches
were to projects –
not with the news tonight
/ the Bonneville's
front end playing
tag-ball with
disaster.

*

Wasn't that old Joe Clamm — with weight
to shed — getting
the colors right — a paint can clamped
and vibrating — until
the hues seemed right for Catholic school rooms —
part of this dream about a dream —
begun by this call I need to place — invited
to phone but nervous now —
for Ohio stars tonight — for places
we knew apart — before I worked
with Ray — had even
heard of The Eldaros / for
these nine years
two count between
two winter
birthdays.

Then this busy signal twice — a son
on the line — grandchild
loved so much his disappointments crush you —
while Bobby's thinking Dinosaur
/ thinking blues — best ribs between
South Boston and Fredonia —
until I'm this third try through — and
Ray's bro's remembering
Ray Green at thirty-five — when
"Dearest Dorise"
meant calls / "Surrender Baby"
/ "Baby Child"
brought on the collectors
/ cameras
made points / bass
points / and
sky lively
falsetto.

*

Maybe the cards did not fly right. And
duffles (stuffed) changed hands.
Maybe I'm eight nine ten —and unaware
of shades-drawn spots and barbecues —
places where kids with kids joined voices comfortably —
and cannot — even a few bars — harmonize —
entering the dark —with plans for questions
and quiz study —but listening —for words
to fall from the night air to my blank pages / be there
when I wake — to make them something else
and more surprising —until the poem's high lit
and sharing the chromatics —though
this would take years —take galaxies
/ guitars and streets
and pencilled scores / seasons
away from the proof-stone
blocks that I grew up on
/ and *forgiveness*
finally.

*

It's *all* an eye and ear can ever do.
Bob Green and Ray from Almond St. —
the shivers when Clyde (The Dominoes)
turn hearts to Capistrano —and
listeners —in Syracuse —or any canal city —
hearing the voice again —and
seeing the stagelights / the tables in clubs
where the kids sang
but could not hope to share a supper —
whispering (to themselves)
the promises : the demos / guarantees —
counting on sums
his Alladin letterhead made real —
but that letter

vanishing / the moment
absorbed
in magic hearts
would have to
pay for

leaving the kids / clefs to factory lines
and weekend singing – and letters
that kill and kill – recalled by the colors
of August wheat and evergreens
/ the classroom pace of history – by this
three-quarters moon tonight – observing
/ alien – lending its light to dreams – over
this freshened joe / this tank I follow
along Route 30 at State limits – returning
to you Elizabeth – with east-going
barrels down – at dusk – that
by next week's dark – while tables
are warmed and thanks go round –
and *finally!* – past
all doubt – the schoolroom's
shut tight – and God
lifts up the veil.

*

Had God desired these dotings on –
these homes made fast –
serious as prayer / praise – as the gaze
that burns – as if abstract
were ever again made bearable – these
barns abandoned – farm-homes
deserted for day-jobs after all – for
the uniform cuts of fabric
and coiffures – when dusks (alone)
would make another thing
of targeting – and we (for the record)

pay — forever wrong — see
to the ways the mind appreciates —
how the fields have to be
/ the (medieval) prompts
and disciplines —
poured chalk I suppose
and even odder
dalliance?

*

Was that Catawba or Isabella near Salina —
where some Irish mischief
played — or — in (inspired) clichés —
beyond the burger huts
and package stops / behind the quick-lube shops
where the strip ended — where
the dark seemed generous — where influences
such as schoolbells had never promised
sparked desire in boys — with much more
ahead than boys could row toward
afternoons — clocking the same meantime
and waking again in rooms
the size of open vowels — remembering
the perfumes — the grey-going
ebony — the scuffed orange
and grey-banded barrels
and glad wheels — the hawks
upstaging hawks / ignoring
the search-lit skies / the calls
for house-arrests
or deportation / the gas
poured over / into
(still) another
story-line?

*

What was a little glass or more? What
was the noise outside — where
the dancing then / and ends of winter
meant police — sirens and stuff
the boys would memorize the names for —
a spotlight and splendid ice
that asked for their attention — until
they were shooed away from that —
dared to peek — shooed down
to ordinary evenings
near the park swings — and —
working off
catastrophes — in less
than a keystroke
gone — then gone
in deep-water
pajamas.

OUR WHITMAN OF AMBIVALENCE:
CAMPBELL McGRATH ON POLITICS, NOSTALGIA, AND
CARPENTRY

“Working as a carpenter . . . doesn’t just teach you to hammer nails, it gives you insight into the lives of everyone who has ever hammered a nail.”

America is too large to hold in one’s mind. Its competing, contradicting, and coexisting ideologies are as variegated as its geographic expanses. Still, there have been writers whose work seems to capture in snapshots the complexities of its spirit, even if that snapshot’s hurried blur only hints toward something more definite, something still too expansive. These writers awaken in us the moments in which our daily lives and the greater world seem to constellate and make sense. But this “making sense” results in terror or futility as often as it elates and charges us with new energy. In fact, our own experience of our world is more often the blur than the clear image—we spend more time in longing than we do in knowing. Somehow, Campbell McGrath—poet, documentarian, historian—holds America in his mind and, through his stories and music and humor, gives us back our daily experience more clearly, more connected to the larger scene of America—its places, history and ideologies.

Author of ten books of poetry, Campbell McGrath has been honored with the Kingsley Tufts Poetry Award, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and a MacArthur Foundation “Genius Award,” among many other prestigious awards.

The following interview took place over email early this year.

Vincent Guerra: There seems to have been a resurgence of political poetry in the past few years, defined perhaps as poetry that explicitly addresses social injustice. Why do you think writers feel a new sense of permission in this regard? Or perhaps a better question would be, why has this always been a concern of yours?

Campbell McGrath: Political poetry doesn't necessarily address social injustice—in a perfect society political poetry would still be written, but there'd be no injustice to report upon. Since I'm a member of this society, no such luck. My point is: my primary instinct or concern is to write about my society—that comes first—and since politics both just and unjust are a salient part of that world, so it falls under my mandate. I am a documentarian of my society, my culture, my world, and politics is at times in the forefront of my poetic concerns, at other times off in the distant background.

VG: Your work seems interested in avoiding nostalgia for a pre-industrial era, a common complaint against those who oppose capitalism. How do you find yourself negotiating a critique of the present state of the world without expressing nostalgia for the past? Is this possible?

CM: I'm not opposed to capitalism, I'm opposed to greed. Capitalism gives license to greed, so they often go together, but not necessarily. There could be such a thing as "enlightened capitalism" and I'd be all for it. Maybe we should all move to Norway. No offense to previous economic systems, but capitalism is so vastly more productive that it's not much of a contest. Fernand Braudel, for instance, who was a Marxist, demonstrates that capitalism has been like a "rocket engine" for the material betterment of mankind. That's the upside, all the material stuff it begets. The bad side is the lack of a moral code, the alienation it wreaks, and the fact that the greedy, unenlightened version of capitalism seems to be the only model America is interested

in these days. So, nostalgia? For a “simpler world”? Like, living in a hut, shooting gazelles with arrows? Not for me, though I wish the capitalist world did not insist on exterminating such cultures in its race to global domination.

VG: Of your most recent collection, *Seven Notebooks*, one reviewer has said that your work “thrives on [your] dissatisfaction with the world.” Yet, one also gets the sense, through the often lush language and the encyclopedic inclusiveness of your poems, that your work thrives, too, on a love of the world – could you talk about this apparent tension?

CM: I describe myself, in “The Bob Hope Poem,” as “a veritable Whitman of ambivalence,” which I think says it all. Keeping in mind that ambivalence does not mean not to care either way, but to care both ways.

VG: Your author’s notes often publicize your diverse travel/living and employment experience. Young writers are often told to go experience the world or to learn a skill as part of their training. What is your advice to young writers?

CM: Can there be any argument about the value of experiencing the world – for anyone, but especially for a writer? Working as a carpenter, say, doesn’t just teach you to hammer nails, it gives you insight into the lives of everyone who has ever hammered a nail, insight into the pleasures and annoyances of working a craft, any kind of craft. Visiting and living in other cultures is especially vital for Americans, I think, as there’s such a myopic world view in the country, based not so much on malice as on ignorance. As a young writer you need to write as much as you can – put in as many hours working on your craft; but outside those hours, the broader your world experience the better, in my opinion. Especially if you end up in academia, which is

a very narrow field.

VG: What are you currently working on?

CM: Since *Seven Notebooks* I've published a book-length narrative poem about the American west, *Shannon: A Poem of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*. I'll have a book of "regular" poems coming out in 2012, and after that I've got another long project book in the works, 100 poems about the 20th Century, one poem per year, in the voices of various historical figures.

VG: Who are you reading right now? Anything you would like to recommend?

CM: Because of the historical project I'm involved with, I've been reading lots of biographies, history books, nonfiction of various kinds. But here are a couple recommendations: in fiction, *Divisadero*, by Michael Ondaatje; in nonfiction, *The Possessed*, by Elif Batuman; and in contemporary poetry, I've been reading and enjoying the work of Tracy K. Smith and Peter O'Leary. ■



There were lots of things he couldn't do but one thing he could was buy Beatrice a bonnet like the older ladies wore.

UGLY BROWN CAR

Bobby came home from work and told his sister, Beatrice, he'd like her to pitch in.

"Pitch in how?" she asked, sitting at the kitchen table and shucking onions from their peels.

Bobby told her she could get a job too, maybe at Jack's Hot House. She could work days, he said. Then they could pool their pennies and buy a car that wasn't the ugly brown car. They'd had ugly brown car for what felt like forever and lately, forever had been feeling not so great to Bobby.

"We need more than pennies for that," Beatrice said, wrenching the top off an onion.

"You know what I mean," Bobby said. "We need to save money for a better car. We need a car that can go more than straight. If you drive up a hill, ugly brown car dies. If you turn left, ugly brown car dies. If you turn right—"

"Ugly brown car dies," Beatrice finished. "We'll see. I can hardly drive."

"You'll learn." Bobby frowned. "What are you making with all these onions?"

"Oh nothing," Beatrice said. "I just felt like peeling them."

Onion tears brimmed in Bobby's eyes. He knew he shouldn't push Beatrice any further, that she only changed her mind once every few forevers, so he pinched the bridge of his nose and went out the backdoor. Here his garden waited. The garden was a brown space fenced in by gray, well-splintered wood, dotted over by tangles and gnarls of green.

Hello little lettuce that will be, he thought. Hello tomatoes of fad-

ing summer.

Bobby gathered five of the reddest tomatoes then sat on the plastic folding chair arranged to face the sunset. Bobby speared a cherry tomato on each finger and ate them that way, slowly, chewing each one and working the stems forward in his mouth to spit them out.

Bobby was tired. From his calendar, he knew he had worked two years and one month without a vacation. He had to pay for things for Beatrice and himself. They needed food and clothing and this car, so Bobby could get to work. His paychecks were not much bigger than small and, it seemed, the needs of the brother and sister loomed large sometimes.

Suddenly an onion flew out the open kitchen window. Bobby watched a few more white bulbs follow. He heard his sister singing a song from their childhood. It began, Left, left, left right, left. The rest was about ants but Bobby could never remember it. Bobby counted five more naked onions flying into the garden before the kitchen window shuddered on its sliders and finally, became still.

Beatrice was gone before Bobby woke up for work. He ate microwaved onions dipped into sour cream for breakfast, gathered the leftovers for lunch, and got in the ugly brown car. Jack's Hot House was on his way to work and when he passed it, Bobby worried his hopeful brain had created a cruel, puppet version of his sister. But there she was: wading through the dirt parking lot in apron strings.

At work Bobby groomed his accounts and stacked his numbers. He tinkered with some client lists. He ate his onions and sour cream lunch inside the ugly brown car, the scent prickling the edges of his eyeballs.

After work Bobby drove the ugly brown car in a straight line to Jack's Hot House. He jabbed the flasher button, left the keys in the ignition, and got out of the car. Jack sat on the swinging bench near the restaurant door. He was drying a stack of salad bowls and told Bobby his sister was not there any more.

"Did she work today?" Bobby asked.

Jack nodded. He told him how she'd filled up water glasses, put Caesar salad on tables, and rolled up silverware in napkins.

Bobby asked if Beatrice made any mistakes.

Jack said, "Yes, yes she did."

Beatrice had stepped on the foot of a crouched six-year-old child searching for a fallen chicken nugget. She cut in line for the bathroom, for the men's bathroom, forcing a businessman, a lunchtime regular, to wait an extra minute. She rolled up spoons into the silverware even though only forks and knives belonged there.

Bobby asked if Beatrice would come back to work.

Jack said, "Yes, yes she will. Tomorrow."

Bobby nodded and got back into the ugly brown car. He was so happy he forgot to turn the flashers off until he parked in the driveway of the yellow house. Beatrice came outside holding three tomatoes dangling from a vine like a mobile.

"What's the emergency, bro?" she said.

"I heard you went to work today," he said. "Jack said you did a great job. No mistakes."

Beatrice looked away. She had always been a little stealthy. "All I did today was trim your tomato plants. Some of them are looking grim!"

"A really stellar first day," Bobby said. "He's excited for you to come back tomorrow."

Beatrice stared down the road, in the opposite direction of Bobby's work and Jack's Hot House. Earlier the sun had collapsed into squat yellow and orange and now, a graying darkness hung.

"How do you think they make ketchup?" she said finally.

Bobby said, "It's not like I'm not going to see you there. It's not like I'm not going to notice!"

Beatrice turned so her stare went the other direction.

When Beatrice went inside, Bobby followed. The bowls spread over the kitchen table looked like the ones from Jack's porch, white with a thin stripe of blue around the rim. One of them held pulpy

remains of tomatoes.

“What do we have here?” Bobby said. He felt tired. An ache bit behind his knees.

“Smashing seems like the first step,” Beatrice said. “Ketchup-wise.”

Bobby sighed. He told his sister he thought vinegar was involved. And perhaps salt.

Beatrice kept going to work. She left early and came back late. She worked all three meals Jack’s Hot House offered: breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Bobby knew she stayed all day because he used his lunch break to drive the ugly brown car past Jack’s Hot House. Each day it died mid-turn on the way back to the office, blocking the road, and a trucker would stop to help Bobby turn it all the way around. Usually the trucker noticed what a real bitch a car like that was and recommended a check up. Oh immediately, Bobby agreed. Of course.

You never know when something like this might start to happen more than once, the trucker would caution.

Then Bobby nodded solemnly, agreeing that a car dying all the time was a terrible prospect, and drove the ugly brown car in a straight line back to work. During meetings he doodled on a yellow legal pad. One meeting he used the edge of a folder to draw the straightest columns, between which he created six different versions of a dollar sign, two versions of ketchup, and a single undersized tomato.

During the meeting’s five minute break, a coworker shifted so his chin was in his elbow and his gaze flicked toward Bobby’s legal pad. Bobby glared at him. The coworker shrugged and said,

“Think about food a lot?” The coworker patted his belly. “Lord knows I do. Thinking of stopping in at a restaurant for dinner.”

“Me too,” Bobby said. “My sister works at one.”

“You get a discount?” the coworker wanted to know. “Man, if I knew someone at a restaurant, I’d go all the time. Seems dumb to waste such a good connection.”

Bobby stiffened. “Of course. I go often.”

The coworker nodded.

"I'm going tonight, in fact," Bobby added. He thought it was about time. Two people who cared so much about one another, who needed each other so essentially, should uncover all their secret stones. Beatrice's job was a big secret stone and Bobby knew he was strong enough to lift it.

Even from across the restaurant, Bobby saw how Beatrice's hair crinkled around her face. How her cheeks had gone pink. She served alongside some older ladies who wore white, pillow-like shoes and bonnets. Beatrice's crinkle-headed hair looked wild alongside the older ladies' smooth bonnets. Bobby smiled at one of them. The older lady did not smile back. She wrinkled up her nose and re-tied her bonnet strings tighter around her chin.

A different older lady walked up to Bobby and said, "Just you then? All alone?"

Bobby pointed to his sister. He told the older lady, this one with a rounder, not so crinkly nose, that he was waiting for that server. He said that server would be ideal.

"Suit yourself," the older lady said. "But I can tell you, that server is new and already, very popular among the men. So it might be a while."

Bobby said, "Fine then."

Bobby followed the older lady past the Hot House bar, the Nut House. The older lady pulled a rolled up menu from her apron strings and handed it to Bobby. He opened it at the tiny circular table. Without reading it, he asked about the soup of the day. The older lady wrinkled her nose and said he didn't want that. Bobby stiffened and said, well what if he did.

"Suit yourself," the older lady said over her shoulder, her butt already shifting like balloons in the wind as she walked away.

Beatrice's face colored when she saw who the customer seated alone at a bar table was. She did not look at Bobby while explaining that Jack's

Hot House Hot Wings were two dollars a basket during Happy Hour. She nodded when he asked for the Caesar salad please. Bobby winked at her, like oh, I get it, you'd like to remain professional. That was okay. He would play along. A secret stone could be a nuanced stone.

An older lady in a bonnet brought his Caesar salad. Bobby saw Beatrice talking to Jack at the opposite side of the restaurant from the Nut House, the section with plush round booths, where the high chairs were stacked and servers were always restocking sugar packets. Children liked to make lemonade with the lemons from their parents' iced tea. Beatrice pointed toward Bobby and he waved. She did not wave back but Jack did.

Then Jack came over to the table and told Bobby lots of things. He told Bobby his sister was learning quickly as a server. He told Bobby his sister had a real knack for certain aspects of serving. Her tips were on the rise. The older women, practiced and poised as they were, fell often to jealous words, snide tricks. Beatrice's apron pockets had been discovered stuffed full of peanut butter. Someone had kindly left a bonnet on Beatrice's hook but that bonnet held some bees and what the bees did was not kind at all.

Beatrice was learning lots of things rather fast right now, Jack said. Perhaps she needed space to do that, time to grow.

"You're a gardener," Jack said. "How is it for your tomato vines, your basil clusters, your carrot rows?"

Bobby nodded. He thanked Jack for his input.

Then Bobby asked Jack whether his lettuce came in a bag. If the Caesar dressing originated from a packet, some water, a hasty swabbing with a fork. Jack nodded, like perhaps what Bobby said was true and he, the restaurant owner, had only to go off alone and consider the bad news.

Bobby woke up early to catch Beatrice before she left. He found her in his garden, where dead slugs floated belly-up in shallow lids of beer.

"How long do you plan on saving?" he asked. "Why work all the

meals?"

Beatrice shrugged.

"Who goes out to breakfast this season anyway?"

Beatrice shrugged again.

"How close are we to replacing the ugly brown car?"

Beatrice reminded Bobby she didn't know how to drive. Bobby reminded her she could learn. Beatrice told him she was. With Jack, from work. She was coming early and staying late and he was letting her practice circles in the parking lot.

"We go left," she said. "We go right. I wouldn't be able to do these things in the ugly brown car."

Bobby clenched his jaw. The ache bit him once, twice behind his knees. The dull pain in his lower back swelled. He asked Beatrice how much money she'd saved so far. She told him. The pain did not change but Bobby's expression did. It perked and lightened as he said,

"Oh, yes. Yes. That is enough. We can put a down payment on something quite nice."

"Then everything will be great," Bobby said.

Beatrice said she wasn't done learning. She said her money wasn't going anywhere until it could go somewhere in a place where the earnings meant something.

Bobby plucked a tomato from one of his plants. Take heart, little guys, he thought. Keep growing. Make firm skins we can scrape our teeth across and feel pride over the strength.

Beatrice put her hand on his shoulder. She said she wanted three more paychecks, a lot more driving lessons, and a plot in the garden of her own. She said Bobby wasn't growing anything she wanted to grow. Had he ever seen a picture of fennel? What about greens? One was called Rainbow Chard.

Bobby handed Beatrice the tomato with a bite taken out of it.

"You love tomatoes," he said. "You always have."

Bobby walked away to let Beatrice eat her tomato, to think over the prospect of replacing ugly brown car sooner than later. Once they

had a new car, Beatrice would finally see how burdensome the ugly brown car had been. She would be so grateful, finally, for everything he had done for him.

That afternoon Bobby said he had an emergency dentist appointment and left work early. He was going to make Beatrice a beautiful dinner. He consulted a cook book they'd gotten long ago and kept atop the fridge. He brought it down, dusted its cover, and pursed his lips over the recipes inside. He decided on homemade lasagna. He boiled tomatoes in one pot and the noodles in another. He hummed when ladling out the first pulpy layer in the blue-glass pan. Beatrice would love this. Beatrice would be ecstatic. Beatrice wasn't working dinner that night. She'd told him so. Beatrice would be hungry, tired, all worn out. Ever so grateful for a homemade meal. They could talk and decide on what kind of car would replace the ugly brown car.

He folded the edges down on the aluminum foil and slid the pan into the oven.

It was well after lunch. Bobby looked outside but didn't see Beatrice lumbering down the road. She'd been getting thinner lately. He'd noticed. A good meal, a strong one, that would be good for her figure. It would make her lady-like, calm.

Bobby checked on his plants. He dumped out a few lids full of beer and dead slugs. He refilled the lids from the case of beer he kept near the door. He weeded spots he'd been meaning to weed near the edge of the garden. He and Beatrice could make a new bed there, if they got their act together in time for the planting season. He'd give her the choice. She could plant anything she wanted there.

Beatrice still wasn't home.

Bobby turned the oven to warm.

Beatrice still wasn't home.

Bobby put the lasagna in the fridge. He ate a tomato raw for dinner. He wanted Beatrice to see the whole rectangle of dinner she'd missed, untouched.

Bobby went to bed.

Beatrice still wasn't home.

Beatrice wasn't home when Bobby woke up. The door did not yawn open; it was primly closed. The ugly brown car was in the driveway, dank little nose pointed onward in the direction of work, Jack's Hot House, the part of road that far up enough, might just curl a little. Had Jack been taking Beatrice there to practice, he wondered. Were they there now? Jack's Hot House didn't always serve breakfast. The older ladies in bonnets spent most mornings milking cows and shining apples for school lunches. The older ladies in bonnets looked too old to have children but always seemed to have a knot of little ones in tow. Bobby had seen them clustered in the parking lot, those times he happened to drive past on his lunch break.

At work, Bobby nudged his accounts toward completion. He made some phone calls. He mispronounced some names. He closed his eyes and willed the tomatoes to cry for him. Need me, tiny tomtoms, he begged. How would you feel without your fertilizer, your waterings? He opened his eyes when someone passing by his cubicle cleared her throat.

At lunch Bobby decided to walk to Jack's Hot House. One of the older ladies' husbands passed him on the road with a horse and buggy. The man whoaed the horse, whose lip drooped in the midday heat, and offered Bobby a ride.

Bobby sat beside the man and listened to him talk about school lunches, how appalled he was at the waste accumulated. So much styrofoam and plastic packaging, he said. If the kids ate better their immune systems would rise to the occasion and adults wouldn't worry so much about the transfer of germs.

"Anxiety is the biggest germ of all," the older man said.

Jack's car wasn't in the front, graveled parking lot when the older man dropped Bobby there. Bobby walked through the the Nut House and ran his fingertips over the dusty bar. The dust felt luxurious to him

somehow, coming up the color of mink and smelling sophisticated. He crinkled a napkin and left it in the drain beneath a tap.

A trio of the older ladies gathered on milk crates on the back porch. Their hair was naked in the midday sun, which struck and shone with so much vengeance Bobby felt something well within him. He felt gracious and generous toward these women who smashed bonnets over their heads each night and pinched the soft flesh beneath their chins with thin strings.

The women, as Bobby approached, either did not hear him or did not care. They were saying unkind things and watching a car weave between traffic cones in the pot-holed lot behind Jack's Hot House.

"She smells like ketchup."

"She gets the best tables."

"She's not even a good server but makes more money than we do."

"She lives with her brother. Who does nothing to curb her way of life."

"She is young now but her path is leading her straight to an agonized older life."

"Whatever Jack's teaching her — it's a lot more than how to drive."

"I disagree. I think she is the one doing the teaching."

"You may be correct. He never tasted this flavor of sin before she arrived."

"Not that we noticed. But in her case: it takes one to know one."

"We need the money more. How many mouths have they to feed? Doesn't that brother of hers do something not-honest down the road?"

The bonnets nodded in unison.

Bobby backed away from the older ladies slowly. He didn't turn around even when he got back inside Jack's Hot House. He nudged the door shut with a gentle click, a sound this side of invisible, probably imperceptible to older ladies haunted by live ghosts: busy children, wanting customers, jealousy urgent as a toddler. He backed up the entire length of Jack's Hot House, not even stopping when a stool he nudged toppled into its tall table, and the ketchup presiding rolled

to the floor. He backed up straight like he was ugly brown car, like it was the only way across the restaurant, like he couldn't turn around without shuddering to a halt.

Outside, Bobby kicked over the garbage can. Then he picked it up and kicked it over again. Aluminum cans sprayed tomato sauce. Wadded up napkins flurried, then flopped. Some became un-wadded. Bobby waited for someone from inside to come rushing out, shouting, wondering what had just happened.

No one came.

So Bobby went home and took Beatrice's jar of savings off the top of the refrigerator. Out back, his thumbs and fingers dove into the dirt. He felt the tiny rips of his severed tomato roots. Sorry little guys. Some of you are aborted, he thought. Some of you might repair yourselves and go on living.

Right before he dropped the jar into the hole, Bobby took a handful of bills from it. There were lots of things he couldn't do but one thing he could was buy Beatrice a bonnet like the older ladies wore. That was a step in the rigwht direction, he thought.

When he stood and turned around, there was Beatrice in the doorway, her full view on the garden, the jar he held. Her hands were at her sides, mingling with her apron strings, undone. She didn't say anything or look directly at Bobby. Instead, she squinted at a space beyond him, as though she saw something there, as though a bug circled her eye, as though there was something far off she wanted but wasn't sure what it was yet. ■

FROM NEBRASKA FAMILY TREE

1. Jed looks like clip art.
There is no father.
There is a lake
that surges with
antibiotics and 50 new homes
brings the population to roughly 60.
Works at the state patrol where
he tests envelopes.
Is poor
in groups. Neat and rodent
in appearance. A candle-
light kind of life.

8. Ruth felt the food spoiling
going down her throat.
We know now
the earth's bounty
is limited.
There was a great deal
of overdose
on any activity.
Let's remember
a majority of people in
the world use drugs.
Food, overweight.
Well known human abuse.
A religious preference first appears.

10. Partner's house was
rubber and pork.
Nervous of
people's intentions
and the hoey over shooting
social rodents.
Very scared
by the world
and what they
might think of him.



*Shane swallows the nothing in his mouth, in preparation,
then deposits the pill onto the back of his tongue.*

SNOW MONSTERS

Shane sits in his blue Impala at the curb. His wife's shift at the mall is over in nineteen minutes, not that she ever clocks out on time. He didn't mean to be this early to pick her up, is sure he's forgetting one of his errands, but even if he remembers it now, there won't be enough time for it. Best to be satisfied with the few he did remember, he tells himself.

After picking her up, too, saving her from the bus, there's the kids at three-thirty and three forty-five. Nolan from his school, Samuel from the corner just down from the junior high; Samuel insists it's faster like that, and that he doesn't care if it's snowing, or whatever.

Shane remembers being thirteen, yeah. All too well.

The corner's fine, even on a day like today, where if you let the delay on the wipers space out too far, a crust of ice will form on the windshield, and, bam, like that, twenty dollars for new blades.

Behind him in the parking lot are the mounds of dirty snow, months of it already. On Saturdays, when Nolan's here with him to pick Mommy up from work, Shane always pretends to have just seen a miniature door kind of embedded in one of those big snow piles, or a window, and — is that a chimney? Is somebody living there?

Each time he circles slow around the mounds, trying to stay ahead of the security Jeep, Nolan's head will track those igloos, his mouth held in that doubting, pre-smile mode. Because what if, right?

Shane doesn't remember exactly what it was like to be eight, no. But he knows what he would have liked it to have been like.

He plans, one day, to come out here, fix some mock window — just a pipe, even, up top — into the snow, watch Nolan's chest swell with magic, but it's always cold, wet, impractical.

Like the man coming into focus by the empty fountain.

Shane waits for the wipers to sweep the snow dust away again before leaning forward from his magazine.

Yep.

Guy's standing there in short sleeves, the cuffs of his jeans rolled and hanging loose, cigarette dangling from his lip like this is an audition for a fifties musical.

Except the bowler hat, Shane supposes.

Is this the new breed Molly's been calling 'hipster,' maybe? And, aside from being famously poor tippers, are hipsters impervious to the elements as well?

Shane smiles to himself, goes back to the article.

It's something about current trends in education. He flips through to the end—four pages—gauges that against the time left: thirteen minutes. Three pages every thirty seconds, then, with time to keep an eye out for Security.

Golden.

It's a word that hipster should know, and use.

Shane looks up as if to tell him that across all this distance, through all the glass and steel and unfamiliarity, and sees him instead in the rearview mirror. The back seat.

"Hey—!" he blurts and pushes on the brake for some reason, cringing up against the wheel in a way he's already ashamed of.

The hipster isn't hip anymore, either.

Instead of a t-shirt and jeans, it's now a shabby three-piece suit with an antique wool overcoat, like one of Shane's professors used to wear. The only thing the same as before's the snugged-down bowler, the snow on it not even melting yet. And the eyes. They penetrate, don't look away. Are amused somehow, at how Shane's swaying his back in, preparing himself for the gun, the knife, even just the hand, reaching all the way to him.

"If you have a minute," the non-hipster says, making a production—elbows, three layers of sleeve—of opening the leather briefcase

now on his lap.

“What are you—you can’t just—” Shane tries, his heart beating again now, and the non-hipster waits this out, his hands still holding the briefcase open.

Is he wearing eyeliner too?

“You can’t—” Shane says again, still stuck on that.

“It’s about your, your . . . ” the man begins, shuffling through papers in the briefcase. “. . . *Nolan*, is that his name?”

Shane fixes his eyes into the rearview mirror against this man.

Is this how it starts? Ransom situations? And what kind of competent kidnapper would target *him*, Shane?

But never mind all that right now.

“What about him?” Shane says, the world narrowed down to just the two of them now.

If need be, he can drop the Impala into gear, bound ahead twenty yards in one surge, through the glass doors of that store that keeps changing names every season.

It’ll accomplish something, surely.

“I’m sorry to tell you this,” the man says, and hands a stiff brown paper over the top of the briefcase to Shane.

No, not paper at all, but—film? Like an x-ray?

It makes a noise like small, fake thunder when Shane tries to flap it straight enough to read.

It is medical film.

Only, this isn’t—the skull’s shaped all wrong. Not like Shane’s seen before. He angles the film to the side, turns it all the way over, and finally sees it: the skull’s not the same because the shot was taken from above, some angle like that. Looking down. The shadow of a backpack zipper floating at the bottom of the sheet.

It’s not quite an x-ray, though. More about soft tissue.

The brain.

“I don’t know how you got in here,” Shane says into the rearview mirror.

The man nods, acknowledging that difficulty but not bothering to address it, and then cocks his left arm up, for his watch.

Shane studies the film again, touches it with the pad of his index finger, half-expecting his finger to dip into something syrupy, or for the image to flicker, slide like a touchscreen.

It's just what it is, though.

"Do you see it?" the man says, clicking his briefcase shut now, leaving it on his lap, the base of it angled up.

A gun in there, pointed at Shane? A pinhole camera?

"How do you know his name?" Shane says.

And no, he can't see it on the film.

The man smiles with one side of his mouth, watches a tall woman in tall boots walk by, her purse slung all the way around to her back.

Shane looks to her too but she's nobody.

"Security will be here in about half a minute," he says. "They make rounds every —"

"A bike rack turned over in front of the foodcourt," the man says.

Silence, silence.

"What is this?" Shane finally says.

"This is opportunity," the man says, knocking on the plastic back of the passenger headrest.

So he's real, then. At least that.

Shane breathes in, breathes out.

"What is *this*," Shane says, wagging the film.

"Glioblastoma multiforme," the man shrugs. "That would be a type four. Basically inoperable, at least when situated like that."

Shane feels his face heat up. He doesn't know if that means the blood's all left at once, or if it's all swirling there under the skin.

"What are you saying?" he asks.

"I'm going to need that image back, of course."

"Who?" Shane shakes the film for emphasis. *Doesn't* give it back.

The man purses his lips, looks out the window again. This time there's nothing. Just not-Shane, Shane suspects.

"Nolan," Shane says.

The man does his shoulders in apology.

Now the heat's all in Shane's eyes. Going to spill out.

"What are you?" he whispers.

"Not who?" the man says, a flicker of a grin there.

"I don't—" Shane starts, can't finish.

"Tumors like that are unusual in a boy his age," the man anticipates.

"But, you know. It's a crazy world, right? Anything can happen."

Shane's studying the film again.

This is Nolan?

In twenty-two minutes—no, fifteen, now—he'll be standing at the curb in the hug 'n go lane, his insulated hood pulled up over his head. He'll be doing what he calls 'switching feet'—going back and forth in a stationary waddle, to keep warm. The whole way to the junior high he'll be looking around the side of the passenger seat, to be the first one to see Samuel.

"No," Shane says.

The man just nods, though. "Fourteen months," he says. "Not all of them good."

"But I can—"

"Even if you take him to the hospital today. Right now. Last week. I'm sorry."

"Who are you?"

"And if I said you just get one more question here?"

Shane says it to himself, in his head: *Think*.

"This is what you would ask," the man offers. "Not who I am, but what I can *do* for you."

Shane nods. Yes, this. My one question.

"How long we got here?" the man says then.

Shane does the math in his head, off the radio clock. It hurts.

"Eight minutes?"

"Ten if she's still got a table," the man says, opening his briefcase again. Shuffling, shuffling.

It's what Shane had been about to say: ten if she's still got a table. He realizes then that he's crying. Either on the outside of his face or the inside, he can't tell.

Nolan.

"Opportunity," he remembers the man saying.

The man nods as if in response, still picking through his briefcase. Refiling a piece of paper nearer the front.

"I didn't say that out loud," Shane says then. Out loud.

The man keeps nodding, smiles, whatever he was looking for finally there in his hands. He closes the briefcase in victory.

"You might call this a special deal," the man says, "a one-time offer. You understand we don't provide it to everybody?"

For a moment Shane's heart leaps, a woman cresting the stairs, but then it's not Molly. Just Molly's hair.

"You can't even have gotten into the car," Shane says into the rearview mirror.

"Of course not," the man says. "Neither could I have a magnetic resonance snapshot of your son's limited future, but, well—"

"That's not how MRIs work," Shane interrupts. "They're at—they're at hospitals."

The man smiles wide this time, doesn't disagree at all.

His teeth are watery brown. Years of coffee, cigarettes. In the fifties they didn't know.

"What can I do?" Shane says.

"What would you do?" the man asks back.

Shane laughs through his nose, both hands still to the wheel.

"Trade," he says.

"Yes," the man says. "Trade. Exactly."

Shane isn't surprised. The only story he remembers from his junior high English anthology is a kid getting into an elevator with an old man, one whose daughter was delivering a baby, only everything was going wrong with the delivery. Somehow the kid got involved in the drama of it all, until, in the bathroom, he hears the old man

offering his life for his daughter's, for his granddaughter's, and then, hours later, in the cafeteria, the kid reaches up to touch the old man's forearm, tell him it's all right, and the old man collapses into ash, and the daughter and granddaughter live, and the kid, he's the only one who knows why.

Shane is that kid now, he knows.

Or, no: he's that old man. Has been all along, ever since his lower lip shook after reading that story.

When Molly gets here, she'll find the car idling, waiting, empty.

"And he'll live?" Shane says into the rearview mirror.

"Have his own family someday," the man in the backseat says, then narrows his eyes, looking at something definitely not in the headrest. "A foreman, looks like." He comes back to Shane. "His crew likes him. Respects him. As they should."

"Give it to me," Shane says, holding his hand up for the paper. Three minutes until Molly.

"It won't be like that, though," the man says. "In stories people can turn to columns of ash. In real life, a person can die for months, for years. Not even know himself at the end."

"But he'll live? Nolan?"

"He'll watch you die, yes."

Already Shane's picturing better ways. Accidents, insurance.

Except – wouldn't that be not treasuring each minute he has left with Nolan, with Samuel, with Molly?

At least this way, the man's way, he'll get to say goodbye. Again and again probably, surgery after surgery, but that's got to be better than a police officer at the door. Doesn't it?

"It'll destroy him, sure," the man says, "but he'll get put back together. Him and Samuel both. Children are made for this kind of trauma, it would seem."

"Two minutes," Shane recites, his voice already dead.

Still, it's been the easiest decision of his life.

What father wouldn't take that bullet for his son?

The man in the backseat smiles with his eyes, in agreement, and begins folding the paper tinier and tinier — all Shane can see, in flashes, is the occasional line of crayon — until it's an eggshell-white origami capsule, every edge smooth.

He hands it over the seat, delivers it to Shane's fingertips.

"Glioblastoma," Shane says, inspecting the cancer from all angles. It's heavier than just one piece of paper. As it should be, he suspects.

"One minute," the man says, tapping his own watch.

Shane swallows the nothing in his mouth, in preparation, then deposits the pill onto the back of his tongue. It's dry, sucks all the moisture from his mouth, but, only gagging once, he gets it down. Tells himself he's grateful for it, even.

"That's all?" he says.

"They won't be able to see it on the machines you have for two weeks, give or take," the man says, "but yeah. That's it."

"She's late," Shane says, nodding to Molly's stairs, and for a shrieking instant he knows this has been a trick, that he should have *read* that paper before swallowing it, that what it had to have said or been a kindergarten picture of was that he was trading *Molly's* life for Nolan's.

But then the man's hand is on his shoulder, assuring him.

"And as you know with blastomas," he says, "the memory becomes unreliable. At some point, you might not even remember me as I am now, would you agree?"

"But we made a deal."

"And it'll hold," the man says, his voice suede now, his hand still cupping Shane's shoulder, "but soon, much sooner than you would think possible, all of your memories, they'll be tinged with foreknowledge of this cancer, as if you were picking up cues — like some part of you saw it coming all along. It's completely natural. And, correct me if I'm wrong, but you're reading about school matters?"

Shane holds the magazine up. "Education," he says.

"So you were already thinking about that story with the old man in the three-piece suit. Add that to the cues you've been picking up,

the signals your body's been sending for months now, and it makes perfect sense for your mind to project someone impossible like me" —to show, he opens the door, the babylocked door—"have him deliver the news to you, perhaps even arrange it such that the cancer is voluntary, a sacrifice, an act of heroism, of—of . . ."

"Love."

"Yes, that."

"And you couldn't have changed clothes that fast," Shane says, playing along with this charade. This fantasy. This joke. Already remembering it as a joke with himself. A coping mechanism. An explanation for why he has to die. A way to shape the past such that he can accept the future.

And the grandfather in the story had been wearing a salesman suit, like he'd come from work, been sitting in that waiting room for days already.

The man tilts his head to the side, in agreement.

"Neither could I know that what Molly wanted you to do this afternoon was get some nail clippers for the dog," he adds.

Because they've been using wire cutters now for all these years. Courting disaster, infection, blood on the kitchen linoleum.

She'd told him twice this morning, before kissing him goodbye.

"Clippers," Shane repeats.

"Clippers," the man says, one leg down to the snow now.

"And he'll live?" Shane says.

"Two children of his own," the man says, shifting his briefcase across, looking suddenly ahead, to the stairs. "T minus twenty-two seconds," he whispers. Excited in a grim way, it seems.

Before he's gone, though.

"Why me," Shane spurts out. "Why broker this kind of deal just to me?"

The man stops his climb out of the Impala, chews his cheek a bit as if collecting his words.

"Did I say 'broker?'" he asks, a glimmer in his eyes now. "Correct

me if I'm wrong, but brokers are the middle man, yes? The agent?"

Shane nods, a wariness clenching inside him now.

The man smiles, pats the seat he's just sliding away from. "Agents work for other people," he says then, less coy now. "Me? I work for myself, Shane. For me and me alone. To help people like you, in need."

"Thank you," Shane says — an apology, really — and the man tips his hat, steps up into the blowing cold, and is already walking toward the mall, his gait not curt like Shane would associate with an overcoat like that, but young, loose, happy . . . satisfied?

He just saved a boy's life, though.

That has to be it.

He allowed a father to be a hero, allowed a boy to live.

Not a broker at all, but some type of angel. Somebody running interference on Shane's part. Or Death, giving Shane the one get-out-of-jail-free card he has each year.

Or, not free, really.

A life for a life, Shane guesses.

But why? That's what's sticking. Had the man been a broker, then he would take a cut, but if he's working for himself and himself alone, then he must be the dealer himself, the trader.

And . . . why trade?

Why does anybody?

Because they can trade up. Get something better, something they want more.

But how is Shane's life worth more than Nolan's?

It doesn't make sense. But neither does the man being there at all. And maybe that's part of the forgetting him: a logical inconsistency at the center of the experience, that makes it easier and easier to forget, to dismiss, to laugh away, to never tell anybody about, because they'd see the obvious holes in the story.

Shane smiles, rubs his throat with his index-finger knuckle, and then Molly crests the top of the stairs, the wind catching her hair, her scarf whipping up behind her.

Shane smiles—only two minutes late today—is already trying to gather an excuse for the no-nail-clippers thing, and then the man, a hipster in shirt-sleeves again, he steps slightly aside for Molly to pass, and tips his hat to her as well, pinches the cigarette away from his face.

She nods, passes, holding her coat together at her throat, then stops a step or two later, to watch the man recede, like she knows she should remember him, and like that—though it lasts for hours in Shane’s head—Shane sees him at one of her booths, sees him talking earnestly of impossible things, sees him telling her that she’s the daughter in that story, the one who shouldn’t have lived, the one who’s number’s being called back in now, he’s sorry, he really is. The whole time folding a piece of paper, one of Nolan’s old pictures, folding it smaller and smaller, then passing it across the table, under his cupped hand. Leaving it there for her like a decision, one she’s already forgotten.

She would do anything for the kids too, of course.

The trade wasn’t one-for-one, it was two-for-one.

Of course.

Shane closes his eyes, opens them, and, for the first time since he’s been picking her up like this, stands from his side of the car, crosses to meet her.

“Um,” she says, flashing her eyes around for the security Jeep.

“Moll,” Shane gets out, his voice cracky, eyes hidden, then takes her hand, is leading her to her side of the car but then turns around. “I’m saving you from the bus,” he says right into her ear, and steps to the side, raises her hand to pull her to him so that she spins under his hand, stops with her back against his chest, her hair against his lips.

“My knight,” she says. It’s part of their old routine. From some movie.

Shane swallows. They’re all alone now, the snow swirling around their feet, some distant mallbound shoppers making their way across the parking lot, their shapes small against the months of mounded snow.

“The kids,” Molly says then, because it’s time.

Shane nods, knows. Wonders if this is what it'll be like after. If they'll be able to see Nolan and Samuel through the snow, far away, moving into their own lives.

"Wait," he says back to her, and leans forward over her shoulder, squinting. Not at the distant shoppers but at the coffee-colored negative blown from the front seat, sliding across the snow now. Behind it the snow mounds that seem so permanent, so—

Shane smiles.

"See that?" he says to Molly, and she looks down along the top of his arm, his index finger pointing to the top of the tallest, oldest mound. The quiet little pipe jutting up from the snow there.

"What?" she says, and Shane nods to himself, says it like talking from a dream, "Home," and then switches his feet back and forth twice, for warmth, for magic, for everything. ■

THE LIVES OF COMMERCE

“At the origin of everything is commerce.” – Donna Stonecipher

We were a pair of lonely and crowded sexual markets, each hinging on the social development of our various foreign outputs. Everything for me was a dilemma – imports and exports, the rational anti-rationalization towards the inherency of free will and trade. You had the opposite problem: Incoming and outgoing, your goods had been accepted so easily for so often and so long that they were of little worth to you or anyone else. We came together like two gigantic icebergs mired in a children’s empty wading pool. Nothing else to lean against, nothing else to touch. *It’s a joy selling quality products again to someone that actually appreciates them* you said with a smile. *My how money has the power to change the world to the point where now I’m finally able to see it* I lovingly replied. So much is paradise, marketwise and fleeting. And the problems that never start never stop. Then behind every window another potential partner or secret admirer, everywhere in sight a more alluring sale or possible trade.



*The truth: An immigrant is always lonely,
and an immigrant son will inherit that loneliness.*

ABRIDGED IMMIGRANT NARRATIVE

Immigrant on the Run

He was quick. Years of running away from mad dogs in Ayutthaya. Years of playing ping-pong with swift-footed monks. Years in the Thai army.

Being small helped. A quarter of the size of the Polish and Irish he worked with, a sliver of their girth. This, however, he would not admit to because he talked big, chest puffed out like a preening rooster.

Roosters are hard to catch, he used to tell his son. When he was young, he chased them along the dusty road, zigzagging and leaping, stumbling and hugging his arms around air and feathers. Finally, he figured out the best way to catch something so erratic was to stay hidden until the last moment.

So when the INS chased the illegals through the steel factory in Chicago, he made himself smaller and hid in a locker until the big Polish and Irish men were caught. Standing and waiting in a locker was no different from outsmarting a rooster. Eventually, he would know when to jump out.

Immigrant Love

His mole attracted her. Some time in 1972.

Since her arrival in America, she rarely had the attention of men, except for the doctors she worked with, who complained of her broken English. She spent her time with her best friend, confiding hopes and dreams, homesickness and fears. What she did not tell her friend was that she yearned for a handsome man to take her out of the crumbling nurses' dorm and into a house where she could raise children. Her younger sister in Thailand was already had three kids. She sent photos

and letters written on thin blue airmail stationery. At the end of each letter, her sister asked about prospects.

Enter this man with his mole. She began to feel wanted and needed and desired. And perhaps she had forgotten where she was, forgotten her fears of this country while talking to the man, who was generous with compliments. She did not know he had been married once before. She did not know about the daughter he left in Thailand. She did not know he was in the country illegally. Those details did not matter because he said she had beautiful lips. He said he could read fortunes.

They sat by the fireplace at a party, plates of food on their knees. As she picked at grains of rice, he took out a notebook from his back pocket and drew lines that resembled a tic-tac-toe grid. He started asking her questions: What day were you born? The time? What animal are you in the Chinese Zodiac? After she answered his questions, he smiled. According to this, he said, we will be happy together for a long time.

Immigrant Joy

Immigrants do not experience joy. They are surprised by and suspicious of it. What is this feeling, they wonder, bubbling in their chests? Why does it feel, briefly, comfortable, like home? Why is today not as long as any other day?

Never do they allow themselves to feel, to laugh, to smile, to indulge in the sensation. Never do they let their guard down. They think joy comes with false pretenses because, to an immigrant, joy is short-lived; joy is closely followed by its opposite.

Immigrant Marriage

Their wedding was not in the familiar heat of their home country. There were no sisters or brothers or uncles or aunts or cousins. They did not walk side by side around a jeweled temple three times. Their parents did not meet to discuss the compatibility of their union. They did not kneel together in front of monks, heads bent low and praying,

while a delicate white string laced through their hands and looped into the palms of a golden statue of Buddha looming above them. They did not partake in the traditional water ceremony where both sides of the family would sprinkle water over the married couple's hands, wishing them luck and a quick baby.

Their wedding took place instead at the Cook County Courthouse. There was a judge. There were a few friends. It was a quick wedding because the line for matrimony was long that day. Behind them was a Hispanic couple. And behind them was an African couple. And behind them a Vietnamese couple and a white couple who did not speak English.

Afterwards, they had a small party at a Chinatown restaurant. A band played a version of Nat King Cole's "Stardust" and though she wanted to dance, he did not. So, she glided by alone, back and forth, pretending to have someone holding her, while he sipped a soda and laughed.

Immigrant Dreams

He took her to open houses in the suburb. Large improbable homes they could never afford. These were houses doctors or lawyers bought. These were houses for immigrants who came to America with money already. Real estate agents tried to push a sale. Imagine, the agents would say, this bedroom as yours. They did imagine themselves occupying this room that was bigger than their apartment in Irving Park. Imagine, the agents would say, your future kids running around the yard. They did imagine future kids running around the yard. They saw a garden, too, with big-fisted dahlias and roses and bitter melons and cucumbers growing along the fence.

He would tell her his dreams of getting rich: the Thai restaurant he wanted to open, the cable company in Thailand he left to a friend to watch over; the fortune telling business, which was getting more clients. He would tell her about how he would be made head supervisor at the tile factory and his salary would triple. He would tell her

that soon—real soon—they would move out of the apartment into a house of their dreams. America would make this possible. If he were still in Thailand, he would be fixing someone's car. If he were still in Thailand, he would be washing someone else's dishes. If he were still in Thailand, he would be drowning.

She did not tell him her dreams. She did not want to interrupt his excitement. She did not want to say these houses scared her because it meant they were moving farther away from her home across the ocean. She did not want to tell him that at night she would wake up and watch him sleep and think he is a wonderful man and she is undeserving of his love. She did not tell him that she listened to the Lake Michigan waves and imagined it to be the ocean. She did not tell him that when she dreamed it was always about her father and her brothers and her sisters, and they were calling her back. She did not tell him how glad she was to have found a man like him to dream the appropriate dreams for her.

She clung hard to his hand as they went from room to room, imagining, from house to house, hoping.

Immigrant Son

He was born in 1976 after 24 hours of labor and cried for days. The hospital had octagonal windows, and she remembered as she pushed him out, how the rising sun cast a shaft of light on the wall beside her, and it was the light she concentrated on, the light that assuaged her labor pains. Afterwards, the doctor put him in an incubator because he was yellow.

For three days, his mother could not touch him. She watched the rise and fall of his sunken chest. She envied the nurses who came in and out of the room and moved his small arms, listened to his small heart, cleaned his small body. They told her he was getting stronger. They told her she would be able to hold him soon. They told her they never saw a baby born with such thick hair.

His father was in Thailand to check on the cable company that

went bankrupt. He called every hour. He asked the same questions.

How is he doing?

Better.

What does he look like?

Small.

What looks like me the most?

His hair.

Over the phone, he laughed loud and proud, and it did not matter that he lost money over a defunct company because now he had a son to carry on his name.

When the nurses asked for a name, she thought of her father's. Chua. She thought about how that name would connect her son to the person never far from her heart. She thought of the smoking pipe in his mouth. She thought of his patience. She thought of how it was her father's urging that made her come to America.

In the end, a new life needed a new name. A new name in this new country. She quickly flipped through a book. "Something American," she decided. "Something easy." There is nothing easier than a name with only three letters.

Immigrant Pride

This is my son, he kept saying to anyone who would listen.

Look at him, he said.

Isn't he handsome? he said.

He will be famous, he said.

He will break hearts, he said.

See how black his hair is? he said.

See his birthmark shaped like Thailand? he said.

See how tight he grabs your finger? he said.

He likes to pull my hair, he said.

He makes wonderful noises, he said.

He watches everything, he said.

He watches my every move, he said.

I can't believe he is mine, he kept saying to anyone who would listen.

Immigrant Protection

She held him tight to her. She read that the Hmong kept their infants with them all day, attached to their chests. They never were separated. They slept with them. Ate with them. Bathed with them. This was the reason why Hmong children stuck close to home.

She did not allow anyone to hold him in fear that they would drop him. She held him so tight at times, his young skin bruised.

When her husband was away at work, she spoke to her son.

You love your mama. You love your mama. You love your mama.

Immigrant Dreams II

They moved into a house they never thought they could afford. In a suburb. Two floors. White brick. Black roof. They asked a Buddhist monk at the temple in Chicago to come and bless the home. He wore large thick glasses, and because of them, his eyes were magnified like an insect.

This scared the boy. He cried in his father's arms.

The monk went into every room and sprinkled holy water. He traced a holy symbol with wet white powder on all the doors. He said this house would protect the family from all harm; nothing bad could enter. He said he sensed only good here. He said the boy should sleep in the bedroom that faced east. He said that when the boy slept make sure he didn't face the ceiling. Only bad dreams came to those who slept looking up.

At night, the mother watched her son sleep, watched him toss and turn. He was a restless sleeper, one who could end up sideways in bed. Once, she found him so tangled in his blankets it nearly choked him. This night was no different. When he moved to the flat of his back, his mouth wide open, face toward the ceiling, she gently pushed him onto his side.

There were nights she did not sleep at all, her worry of bad dreams keeping her up. She asked Buddha daily to send only good thoughts when he slept. She asked him for his protection. She asked him why she could not stop worrying, why she felt all of this good fortune would soon disappear.

Immigrant Lessons

When the boy turned five, his father bought him a bike. A real bike. Nothing with training wheels. When the father was younger, nearly the same age as his son, his mother threw him into the middle of the river. She told him this was how he was going to learn to swim. If he did not, he would be washed away and drowned. She watched him struggle. She watched him slap at the water. She watched the river take him further away. He said the river made her smaller and smaller. That was the reason he survived. He needed to get to her. He needed to show her how capable he was. And so he swam, clumsily, back to shore. He said his body hurt. He said he coughed out water.

Teaching his son how to ride a bike would be no different. He did not steady the bike. He did not run alongside it. He simply watched the boy get on and fall. Get on and fall. The boy's knees were bloodied. The boy's face was wet.

I don't want to ride anymore, the boy said.

Get on, the father said.

It hurts.

Get on.

The boy got back on and fell. But the time between falls were getting longer now. The boy was learning to pedal. The boy was learning to fall without pain. The boy was no longer crying. Instead, his face was full of determination.

Finally, the boy coasted with ease. It was as if his earlier clumsiness evaporated.

Look, said the boy. I'm riding.

When the father made it to shore those many years ago, after he

had coughed out the river's water, he looked up for his mother, but she had gone home without word or praise.

I'm very proud, said the father. You ride well.

Immigrant Borders

The immigrant comes in search of a larger world only to find a smaller one. Yes, the land is expansive. Yes, it stretches across deserts and mountains and prairies. But the immigrant only feels safe, feels free, in the space of home. There are invisible borders here. Around the house to the front of the driveway. Inside this space, the immigrant can do what he or she pleases. The immigrant can cook stinky food. The immigrant can pray in any language, to anyone. The immigrant can say aloud, "America is a peculiar place." The immigrant can raise a son any way he or she wishes.

Once, on a hot summer day, the son rode his bike up and down the driveway. The father was at work at the tile factory. The mother sewed inside, watching him from the front window. He did endless loops. He loved the sensation of wind whizzing in his ears. His lobes were long. His mother told him they were like Buddha's, and when he went fast, they fluttered. He knew the border. He knew he could not ride past the driveway and into the street. He had heard this lecture countless times. He was at the age, however, of testing boundaries. He wanted to know how fast he could go. He wanted to know how fast he could make his earlobes flutter.

So he pedaled. Hard. His muscle pulsed. Hard. He breathed. Hard. The end of the driveway came and went and he was on the blacktop of the street, his ears fluttering like a speed bag. Wind whooshed.

His exhilaration was short lived.

A car blared on its horn. Swerved. Missed. Sped away. Shouted "Fuck" out the open window.

The mother stormed out of the house. She yanked him by one earlobe. She threw him down on the grass. She hit his legs, his arms, his back, any unprotected part of him. It did not matter that the neighbors

were out. It did not matter that other children saw this small Thai woman, this small immigrant woman, hitting her son repeatedly. She was blind to their gazes.

How many times? she said. How many times do I tell you?

The boy cried. Grass blades poked his face. He promised not to do it again, but knew this to be a lie. He would do it again. He would pedal even faster next time. He liked the feeling of speed; he liked the sound; he liked the danger. He marveled at the word “fuck.”

The borders expanded.

The mother knew this, which was why she hit harder, which was why she kept saying to him, Listen to your mother, and don't do that again, and I can't lose you. It was why she picked him up and held him hard to her chest, held him so hard he said he could not breathe.

Immigrant Loyalty

Question: What is the best country in the world?

Answer: Thailand.

Question: Who is the greatest man in the world?

Answer: Daddy.

Question: And?

Answer: The King.

Question: Who else?

Answer: Buddha.

Question: What language should you speak all the time?

Answer: Thai.

Question: What are you?

Answer: I am Thai.

Immigrant Dreams III

In the summer, he mowed the lawn. In the fall, he raked the leaves. In the winter, he shoveled the snow.

In the summer, she took care of their son. In the fall, she took care of their son. In the winter, she took care of their son.

Both were content. Both had fulfilled a shared dream.

When one dream is achieved, what do we do? Do we stop dreaming?

An Immigrant's Dream is not an American one. An American Dream revolves around one notion: Success. An Immigrant's Dream revolves around one notion: Survival.

Now the two of them began to dream for their son. The father wanted a professional golfer. The mother wanted a doctor. The father wanted to continue living in the states. The mother wanted her son to marry someone Thai and eventually return to his ancestral home.

The boy. He dreamed of being a boy.

Immigrant Fear

The boy stood next to his mother at the bank. He could barely see over the counter. He eyed the candy dish. He was six and wanted nothing to do with this; somewhere in his young brain, he knew this would be his role for the rest of his life.

The bank teller asked, Can I help you?

The boy stared up at his mother and then at the bank teller. He said, My mother would like to deposit some money into her account.

The bank teller looked down at the boy, smiled, and then at the woman beside him. She asked the woman, What is your account number?

The mother spoke to the boy and the boy translated. He handed the bank teller a check.

The bank teller said, This check won't clear right away.

The mother told the boy to ask the woman why.

The amount is large, said the bank teller. It will take a couple of days.

The mother frowned. She spoke to the boy again.

The boy rolled his eyes. The mother nudged him. The boy sighed. The mother cleared her throat. The boy looked at the bank teller, as if to say he was sorry for all of this. He then said, My mother would

like to know the exact date the check will clear. She would also like to have your name and number, so she can contact you if the check does not get into the account. She would also like to add that last month's statement came late in the mail, and would like to make sure that would not happen again.

After everything was settled, the boy asked the bank teller for a green lollipop, his favorite.

The boy found himself talking to accountants and waitresses and sales clerks. He inquired about bra sizes and ordered whenever they went to an American restaurant.

When the boy got older, he asked the mother why she could not talk for herself. He knew she could speak English. Speak it relatively well.

She was older, gray creeping into her thinning hair. She said American people were like that one monster villain the boy was so afraid of.

Freddy Krueger?

The mother nodded. American people were like Freddy Krueger. They stole her voice.

Immigrant Fear II

The man never let negative thinking enter his brain. He did not want to admit that he was sixty and none of his plans were coming to fruition and he had been working at the same factory for years, the same factory that scarred his hands, and he was not a rich gas station owner and he did not have a restaurant. He did not want to admit that the woman he loved, still loved, did not love him as much as she loved their son. Not even close. He did not remember the last kind thing she said to him. He did not remember that last time they were intimate. He did not want to admit that on some days he did not want to come home, but rather, he wanted to drive all night through the lighted city. He did not want to admit that women at the temple still found him attractive, even though that mole had hair on it. He did not want to admit that he found them attractive too. He did not want to admit the guilt he sometimes thought about feeling, about how he left his

other family in Thailand, about how he did not treat his son well on the golf course, about how he sometimes pushed a little too hard for his own gain, about how he talked big but it was always just talk.

To admit all of this was to admit his unhappiness. He was not unhappy. He loved America. He repeated this.

I love America. I love America. I love America.

Immigrant Fear III

When the boy turned thirteen, he began making and receiving phone calls. To and from white girls. The mother sometimes picked up the phone. She would say in bad English, Who is calling?

The girls on the other end of the line would tell her their names.

It's Jean. It's Claudia. It's Brenna. It's Heidi. It's Jenny. It's April. It's Sara. It's Dalphine. It's Vicky.

She would sigh and hand the phone over to her son, and he would talk for an hour or so before hanging up.

Once, the mother quietly picked up the phone to eavesdrop on her son's conversations with these white girls. She anticipated gossip about school. She anticipated innocent chatter.

She heard: Will you be my butt doctor?

She heard her son: I have advance degrees in being a butt doctor.

She heard: My butt is in need of doctoring.

She heard her son: Let's make an appointment to fix your butt.

The mother hung up. Panic stabbed at her chest; it felt like a hundred sharp syringes into the heart.

Immigrant Regret

Throughout the course of an immigrant's life, regret is never far behind. The immigrant has feelings of regret daily, hourly, by the minute or second. Buddha teaches that regret and guilt are the worst forms of suffering because they cannot be easily erased. They follow. They linger.

The man regretted stealing his friend's student visa all those years

ago. The woman regretted leaving her family behind. Coming to America, for an immigrant, is a form of regret.

For most of their lives together, they tried to look beyond their regret and guilt. What was there to regret, they wondered, when we live in a beautiful home, in a good neighborhood, with two cars, and a son who can do no wrong? Why feel guilty, they wondered, when there is so much to celebrate?

Like their son winning golf tournaments. Like their son doing reasonably well in school. Like their son receiving the American Legion Award on graduation day. He stood on stage, in blue robes, with a plaque cradled in his arms. He was asked to make a speech. The parents waited for him to say how much he loved them. They waited for him to say that they had made many sacrifices for the betterment of his life.

Instead, he said: It's good to be an American.

He walked off the stage to roars. The parents clapped, too; they did not know what else to do.

The Immigrant Son . . .

. . . is no longer a boy. His parents have moved back to Thailand. They are divorced. He talks to his mother once a week. He talks to his father occasionally. The son goes to temple once a month, for the food, not for Buddha. He says prayers to himself, all those prayers that his parents made him remember and recite every night.

Sometimes a friend will ask about his family. Where are they living now?

In Thailand, he says.

Do you have family here in the states?

No.

Is it lonely?

The immigrant son shrugs. Says, Not really.

The truth: An immigrant is always lonely, and an immigrant son will inherit that loneliness. He will recognize the loneliness at odd

moments. Driving to work, and he will remember how his father drove to the tile factory every day, and how he must have stared beyond the road in front of him, a road perhaps that would have led to a life where all his dreams came true. Looking out the window of his Florida home and the immigrant son will remember his mother sitting by their front window in the Chicago suburb, filling her days by sewing, her hands working on outfit after outfit, day by day, the sun rising and falling.

He knows that his immigrant parents came with expectations. He knows they had expectations for him. He wonders, at times, whether he has let them down. He wonders whether this loneliness will ever go away and suddenly he will truly know what it means to be of one country but to live in another. The immigrant son understands that this tug and pull will be there his entire life. The immigrant son understands that he is trying to live two lives at once: the one his parents sought for him, and the one he sought for himself. The immigrant son understands that when his wife talks about home it is easy for her to identify, and when he thinks about home he thinks of not a place but of immigrants.

The immigrant son understands. ■

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For a long time, **STEPHEN GRAHAM JONES** went to bed early. But then came that pivotal moment in his life when *The Last Starfighter* became available on the rental shelf at the convenience store. Already a Centipede and Galaga veteran—some would say champion—Jones of course collected *Starfighter* from that shelf, along with *American Anthem*. Together, those two VHS tapes would form the binary star around which the rest of his life would revolve, spinning out books like rogue comets: *The Fast Red Road*, *The Bird Is Gone*, *All the Beautiful Sinners*,

Bleed Into Me, *Demon Theory*. Most recently, *The Long Trial of Nolan Dugatti* and a book called *Ledfeather*. Collectively, these seven blaze across the upturned bowl of his mother's sky, and cast crisp-edged shadows onto the ground behind her. Soon, however, an eighth will join that formation, splintering her shadow into a tall, perfect, single star: *The Ones That Almost Got Away*. Horror stories Jones can hardly even proofread, they're so scary. Jones's current project involves trying to get a pair of boots out of layaway. While not quite *Starfighter*-issue, they're nevertheless quality. To read more about these boots, visit demontheory.net.

ROBERT LIETZ is the author of eight published collections of poems, including *Running in Place*, *At Park and East Division*, *The Lindbergh Half-century*, *The Inheritance*, and *Storm Service*. Nearly 700 of his poems have been published in print and online journals. He keeps active writing and exploring his interest in digital photography and image processing and their relationship to the development of his poetry.

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Judge: David Kirby

***Southeast Review* Narrative Nonfiction Contest \$500**

Judge: Mark Winegardner

*Postmark deadline: March 15th, 2011.
For more details visit southeastreview.org.*

