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EDITOR

J.W. Wang

POETRY EDITOR

Vincent Guerra

ASSOCIATE EDITORS

Ashley Farmer

Ryan Ridge

Alan Rossi

Benjamin Wright

ART DIRECTOR

Carol Chu

Cover and illustrations by Carol Chu.

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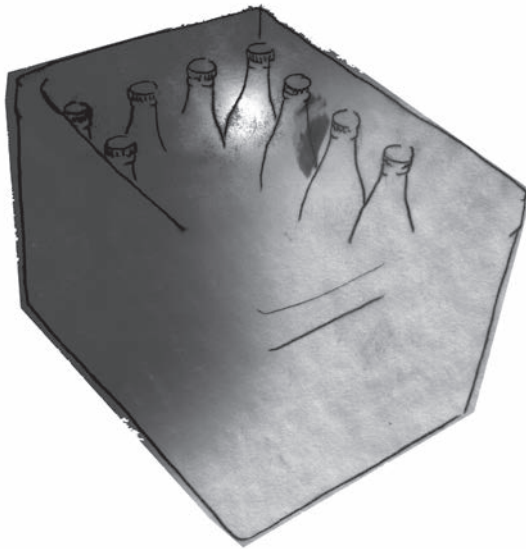
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Sobriety for me is one of those things that only lasts so long, like a job, though I didn't need a reason.

STEVEN MATTHEW BROWN

THE NEIGHBORHOOD MACHINE

It looked like a mountain in Hell carried inside a mile-wide tornado. So much dust and smoke the day went dark. That is all I say. That is as good as I do. The rest is nothing I discuss.

A grandmother

#

I was good, I can honestly say, in the first moments after seeing it. Ella in her baby carrier. Ella in the car. It all flowed. Canned goods and a camping stove, some water and blankets all found their way into the trunk. I was in control. I was getting it done. Joshua had been playing on his portable game with headphones and had not seen it, so I quickly guided him out to the car like we were late for an appointment, and he went along. We beat most of the traffic. I cooked along that highway as fast as I could. This trooper started following me with his lights on, and I just went faster until he tried to overtake me like a crazy person. He didn't believe my explanation, but that smoke cloud on the horizon told him *believe it*. Yelling isn't what I did, but I wasn't coy. I told him, I am leaving now, and if you want to stop me from saving my children, you're gonna have to shoot me. You're gonna have to shoot me. The whole highway was rushing with traffic now, and he *let* me go. I did not stop until it was dark and we were somewhere in Ohio. It was only then, in the hotel, that I cried and lost my breath. I don't know how I will tell Joshua about this. I don't know what a mother would say to her child. It wasn't war. No flood had come, with that certain kind of sense behind it. We stay away from the television and other people in the hotel who are like television from the watching.

I try not to think about people left behind, that trooper. I try not to think about what I would have done if Joshua had already gone to school that day.

Judy Denzer, self-employed

#

What did it want? I ask myself. It took the houses, brick buildings, downtown, water and cars. How did it all fit inside? How did it still manage to move on and where did it go, since Aster never caught sight of it? It doesn't make any sense. It must have flown away, right? It can't just have vanished. I cannot believe I'm having to say these things of nonsense. But I cannot just *think* about it all in my head. *I just cannot believe it* doesn't do any more good the fiftieth time than the first. How could I believe it? What is to be believed? That I could see an end of mortgage payments for the first time? That I had been able to plan more than two months ahead? Or should I believe this all has some magical dimension? Aliens maybe, or God? An intergovernmental conspiracy, perhaps. Should I sit down with all the other victims and hash out why the machine arrived, where it came from, what it wanted, as though those questions even make sense? If I hear the words Smolensk or Ouagadougou one more time I don't know what I'll do. Should I suppose this is some kind of a dream? Is my pinching not enough to wake me? A nightmare wouldn't even explain the kind of sorrow I feel. Can anyone name a nightmare from which she did not awake? No one can name me a nightmare she did not awake from. I conclude this is real, and I have nothing to say about that. I have to find a roof and dollars.

Apple Starlight Jones

#

We are starving in the streets. We are dying. Where is the aid? Where

is the news on this? Where is the government? Where are the jets and bombs for that matter? Is anyone doing anything about one town after another being wiped off the map? People say the machine just vanishes. Well that's great. You would think by listening to the radio that someone would come to the rescue. You would think that by talking faster and shouting people got fed. They don't. You open up your phone if you've still got battery life and signal and read commentary like it's doing anything. We are hungry. I don't care if some kid posted a video taking responsibility for the thing. Arrest him if he did it. Torture him if he is guilty and hang him on television for all I care. But not until after someone fills some helicopters with food and medicine and clothes and lands them here. They can land anywhere. We can unload and organize the rest ourselves. That is the only thing I am sure of anymore.

Anonymous volunteer firefighter, Marty's Landing

#

I would rather have been there with my wife and son and daughters and died like a rat than have had to watch it all helplessly as I did. I had submitted my flight plan and taken off accordingly. When I saw the dust come up on the horizon I took it for smoke and came back over the ridge toward town. The east side was already unrecognizable. But it wasn't fire. I didn't know what it was. The machine did not catch my eye at first. I thought it was the mall, but that didn't make any sense because I could see Tireman road there beneath it. And the road does not run *through* the mall. I remember wondering what kind of a fire it was even as I knew it wasn't a fire and saw the big gray mass cross the river and get going on Old Town. There was my house, people in clusters and lines. I buzzed the street to look for my wife. The van was gone. Traffic was jammed up and down the highway. I looked for the roof of our red van. I called her on my cell phone, but she did not answer. You can only let yourself get so upset when you're piloting a

plane. What good is a bird's eye view? I thought. I still don't know. I have no clearer answer about what it was than anyone else. And the destruction is not needing any clarification from my little flyovers. I spent all the fuel looking for the van and when I couldn't spare any more I had to land. I remember taxiing to the hangar before wondering, *Now what?* And the control tower was gone. And I still wonder over and over again.

Lee Cole, former Director of Patron Experience, Rosemarie Bath and Body

#

The claim by many that the problem lay in unleashing the machine's destructive potential seems false in two ways: first, this implies that the machine's destructive potential was leashed to begin with, something no one can know, perhaps not even the machine's creator; second, we do not know that the machine's destructive potential was not its core potential. Perhaps what happened was inverse the claim: some unknown generative capability had been leashed, freeing the machine to leave so many of us in Marty's Landing standing in tread-scarred streets before the ruins of our homes. The machine came and erased the town in a matter of hours. It left. We do not know any more than those two facts and we should not pretend we do. We might do well to restrain ourselves from drawing conclusions in the absence of any evidence as to the machine's license. Certainly, we ought to begin by establishing the basics: what it was; where it came from; where it disappeared to, and where it will reappear next? Ouagadougou and Monterrey, Mexico, were so completely destroyed that not even a distant enemy stood to share a word about what happened. Do residents of the former Russian city of Smolensk have any information they could share? Tell us anything. No, all judgment should be suspended until such a time when any evidence exists that would allow us to begin scribbling notes. I want answers, too; but there are ways

to get them, and ways not to. No answer is better than the wrong one, from my standpoint. Whatever imaginative energy remains might best be applied to helping victims with material needs and comfort. My heart goes out.

Cindy Cahn-Wilson, retired engineer

#

All I have left is a photograph of my grandparents, and all I can do is stare at it while a nurse feeds me. She is a good bit taller than he was in real life, though she squatted in her dress to make it look like they were nearly the same height. If you did not know that you would think she was fat in the thighs and had an ugly face twisted up in a dour grimace. That is the cruelty of it. A sacrifice of dignity, what might have been called ladylike composure. Do I dare think she had her kids in mind? A woman should not have been taller than their father. A woman should have accepted her situation like a horse. And back then people did not know what they looked like in pictures, so her ugliness was just a thing like birds chirping she thought would not show in the photo. All she knew was the strain. It is evident now. He was a scoundrel to the end, which also does not show up. We have her, in her moment of uncanny bottom-heaviness, and him, smirking. He can see payback coming. Boy could he.

Sadie Gonzalez

#

People will find what I have to say offensive. I worked at all three schools for 17 years as the Art Teacher. If you drove past them for as long as I did and saw them in every season and angle of light you would have all but memorized the cracks in the mortar. In winter, and this is what I mean might offend some people, the schools were reduced to a series of brick walls erected at right angles in fields of

snow. The brick was kind of a flesh color, like the color kids mix out of habit before they have studied the cheek of one individual. You couldn't recover the sense of any one building after seeing that emptiness in it. I don't mean to sound bitter, or to indict our system of education, or to traduce my colleagues, but walls in a field were all I needed. Where else do we come together to draw and paint with such focus? I have no classroom to illuminate and gather into quiet now. The kids' curiosity did all the hard work.

Brian Marsden

#

I don't know why, but it sort of seemed like, Sure, why *not* here? Why are we different than Pakistan or Russia? And something that big overwhelms you before you can even become surprised. Timmy thought so too. He was just coming back from lunch and hadn't seen it yet, so I got a look at how I must have gawked when I first saw it from up on the roof. Sheer and utter shock, but slow, like, What the heck *is* that? He slapped my hand and lit a smoke and asked me, What are we looking at here, Brady? I said, What, that there? He said, Yeah, that there. I said, I don't know any more than you do. And he said, Is this that robot people have been talking about? I said, Is it a robot? I figured they looked different than this. Or an alien, he said. The guys were all gone by now, cramming themselves into the gridlock on the highway. Fear always makes me giddy. We felt like seeing what happened next, and it was kind of staying inside the town, so we kept watching. Timmy admitted he was happy to share that moment with me, the privilege of seeing something so massive in motion. It ate up Old Town and the schools and the whole east side in about an hour. In that time, my fear eased up a bit and I started feeling depressed like, Is this it, then? Is this how I end? When it turned toward us there on the roof of the shop, I wanted more than anything to grab Timmy and hold him. What happened was that *he* edged over to *me*, both of

us still watching it come, and interlaced his fingers with mine. Without letting go of my hand, he led me down the stairs to the garage and to his truck. He opened the door for me. He says he had always wanted to do that.

T. H.

#

This just proves we get what we deserve. I am not saying the town deserved it, but my ex-wife certainly had something like this coming for a very long time. You take my house? Look what you got now. You take my boat, my dog, my fridge and computer? By all means. What pretty pictures do you see on my big flatscreen television today? I left with my dignity and you left with my stuff. Look who came out on top. She calls my mother in Detroit – my own mother – crowing and crying about how it’s all gone. I didn’t do that after we split up, for Christ’s sake. And leave her out of this. Ma has got enough to worry about with my dad gone who knows where and my sister’s kid to watch over. Second, tough cookies, Madeline. To hell with you. I only regret that I wasn’t there to watch you watch all my stuff get smashed. You had the whole east side of town as a warning. You had the schools right there at the end of the road to look at and take as a suggestion you might want to get the hell out while the getting was good. Did I make you stay? No. Did my stuff make you stay? Did your materialistic soul ruin you? I’m actually curious why you watched our old house get demolished. No one *made* you view that. It must have been hard to watch. Was it hard? I think about that a little. I am glad you are okay. I would never wish harm on you. I talk big, you know that, but I do still love you in some way. I just wish you would have had some good sense not to put yourself in danger like that. I mean, stuff is just stuff, right? I miss you, Madeline. I miss Banjo, too. Yeah, he was a good pup.

Anonymous

#

If you get past the commentary and career-making all any news person can say is the *former* city of Smolensk, or the *former* Baltimore metropolitan area, or the *former* metropolis of Santiago de Chile. Hours and hours of sales pitches and preening could be spared if they would just focus on that one word and repeat it until we all shuddered with the thought that ten or fifteen million people can be disappeared at one go. They send reporters like to a dark hole to say, Yes, it is still dark in there. Back to you. I would just as soon not know any of it, so I stay off. I stack boxes and rations and drive trucks to distribution points. We have organized pretty well I think, and we have reached most people. Sanitation is going to be a problem if we all stay for very long. Those without relatives or something better to go toward might stay, but there is nothing here for them, and there never will be again. Trees will shade the ruins, and it will be like some ancient European city lost everywhere but on paper. The *former* settlement at Marty's Landing. Sniffer dogs were brought in yesterday morning. I told them, you'll not find any bodies. They were all taken by the machine, or we have moved them to the graves. I showed them the graves, by the marsh and former hospital, and the dogs went crazy.

Pat Caldwell

#

I was under brick rubble. The size of an aircraft carrier, that is what, carried along on treads and some legs. It looked like an owl, like a metallic stuffed owl laid on its belly on treads and some legs and the size of an aircraft carrier. And it was an owl with one eye, the circle on the face was off-center, black and open, but made of some stuff. And for feathers it had all these things on its back, like antennae but so many of them it was more like all those illegal splices and knots in a slum. In fact, that was my first impression. People seemed to live up

there. Maybe no people were visible, but you would have thought it was swarming with bodies. That was in a few seconds before blacking out completely. On the back end were some, pardon me, testicle kind of things. Lung-like, kidney-shaped. I remember no more except the vibration. The details keep changing like an old-old dream. Don't trust me on this.

Unidentified

#

For months we had heard their older daughter crying every night. It was a baleful wailing unlike anything I had ever heard before. Our girls weren't criers, but still we knew something was wrong. We could not agree on what. Had they beaten her or done something worse? Meeting the father and mother on weekends at the fence between our yards you would never suspect them of anything cruel, let alone criminal. So we wondered if she was sick, even though she seemed healthy enough playing by herself in their front yard. My wife thought she was acting out. That was our first instinct back when it all started. When you hear a child letting loose you assume the parents are allowing things to wear themselves down. But it went on and on. I started hating this pretty little girl for no reason other than not being able to explain to myself what the heck was going on. At church we would ask, How are the kids? Is everything okay? Can we help with anything? I'll be the nosy guy on Sunday if I think it could help. The girl was playing out front when I went to get Justine's diaper tote. From behind a bush she said, Hello? in this little voice. I didn't want to look at her. I couldn't. It absolutely broke my heart. I cannot even say why except that I heard terror in it. It seemed surrounded by this mysterious, oppressive sadness. Why did she cry like that? I want to know. What caused that anguish in such a young person? I've heard a lot of despairing sounds since the machine came, seen a lot of broken children in the shelter. Nothing like her. Maybe I do not want to

know. I am glad I am no longer her neighbor.

Anonymous, now of Portland, Maine

#

My oldest girl Corina showed me footage on her tablet. I watched over the video repeatedly in the hotel bed with Ben until we had to wake up Corina to ask where the charging cable was. To see Jillian there speechless in her dress. Each time I somehow know in my body that she will be killed. My stomach turns, then loosens like I am going to be sick. But it is important to see exactly what my husband went through. I press play again knowing exactly where the time bar will be on the bottom of the video when the top corner of the machine comes into view over the pines in our front yard. I know exactly when Jillian turns, all by herself, and marches unafraid across the grass to Ben and Corina. They get into the car, and I watch along like I am sitting in Corina's hands. I cannot believe the girls can even sleep at night. Ben and I are zombies with this feeling like, have you ever come racing up to an intersection and suddenly panicked because you *know* you are about to hit someone? That is the feeling of seeing the machine on Corina's video. Predicted isn't the right word, or even feared, or even contemplated. It confirmed a thing I have felt in my bones, but never thought about. I knew someday they would be in mortal danger and they would all know what to do. So the panic is mixed with joy and trust and all kinds of stuff happening in my thoughts at once. Ben cries when he tries to tell them. He tells them what they experienced, though they don't understand. He understands, and he doesn't. I am here for him and the girls, with these waves of panic like it's all happening again to me for the first time.

Angela Deutsch, homemaker

#

Are you asking me who I am? Or are you asking me to justify who I am? Those are opposite questions, sir. I was on the boulevard living my life. The sky was a diorama of clouds and the street a cloud of dioramas. *Blamo*. But this ain't no judgment. Why? Do you *feel* guilty?

Theodore Smokefoot, that's who

#

Sobriety for me is one of those things that only lasts so long, like a job, though I didn't need a reason. The last case of beer in my mom's basement had my name written all over it. By the other side of the marsh I was wishing it was a fifth, or a covert mission. I sat in the old foundations of the timber pier and looked out over the reeds to those new condos lined up on the hill, a sight in the sunshine. Just as I got to thinking I would never live in one of those unless I finally got my act together, just as I was thinking it would take 100,000 years for scientists to find my body preserved under the muck, just as I realized I was not going to drive myself to Trish's and would have to sleep it off in my car, the machine came into view. I agree it looked like a big hanger or something cheap like a school. I've seen the world's largest, meanest machines in action, and this trumped them all. Down went the power lines and trees. Down went the condos. Up went the dust. Up went my dreams, and anger. I dove into the marsh and grabbed onto one of the pylons. It was the lifesaving choice to make. The water just vaporized around me in this ice-cold flash. When I cleared my face of mud, and after the cuts on my forehead had stopped bleeding, I opened my eyes. If my detachment had tried to bomb the world out of existence how they used to do, that is what. I got angrier holding on to that pylon and not doing anything. I can still feel it along the length of my body, in the grip of my arms. I'll never let it go. It will keep me from reaching for other comforts. That is all I have to say. Except my condolences go out to all those who lost loved ones or homes on that

day. And I wish I could have done something.

United States Air Force, retired

#

From a distance we could see the shadow cast over town like a thunderhead. It was too dark to see through and crazy with bits of everything. And they say the whole town got sucked up, but drive in now and see where bulldozers cleared the way. We had just taken a buck on the ridge. It began to snow garbage.

Noel and Nathan

#

It seems to be getting late lately, would you not agree? Horrible though it is to contemplate how adding more thoughts to the fray of thoughts takes even more precious seconds off the clock, they need telling. *Need telling?* you will ask yourself, what needs telling now that our lives are ruined? *Truth needs telling*, brothers and sisters. It deserves to be heard; words cry out for an ear, two ears, a city of ears; and who to listen in the ruins of a school, the crumbs of a church? A factory's deep foundation has enough to say about men and women pressing on old hopes day after day let alone to hear how its town was dismantled by some mind-forged machine, plucked brick-by-bolt from under maples and sycamores themselves robbed of their lovely shade-making. *Yes*. Someone must listen to our cries with care. Say *Yes* with me. Someone must take up our breath into His hands and form it into an eternal pause. *Yes*. And who is this? you might ask. He who cannot help but listen. What are you asking Him? That is the question to ask yourself. What are you asking yourself? Are you listening? What do you hear? The rumblings leading to a fully prepared soul into which the one true word may come and burn away all the accumulations of this world? Build a nest with fresh materials for a new brood. Erase your suffering.

We cannot erase your suffering. You can, only you can by opening up your mind to the closed nature of your sins in the glory of His light and His forgiveness. Is that what you are being told? Does it hurt to hear it? *This*, children, the destruction everywhere around us is a message, even though His voice in this matter is truly, as it were, silent.

Submitted recording

#

Whatever happened, it happened, and we need to get that settled in our hearts as soon as possible. Our minds will follow our hands as they take up new jobs and new burdens in new towns all around the country. We should not be ashamed to accept kind gifts of our neighbors, whoever now, or the government. This is part of what both are for. And we join in with our contributions of aid as we can with each new town succumbing to this thing we do not understand. Understanding will come with time, and if it does not, life will go on anyway. Life goes on because it has to, as my parents had it. They were right, and they go on in my heart because they have to do so, and because I need them there, right at my center where they can do so much good and be so beautiful. I work at a lumberyard in Kansas City while the pennies add up and my heart settles. It had been years since I worked physically, and I am glad someone would have me at all. I'm proud to be feeling stronger, and glad for the company. A woman here who lost her husband in a hurricane has been the ultimate consolation to me. We can talk about how things go on, because they have to, and not have to feel naive for being accepting of that pale gift and its blind momentum.

Charlie Comstock

#

Neither of us could sleep. We had been working too long cleaning up. And some of the things we saw were too much to close out. A plane went overhead, but not a commercial plane and not an army plane. So the argument was about why postal planes never seem to crash. Neither of us argued it didn't happen. We figured it was not considered newsworthy. Talk turned from two pilots in a cockpit to a few people in a newsroom trying to determine what would interest and/or excite and/or terrify. Mail does not register on the sexiness scale. And he said there was an aspect of fairness to it. Why cover a cargo plane, say, and not automobile accidents? There are too many of those, I said, and they're not freakish in any way. But what about some waitress who cuts her hand off in an IHOP in Denver? In Denver, I supposed, that would be news, for a moment anyway. Only if she had been suspected of doing it for a disability check or lawsuit, or actually had some disease that got to all the customers would it really be a great *story*. How the hell would she cut her whole hand off anyway? I asked. He did not know how she would accomplish that in an IHOP. Badly scalded, he said. What if she badly scalded her hand? Well that is just self-evidently not newsworthy.

Bo

#

My dear sweet brother said, You're not going to win this one, Eva. You are messing with the wrong magician. But he is dumb. I love him but he is dumb. For example, he thought that was the end of it. Like just by saying you can't do anything about anything changed anything for me. It ruined him. You only have to look at him to see that. His ideas are interchangeably bad. I found a house and I carried the water and I kept the matches dry until the aid was allowed inside the perimeter. The whole time he was all, I don't know what the griping is about. Who didn't wish the town would get swallowed up by hell? Just a good housecleaning if you ask me, though of course no one did ask

him. I said, it took the end of the world to get you out of mom and dad's house after 37 years. *That's* the real housecleaning. Now *I* am the magician, and if he messes with me, he can be damn sure it's with the wrong one. I am feeding people. I know how to do that. He can clean and watch the kids we have taken in. Together, we might make a pretty good team when this is all over with. And he is lost without my parents.

Unidentified minor

#

I survived the school being destroyed. Not many people did. I survived the surviving. I waited until dark for someone to come, but no one did come. When I got cold I started walking, thinking I could find something, or someone, or at least reception for my phone. I did not find any of those until I got to the county highway. A bunch of people were standing around the front yard. She had food warmed up for everyone. People took turns helping and eating. It was a bad kind of quiet all throughout the house except for kids trying to call people on her phone. And the adults consoling them. One boy knew his telephone number and address, but neither of those things existed anymore. What was someone supposed to do with him? We laid him down with the other kids and some adults and read to them. Finally, I got my mom on the phone in Houston. She had seen it on the news and would not let me hang up until I was asleep. I said there was a whole line of people waiting behind me. She did not care, and I was forced to hang up on her crying into the phone. I could not sleep after that. I wanted badly to help the woman clean up, but I was not taken seriously, so I went to that boy, and found him awake, and read to him until morning, something about horses.

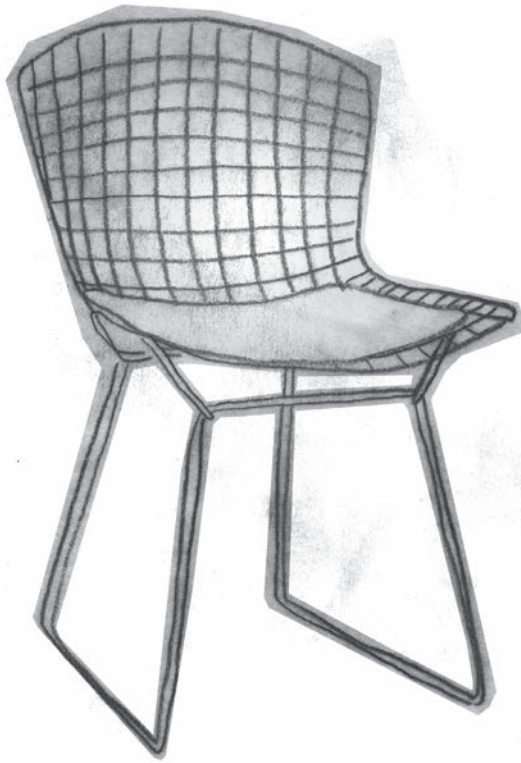
Unidentified minor



CANNONBALL

I heard it was my turn to be shot from the cannon. At first I didn't believe it. People are always joking about these things. My friends told me it was serious this time though. Apparently there was a whole meeting about it, and people were divided on the issue. At the meeting, an old man took the microphone. No one had seen him in years, but he showed up to this meeting because he felt strongly that I should be shot from the cannon. His argument was so graceful, apparently, everyone in the audience was crying. His conclusion was about how hard the times were becoming, how the cannon stood for human resilience, and how I stood for all humans. In a sense, by shooting me from the cannon they were shooting themselves up too. I was simply the spokesperson. And what an honor it was to be the spokesperson, to carry the weight of the whole human family on my skinny shoulders. Fuck, I thought to myself. I always knew metaphors would be my downfall. "I am flattered," I said to my friend Amy. "I understand this is quite an honor. But why do I have to be shot from the cannon? I would rather do some community service, or maybe give a speech." I am quite anxious about public speaking, so you can tell how serious this was to me. I was not looking forward to being shot from the cannon at all. For one thing, no one who had been shot from the cannon had come back to say how it went. I couldn't help but assume the worst about them, and now, about myself. "Don't worry," Amy said. "There is probably a place over the hill that's better than this shitty city. That's probably where you're going. Plus," she said, "I hear the air is like a warm blanket when you're in it. People are so afraid of falling that they don't enjoy flying, but the truth is, they're the same." "Wow," I said. I was slightly offended that Amy had used my impending doom as a way to generalize about human fear

and happiness. I didn't have time for that. But still, she made me feel better about the whole thing. Especially the part about this shitty city. It was, after all, not the best place to be and the cannon was a fast way out. So I started walking, and every time I passed a car, I thought to myself, I love you car, this is the end. Then I approached the receptionist at the government building. She was licking her lips, seductively I thought, but she could have been just chapped. I cleared my throat and said, "I am ready." She looked up at me and suddenly I regretted everything. I grabbed her face and kissed her. "Oh," she said. "Thank you," she said. "I will tell my boss to build a cannon. We didn't think you'd come."



You have very little to talk about now, so you sit in the uncomfortable wire chairs and go over all the people you know in common and give updates.

ADULTERIES

Liza was my first friend in college, Jan was my first friend at summer camp, Sheila was my first friend at the office job, Angela was my first friend in junior high, and usually your first friend is the one you shed later, because by then you have found your actual friend. But, to complicate things, by then the first friend has accrued some loyalty power and pull because she was there and friendly first, she made those first few months tolerable, she buffered the transition. She is so nice that way. But, also sometimes there is something inherently off with the first friend, in that she is so friendly because she is desperate, or she is so friendly because she wants something from you, or she is so friendly and likes you so much and it's suspicious because she hasn't even really met you yet. Why is she so sure you are soulmates? It has only been two hours and *everyone* likes that song you both like.

There is often, then, a moment about two or three months in, when the transition has smoothed over, when the initial terror has calmed, when the new locations are starting to feel worn, when the office layout is making sense, when the first friend gets dumped for the new, more well-suited friend. The first friend may not understand. She may be hurt and upset. Depending on what sort of first friend she is, she may go off to find a new group of new people. She can survive, in part, by befriending those in transition, because certainly there is no shortage of those. She shepherds them through their distress and takes them to the movies. Perhaps, then, the first friend's best bet is to find someone always on the move. A non-settler. A nomad. Then the first friend can be the perpetual best friend, since there is never a second friend at all.

Of course, there remains this curious fidelity to the first friend.

You go and have lunch with her once a week at the coffee and pastry shop that smells like spilt hazelnut extract. You have very little to talk about now, so you sit in the uncomfortable wire chairs and go over all the people you know in common and give updates. Who is freaking out, who had sex, who was rude. You want to break up with her and surely she wants to break up with you too but you are both glued together by some invented sense of responsibility so you string each other along and sip uncomfortably from the oval holes cut into coffee lids. She eats half your raisin scone. For some reason, you mislead her and don't tell her about your new friend, the real friend, the one you love now. The one who will be your friend for a long time.

You and the first friend walk around together and no one else, walking around, understands why you are friends. They wave, and different people wave to both of you and look surprised. It can be good to be from different worlds, except these different worlds do not complement each other at all. You don't feel like she has any idea who you are and certainly you're not really sure who she is either: how could she possibly like that movie? Is she serious about her political stance? Is the fake giggle a joke? Does she think you don't notice the way she glances at her shadow in the window?

You bump into the first friend when you're out to dinner at salad emporium with the real friend. Hi! you say, friendly, but you don't want her to sit with you. She asks if she can. Sure, you say, with the word 'no' running through your head. The first friend sits down with her tray full of chinese chicken salad and cheese muffins, and interrogates your other friend. Who is gentle and fine with it. Who answers the questions with interest. It's you who is twitching. It's you who wants rid of the first friend. Get gone. You hate her now. You can hardly stand to look at her. She reminds you of how it felt to move here. That never happened. You were never so ill at ease, you were never desperately lonely. As you pick at your mandarin oranges, she brings back the gripping stomachache of those entire first few months. And you no longer want to be reminded of how hungry you were then, of how her face lit up the tunnel into the next world. ■

JEFFREY BEAN

I COME FROM INDIANA

I come from Indiana, where the only thing to eat
is clouds. I was born in a snowstorm, the blizzard of '78,
and like snow I come back every year, shaking my hair,
dancing to the slowest music, full of whole notes.
I come from Indiana, where the shoulders of the ground
grow hairy with grasses, where anthills swell up
into heat and the smell of tar shimmering over roofs.
I walk out wearing nothing but a huge coat of corn,
I vanish into the horizon but never leave, like a line
of highway traffic, I throw handfuls of myself into air,
the particles of me gather below streetlights like mayflies,
die in the afternoon then gather again, night after night.
I come from Indiana where faces grow plump in my dreams
like lettuce in soil and good men in towns pour oil
into mowers a few feet from wild deer, sniffing the wind,
hidden behind trees. I come from Indiana, where all the stories
about me are true: the day I stole that policeman's horse, the day
I drove my Honda blindfolded into a tornado,
the day I spray painted *cellar door, cellar door*
over and over on my girlfriend's cellar door until her father
chased me with a burning log into the woods, where
he couldn't find me because I was making love to his daughter
under a bridge in a thunderstorm. I come from Indiana,
and when I'm there I enter the air like a teenager
diving from a boat, the hard blade of his torso slicing the lake
while his mother, out of earshot, calls him home.

NEWBORN

My baby is a chubby fire, flaring
all night into the eye of
the video monitor. Birds love her,
call back when she cries them awake
at five a.m. A father
now, I understand birds,
how unbearably thin
their voices are. I will write
in the book of her life
that I swung her up, thumped
with love her plump back,
cleaned and kissed her feet,
played the heavy banjo
of her sobs, stormed through
the upstairs rooms with box fans
all June to cool her down.
I'll never tell her I cried into my eggs
for my old life, or the dream
where she's my thumb grown enormous,
heavy at the end of my arm,
and I have to shred with my one good hand
my endless hair to feed her.

THE JOY OF PAINTING

Before bed, I'm watching Bob Ross
(you know, the painter guy with the 'fro)
and I notice the sun spots on his hand
as he swirls with the fan brush. And those spots
make me think how he is going to die someday
(actually, I realize, he *is* dead by now) and that
makes me think an old, tired thought: how my baby
upstairs asleep will grow up to die, and by then
if things go as planned I'll be dead and my wife
too, but tonight on TV Bob Ross is happy
and alive, using odorless paint thinner, saying
let your imagination run wild and let it go,
here, you can do anything that you want to,
and he's making a huge mountain struck by light,
and in the face of this and the death all over
his hands, I'm drinking warm milk and hoping
I can drift off to sleep without trouble. And Bob
is washing his brush now, and drying it, saying,
just beat the devil out of it, and now he's painting
a happy little tree, almost like the one he imagined.



We've got to get you that margarita. Pronto.

LESLIE JOHNSON

IT'S JUST A PARTY

You came! You made it!

#

No, of course not, don't be silly. Better late than never, right? Isn't that what they say? That's what *I* say. Better late than never. Some people, quite a few different people, actually came early and left early, so it's good to have some late arrivals, too.

#

Oh, thanks! It's fun, isn't it, for Cinco de Mayo? It's not really Mexican but it looks kind of Mexican, doesn't it? With the embroidery and everything? The salesgirl at Lord and Taylor called it *tribal-infused* print. It's fun, isn't it?

#

No, of course not, you're fine. You came here from the club, right? That thing at the club? You look fabulous. Although, Jeff, you're probably going to want to loosen that tie if you start drinking tequila with Rog. He ordered something very authentic, Don Julio, have you heard of that?

#

Really? A triathlon? Geez, what are you trying to prove, Jeff? Ha — just kidding. You have to have a few sips of the Don Julio anyway, just to taste it. Anyway, come on in! Get in here, you two! You weren't waiting here at the door for long, were you? Were you waiting here for me to answer the door?

#

Oh, good! I'm glad you weren't waiting! Because I was going to say, the party's out back in the yard and the music got turned up a little too loud when everyone was dancing and I'd just come in for more ice

when I heard the doorbell ringing. You just missed it. Mary Callahan got everyone going in a conga line and it was *hilarious*. You should have seen it! Oh my god, I couldn't stop laughing. You know, I was going to hire a mariachi band, but Rog said why did we ever install the exterior sound system if we never use it, so we just downloaded all those old hits from Miami Sound Machine, remember? Oh my god, it got crazy out there! Here, let's go through the kitchen so you can see what we added.

#

Oh, I know I love Mary, too. I just love her. She's so funny. She had to leave early though.

#

No, she's not out there anymore. One of her kids is having a sleep-over at their place tonight and she felt like her and Tom should get home to be the adult supervision. I mean, she knew we were having our party this evening, so I'm not sure why she thought tonight would be a super night to let her daughter host a sleep-over, but whatever.

#

Right, I know what you mean. You're right, it *is* a lot to juggle, with the kids and all. For me, it's just about organization, though. A little forethought. So what do you think?

#

The countertops? Not the *countertops*, silly! The *backsplash*! You've seen my countertops lots of times. They're exactly the same. But you know, now that you mention the countertops, they might look different to you because of the new backsplash. I think the blue color of the backsplash is bringing out the flecks of teal in the granite countertops. I think—

#

What?

#

Oh, I'm sure Rog is out back with the others. He's going to be really glad to see you, Jeff. Go on out and join him! There's margaritas on the upper deck and lots of yummy food left over from dinner on the

lower deck. They served about an hour or so ago, but there's tons left. Try the enchiladas con carne! *So* delicious. Just help yourself. Jan and I will be out in just a minute or two.

#

Right, but wait for just a minute, Jan, okay? I want to ask you something about this new backsplash. I want to get your opinion on something. We went with the glass tiles, as you can see, instead of the ceramic, and since the glass tiles have such a richer tone—a bit of a shimmer, do you see that? So I didn't want it to be too overpowering and go too far with it, but now that it's in and it looks so beautiful, I'm thinking maybe I should have it expanded another three or four inches on each side. What do you *think*?

#

Well that's true, either way *would* be fine, but what do you really think? Because what I was thinking when I went with the glass instead of the ceramic is that sometimes a smaller amount of something special is better than larger amount of something ordinary.

#

No, I didn't get a chance to ask Mary.

#

I agree. Mary's always had interesting taste. Not always my own style exactly, but she has a sort of flair if you like quirky.

#

I know. It's too bad she's not here anymore.

#

Oh, lots of different people. Do you know the Morrisons? They're here. And the Langs. And you know Stephie Walters. Stephie's here. She brought Henry and Larson. They've already pulled down the sombreros from gazebo even though I told them, more than once actually, that they're just supposed to be for decoration. Actually, I was kind of surprised she brought them without calling first. I guess she and Jason are trading off the kids every other weekend now. But, like, did some kind of babysitter plague kill off all the babysitters in this town?

I mean, the last I checked, there were still babysitters in this town.

#

Oh, right. Sure. It *is* hard for single moms. That's for sure! When my kids were little I practically felt like a single mom myself because Rog was always working so much. And you're right, my kids *are* older now, so you're right it's easier for me in a way, but some things get easier and some things get harder. You'll see, Jan! Katie's fourteen now, right?

#

Just you wait, though, Jan. They go to bed one night a normal kid and wake up the next day some kind of weird zombie. That's if you're lucky you get the zombie. Or you get the snarling wolf-girl ready to rip the tendons out of your neck for offering her breakfast or something.

#

No, no, I'm just kidding! I didn't mean *Katie* will turn into a wolf-girl! I just meant teenagers in general. Ha!

#

Kylie? Oh, Kylie's great! She's really doing great.

#

Yes. That's true. Who told you that?

#

Well, they might call it an alternative high school, but that's really just because of all the technology they have there. She can actually take half of her classes online, and actually that's going to be really good experience for when she goes to college because according to the counselors so much of what they're doing at colleges now is online. I'll have to have her tell you about it! She's here. She's helping us out with the party.

#

I know, it *is* sweet of her, isn't it?

#

I know, we *should* get out there so you can say hi to her. Before we go out there, though, there's one more thing I wanted to ask you about.

Something I wanted to ask you. As a friend. Between you and me.

#

No, not the backslash. Something different.

#

It's, well . . . You came here from that thing at the club, right?

#

That's so totally fine! I mean, I wish I'd known about the thing at the club before I sent my invitations and then a week later Kathy and Jean and the Hendricks and the Jensens called to say they had this thing at the club—

#

Kathy said she didn't really *want* to go but felt she kind of *had* to because she was on the committee that chose the charity and that it wouldn't look right to just make a donation and not actually attend because it's such a good cause, I forget what she said it was—

#

Right. That's right. I don't know why I forgot that because I have a cousin with MS. She's had it for years, I remember my mother telling me about it years ago, and that it's such a terrible thing, but she looks totally normal to me. Last Thanksgiving I was watching her to see if I could see any signs, but she seemed just the same as always. She works full time. She works at a Lenscrafters. You know they have them wear white jackets like they're ophthalmologists but they're not. At least my cousin's not. I know she had some kind of training, but she doesn't have a medical degree. But she wears that white jacket to work, and I think that's kind of misleading.

#

Wow, a wheelchair.

#

Oh, no, right, I totally get what you're saying. My cousin's just lucky I guess. But *anyway* what I wanted to—

#

Oh, I'm sure he's fine. I'm sure by now Rog has twisted his arm and

gotten him going on that Don Julio —

#

I know, it *does* sound good! We're going to go out there and get you a margarita in ten seconds, that's a promise, but what I wanted to ask you, Jan, before we go out there, you know, just between you and me, is if you heard anything at the club about us, you know, me and Rog, or Rog, and why we're taking a break from the club this season —

#

In the fall, definitely. I'll be working with you again on the Harvest Fundraiser, don't you worry!

#

Right. Those kids in Tanzania really *do* depend on us.

#

Right. We'll probably be back in the fall. I'm sure we will. It's just that Rog just wants to try his hand at different golf courses this summer and I'm getting so super time-invested in my ceramics, so we figured it made sense just to take a break altogether. Some of the public courses are actually more challenging, at least that's what Rog says, and he's the one who's trying to tweak his long game, but *anyway*, have you heard anyone say anything different?

#

No, about why we haven't been at the club this spring?

#

Really? I mean, if you have, you can tell me.

#

Because Mary Callahan said something. About our membership being under review.

#

Yes! She said that! Tonight! Can you believe that? Right here at my party, when I was showing her my new backsplash!

#

Well. She didn't come right out and say it in those words, but she implied it. That she knows — or thinks she knows, I mean — something

about the status of our membership, which is ridiculous.

#

Well. She sort of put her finger on my wrist, which is weird, isn't it, to put your finger on someone's wrist when they're showing you something new in their kitchen? And she said I shouldn't be hard on myself for something that's not my fault.

#

Well, that something happened that someone's *fault*! That's what I think she was implying.

#

Right. Like Rog. Like she thinks Rog did something that's his *fault*.

#

Jan, that was like four months ago. He had a little too much to drink, maybe, like men do sometimes, right?

#

I know I wasn't there, but it really wasn't a big deal. That's what Mary told me herself when it happened and that's what Kathy's husband told Kathy, too, and anyway, what does that have to do with the fact that Rog wants to focus on a variety of golf courses this season anyway?

#

Oh, no, Jan! Don't be silly. I'm not upset that you brought it up. I mean, that whole thing at the club bar was really nothing, anyway. Nothing. But really, just between you and me, I *am* a little irked that Mary would be, well, inappropriate at my house during my own party. I mean, really. It's a Cinco de Mayo party! A *fiesta*. Not a time to put your finger on someone's wrist and try to be all *serious*. Right?

#

Well, yes. She's my friend. I mean, we went to college together. You knew that, right? We were in the same sorority. She was a legacy. They pretty much have to take you if you're a legacy. Geez, that seems so *long ago*! I guess because it *was* so long ago!

#

No, Mary and Rob were actually our secondary sponsors. The Morrisons were our primary sponsors. You knew that. Didn't you know that? I mean, don't get me wrong. I love Mary. But she can be a little . . . don't you think? Just between you and me?

#

Oh, geez, you're right! A *lot* longer than ten seconds! We've got to get you that margarita. Pronto. I just wanted, you know, so if you hear anything—

#

I'm coming with you! I'm right behind you. You have to try those enchiladas con carne. Seriously, you really have to.

#

I know! Aren't they fun? Chili pepper lights! I wanted them to be strung up in all the trees, too, but Rog didn't want to get up on the ladder. Not that he didn't *want* to but because of his back.

#

Hmmm. I don't know.

#

I know, that's funny. I don't see him. There's Jeff, though. Oh, geez, Stephanie's little boys have him cornered by the gazebo. What's he doing? What's he *juggling*? We should go rescue him.

#

Rog loves kids, too. *Loves* kids.

#

Hey, guys! Hey there, boys! Look, Jan, they're papayas. From my decorative fruit bowl. Ha. You're so talented, Jeff. A triathlete and a magician, too.

#

Right! A juggler. That's what I meant to say. Larson, do you think it's time for you and your brother to give Mr. Wellston a break?

#

I think it's time. Why don't you and your brother take those papayas off Mr. Wellston's hands and put them back in the big fruit bowl for

me, okay?

#

I'll tell you what, then. Why don't you go find Kylie and tell her it's time for the piñata, okay boys?

#

That's right, a piñata! Hurry up now! Go find Kylie!

#

Why aren't you *eating*, Jeff? Did you try the enchiladas?

#

Well how about Rog's special tequila? Did Rog fix you a drink?

#

What do you mean?

#

Well I'm sure he's *here*. You couldn't find him?

#

He's definitely *here*. He wouldn't be anywhere except for here. Unless maybe—

#

What, Larson?

#

Kylie doesn't smoke cigarettes, honey.

#

No she doesn't. They're bad for you.

#

If she's up in the tree house, she's probably just getting the piñata ready, that's all. She's probably going to hang it from one of those big branches. You boys go wait by the tree house, and call up to her, okay? Just call up to her and tell her to hurry up with the piñata.

#

I'm in the middle of talking to Mr. and Mrs. Wellston, Larson. So excuse you! If Kylie's busy, then go find your mother. Bye bye now!

#

Yes, well, that's putting mildly. I mean, I know Stephie's a single

mom now and everything, but if I'm remembering right they just got divorced less than a year ago. It's not like her kids were raised in the wild. I mean, manners are manners. What ever happened to kids and manners? And speaking of manners, that's what I was trying to tell you. I bet Rog is in his golf room. I bet someone asked to see his new drivers, and you know Rog, he never likes to say no when it comes to golf. Golf is really a sport of manners, that's what Rog says. A sport of courtesy. You've seen Rog's golf room, haven't you, Jeff?

#

Oh, you have to see it. It's in the finished basement. He got rid of the pool table and put in one of those indoor putting greens. You have to see it. Here. Around this way. The door's a walk-out to the side patio.

#

That's okay, Jan. You get a plate of those enchiladas. I'm just going to take Jeff to the golf room, and then I want to introduce you to my yoga teacher. My yoga's teacher's here! She's so great. You'll love her.

#

I know. Especially your spine.

#

Come on!

#

Follow me, Jeff. It'll only take a minute. I know you're going to want to see this new driver that Rog is so excited about. It's right around the side here . . .

. . .

Oh.

#

No, he's okay. I'm sure he's okay. Rog. Rog. Jesus, Rog, get up.

#

You don't have to feel his *pulse*, Jeff! He's just, he's resting. He had a headache all afternoon, and that Mary *Callahan* and her stupid *conga* line. That was just too much for him. What the hell does she think, that we're all still in college! Jesus. Rog. Rog!

#

You're right. Let's go.

#

I wouldn't say *sleep it off*, Jeff. He's resting. He gets these really horrible horrible headaches sometimes but he doesn't like to complain. You know Rog. He's not a whiner. Where's Jan? Let's find Jan. I want to introduce her to my yoga teacher. You should meet her, too Rog. Yoga is incredibly good for runners. It's not just regular stretching. It opens the connective tissues and lets it all breathe. Okay, there's *Jan*, but where's my yoga teacher?

#

Maybe.

#

I guess so. Maybe when I was showing Jan my new backslash.

#

I know, a lot of people have left. But then, you guys got here so late. Too bad you guys weren't here earlier when everyone was dancing. Oh my god, that was so hilarious! Here she —

#

Oh, Jan!

#

That's so funny. When did she text you? Just now?

#

I know, so cute! I mean, to *us* it's cute, Mary's singing karaoke with the slumber-party girls, but I feel kind of sorry for her daughter, you know? To have one of those moms who's always trying so hard to be cool?

#

Why, what did she say?

#

No, tell me.

#

Well that's funny. *Worried* about me. That's very funny. I have no idea

why she would even say that.

#

He's fine, Jeff. I told you. You know what, the one I'm actually worried about is Mary. If there's someone we should be worried about it's Mary, if you ask me.

#

Right, she seems that way, but you don't know her the way I know her. I mean, even in college she was such jealous person. It's sad really. It's—

#

Okay, Jeff, geez, enough already! You're an insurance salesman, not an Olympian! Nobody's going to care if you're not at the gym at the break of dawn.

#

But it's still early! Did you even try the enchiladas yet?

#

No, I know! I was just kidding. I know you're not a salesman.

#

Well, okay then, but Jan, you were going to say hi to Kylie, remember? Kylie wanted to say hi to you. She wanted to tell you about her Avatar Club. It's very high-tech. She's very involved with it.

#

Okay, then, Jeff, go ahead. She'll meet you in the car in like ten seconds. Go ahead!

#

Oh my god, Jan, I really admire you. I do. You're so patient. That would make me crazy to have to listen to him whining about that triathlon training every day like he's preparing for a space mission to Mars or something. But you, you're so patient!

#

That's true. It *is* good for them to take care of themselves.

#

I think she might be up in the tree house. She was getting the piñata

ready.

#

I know! We were going to do a piñata, but then we got so busy with everything else. Laughing and dancing! And then, you know, Mary got carried away with her conga line, and it was kind of embarrassing, actually, the way she has such a need to be the center of attention, but I didn't want to make her feel bad. I didn't want to make her think I was trying to rain on her parade. But you know what, I should have. I should have pulled her aside said *Mary*. I should have tried to help her *reflect* on why she feels this constant need to upstage me. But you know me, I wouldn't do that. Not at a party.

#

Actually, Jan, she does. She seems sweet, but she's really a very insecure person and it's sad, but that's why. That's why she's such a bitch. Between you and me, Jan, that's why our membership's under review. Because of her. *Mary*. She submitted an incident report to the board.

#

Right, supposedly anonymous, but it was her. I know it was her.

#

False. *Completely* false.

#

Really? How can her intentions be good if she's a jealous liar, Jan?

#

I *am* calm.

#

I not *jumping* to anything.

#

Well, whatever. *You're* just so sweet, though, Jan. You always have been. I mean it . . . KYLIE! COME DOWN! COME DOWN AND SAY HI TO MRS. WELLSTON!

#

I know, she probably has those earbuds on, plugged into her phone or iPod or whatever. These kids today are all going to be deaf by the

time they're forty . . . KYLIE! CAN YOU HEAR ME? MRS. WELLSTON WANTS TO TALK TO YOU!

#

No, I'm pretty sure she's up there. Wait here. Just wait here a minute. I'm going to go up there and get her. Don't move! Wait right here!

. . .

Kylie? Kylie. I'm coming up. Kylie? Geez, don't make me climb all the way up this ladder, Kylie! I want you to come down and talk to Mrs. Wellston . . . *I mean it, right now . . .*

. . .

Oh, great, Kylie. Just great. After you *promised* me.

#

Right. Sure. I can *smell* it. And your eyes are all red. What am I supposed to say to Mrs. Wellston?

#

Well, do you have any Visine stashed up here?

#

Well, check your pockets. I keep finding half-used bottles in your pockets.

#

Well, forget it anyway. There she goes. I can see their car from here. Fucking Jeff has the motor running. There she goes. Great. Thanks a lot, Kylie.

#

It's not what I want *from* you. It's what I want *for* you. You can't just . . . Wait, I'm coming in. Move over a little . . .

. . .

You can't just escape from your problems, Kylie.

#

Well, you have to *try*. I know that much at least. You can't just quit things all the time.

#

What about your Avatar Club?

#

I didn't say stupid. Did I? I might have said I didn't understand why you couldn't join something where real people actually get together in a real place, but at least it was *something*. It was something you were trying, at least. Like my party tonight. I saw Cinco de Mayo on my Unicef calendar, and I thought, okay, just *go for it*. Because you have to make an effort. I mean, it took me hours to hang up all those damn chili pepper lights. But we all have to keep trying, Kylie. We have to. Even if—

#

I'm not crying. I'm just . . .

#

I know. You're right, it's just a party. I know that. But it's more than that, you know? I feel tired, Kylie. It seems too hard sometimes.

#

Keeping our heads above water, I guess. As we climb the rocky mountain of life.

#

Well, excuse me Miss Smarty-pants. There could be a river, couldn't there? Or a lake? You could be climbing a mountain, *metaphorically* as you say, and get hot and decide to take a swim in a lake or something, couldn't you? Or fall into something by surprise. You could stumble on loose rocks on the trail that you didn't see and fall off a cliff, and just fall and fall, down and down into a deep, deep gorge—

#

What? Where are you going? Don't go yet. Stay up here with me a little longer.

#

Wait, Kylie. I couldn't—

#

I can't hear a word you're saying. ■

JAMES VALVIS

ON THE PEOPLE RUNNING FROM GODZILLA

Here, finally, at the end of the movie,
the people of Tokyo are in the streets,
running, trying to get anywhere else,
though it's already too late.
Godzilla is upon them, bearing down,
and so they stop, turn, point, and scream.
Why have they stopped? you wonder.
Why are they pointing and screaming now?
Do they think others don't realize
there's an 800 foot tall lizard loose in the city
spraying fire and making that awful noise?
And when Godzilla lifts his foot,
they shield their heads with an arm,
as if this will protect them
from many tons of stomping monster.
Whatever you think of the cheesy acting,
the lame dubbing, and the ridiculous FX,
you must resist the urge to call the people stupid.
You too have called attention to the obvious
only after it became obvious.
You too hoped to be spared the inevitable.
And worst of all, you too heeded the authorities,
who never fail to say they have everything under control,
whose advice is always to remain indoors
and stay calm.

SARAH J. SLOAT

MIST

Overnight, when the supermarket is closed, a few lights are left on inside. One hangs above the produce, where the all-night mist machine keeps the deep greens and cabbage damp. The mist rolls thin for its scheduled minute, then the machine shuts off, and moisture flutes along the leaves.

Because the mister is timed, the observer, like the produce, is caught in a cycle of predictable suspense. And it's a question of time before everything loses its bloom, though it's long been assumed that lassitude and apathy can be reanimated by ardor.

Maybe that's why there's comfort in this contraption of great care, its airy irrigation, the bulb burning in an automatic Florida. The mist suffuses. The leaves respond with a sheen that fades a little with each suspended sigh.

In the middle of winter one can't help but stop to watch the fine mist fume and fall on the vegetables that have stopped growing, lined up in their last, noble poses.



*The ice cream fell right off the cone, like a head
out of a guillotine.*

YAHOO

Once a man said to me, *I got it! I've got it!*

I was walking in the mall with two scoops of strawberry ice cream on a cone, passing through a Dillard's, where the light from the parking lot was coming in so bright it was like we were heading for blindness. I was a young girl, and I was with other young girls, talking a lot. I still talk a lot. The ice cream fell right off the cone, like a head out of a guillotine. I was looking down at the tiled floor when he came up behind me, on my right. This was when he said it: *I got it! I've got it!* He was already reaching out his hand. He picked up the ice cream like you'd pick up a baseball. He straightened up and held it out to me.

Here, he said. What could I say? I did not say *yes*. Or *thank you*. I waited for the next thing that was going to happen. Which was that he looked down at his hand for what seemed like a long time. Then he screamed a comic book scream, an "Ahhh!" in round, goofy font above his head.

I find myself thinking of this man now, thirty years later. *I got it! I've got it!* A man who would yell this from across a Dillard's without a thought to what he'd got. I might have dropped a baby. I might have dropped a cotton-candy pink bomb. After screaming, he'd hightailed it out of the mall, disappearing into the parking lot light. Good bye!

This would be the last time that a man said this to me. If I told my mother about this she would have her own theories about why such memories are coming back to me now, and they would all have to do with *the type of man* that I am longing for, no matter how much I am *fooled by denial*. Denial is a tricky thing, she would say. *It hides the facts of our own lives from us*. With her hand covering her mouth, as

she looked away, looked thoughtful.

Yes Mother, I would say, I am looking for a man who will scream across Dillard's, 'I got it!' I am so exhausted I just want someone to pick up the ice cream, the ice cream of my life. I am still an unmarried woman, and this troubles her. Or should I say troubled her – my mother died a month ago. It was her time. Sometimes being unmarried troubles me – more often I am concerned by how unconcerned I am. Whenever the subject came up around my nervous former assistant Jane (who is a bit like a golden retriever – the kind from the pound), she would say, “Oh, but you’re *happy*, Miss O’Donnell. Some women wouldn’t be, without a husband, but you don’t *need* one.” Right on the latter, Jane, but wrong on the former. I wouldn’t call myself *happy*, though I do walk around some afternoons with a wide smile on my face just from observing tragedies and comedies and various absurdities at the gas station or the supermarket. I’m no stranger to happiness, exactly. But consider this: every evening, when I got home from the school library (when I still worked there), the first thing I always did was go to my bed, fall back into its center, push my palms out to the far edges, spread-eagled, and here I would imagine I was falling through levels of a jungle canopy, battering my back with thick branches, whizzing past the hoots and calls of spider monkeys, heading dead for the leafy ground and the centuries of compost to catch me. It was a thrill, the same kind of thrill you get pushing an empty shopping cart across a wide parking lot, the asphalt pitting and spinning the wheels, the rattle deafening. *Yahooooooo.*

This helped me go on with my life. Nightly, falling towards the forest floor, shot out of the sky from God knows what height, what cloud. *This* helped me go on with my life.

I had not always wanted to be a librarian but I have always had a wealth of trivial knowledge. When I was younger I liked memorizing species of fish and quotes of different famous women and flipping through *How It Works* books, especially the ones about boats. I liked

the randomness of elementary school, the fact that someone handed you a worksheet and asked, *Really, Georgia, how is metamorphic rock formed? And igneous? And sedimentary?* What glorious nonsense that all is, a roomful of children who are all being slowly murdered by whatever they put in the chicken nuggets, memorizing types of rock! And yet if I had to say one thing I loved in the world, it would be that nonsense. It would be the beauty of that, of children knowing rocks and birds and trees, of a building where this was posted on the walls like the most important news. Oh, sometimes I could hate myself for it. What was I doing with my life, with theirs? Whose time was I wasting, how foolish, how flighty, could I possibly become?

One of the last things one of my students said to me before I was fired was *You can take your Dixon Ticonderoga pencil and shove it.* Such verbal embroidery! If I have taught them nothing else, I taught them this. Also, that it was Stevie Wonder who sang "Sir Duke" and not Michael Jackson. This we played on Fridays, during musical chairs. The last round always ended with someone bruising a shin, but I couldn't give it up, and neither could they. Somehow it canceled out the letters I would have to write on Monday, in librarian lady cursive: *Dear Ms. Tompkins, Hope you are well. Barry has been making some violent artwork during library period, which I am required to report to his teacher.* This warning was the least I could do, but I would have preferred to sneak the art off Barry's desk while he wasn't looking and shred it before his teacher found it. Some of it was quite profound: a black allosaurus with two pistols and a bucket of bullets hooked on its tail, mowing down a smeary crowd of stick figures, all wearing the same blue shirt. *Ah, Barry! Still a warrior, before someone clubs it out of you.* These types of thoughts came to me more and more frequently in the days before my performance evaluation. I was already on shaky ground, having taken three weeks off to attend my mother's funeral.

"Georgia," said my supervisor, a large-chested woman named Adeline Grey, who wore nothing but matching skirt-suits. *Lady Grey*, I call her in my head. "You're quite a bit over in the vacation depart-

ment.”

“It was a funeral,” I corrected her.

She glanced down at her clipboard. “A three week funeral.”

“Bereavement,” I said, my hands flopping, to illustrate – what? A bereaved trout? “A bit of bereavement.”

My mother, before she was dead, wrapped her bathrobe around her chest, and looked across the midnight table at me. *If only you could believe a little more in God*, she said to me. This was several years ago, before she bequeathed me every single album of Mahalia Jackson’s as well as my father’s old heating and cooling van, with the paint peeled so it read *O’Donnell Heating and Cool* on the side. What an inheritance! For some time I played the album at night, while cooking dinner, and tried to believe a little more in God. If I imagine God as Mahalia Jackson, sometimes something happens. But it never lasts. The van stayed parked in front of my house like a sad draft horse.

“And how do *you* think you’re doing?” Lady Grey crossed her legs, ladylike.

“We’ve been reading such wonderful books,” I began, but – “There have been some complaints,” she said.

What an old and boring story! A big-chested administrator fires a loose-bolted librarian lady over literature choice! There is always something they don’t want the kids reading. Last year, they asked me to pull all the books that mentioned rape from the middle school section, even though these kinds of books are the most frequently requested, by far. I kept the books in the bottom drawer of my desk and all the girls knew about it.

But their real reason for firing me was probably nothing this noble or righteous. I was out of their budget, and poorly-paid Jane would do just fine filing and shelving. Or, it was even less: I was forgetful, I did not quite succeed at my responsibilities. On my way out I pulled all the rape books out of my bottom drawer and put them in a cardboard box, hauling them to my car. Also, *The Runaway Bunny*. Take that! On the drive home I realized that Adeline Grey wouldn’t exactly be

crawling around in her pantyhose griping about where *Runaway Bunny* was, that I had in fact stolen from some blue-trousered kindergartner instead. It was too late to return it. I piled the books by my Mahalia Jackson albums, on the living room floor.

Barry had been my secret favorite. He had been held back a grade, so he was part of my beginning reader group for two years. He had sharp eyes, extremely focused, so much so that when I'd first met him I'd actually avoided his direct gaze. A baby! He was six years old and fat as a beach ball. Barry wanted to kill things. He discovered the *How Things Work* books early on, and ran his dimpled finger along the diagrams of military tanks and rifles and the triangular ridges carved into hunting knives to let the blood run out. He terrified Jane. "These are bad things," she'd say to Barry, trying to close the heavy hard-cover, but then he would stick his fingers between the pages so that she couldn't close it without hurting him, and when she did begin to press the cover down he would scream. The first time this upset Jane so much that I found her behind the YA section an hour later, dabbing furiously at her eyes with a Kleenex. The third time, I saw her push the cover down just a little swifter than she needed to, a hard crinkle around her eyes. This is what the children do to you, if you are not careful (and it is so hard to be careful.) You look at them and think *I could pick you up and shake those brains in your skull like beans in a maraca!*

This is the part of the job that always made me want to throw books off the shelves and say, Just *read* them, would you? I'm not writing any notes home, I'm not giving you stars, I'm not withholding five minutes of recess time on that slanted asphalt you call a playground. I'm not even standing behind you, blowing coffee breath over your shoulder, asking you to read aloud and show me your mastery of beginning consonants. I'm not asking you to reshelve, I'm not demanding gentle page turning. I'm just asking that if you read a word, if the letters click together like a skeleton jumping to life, that you stand up and you scream, *I got it! I've got it! EUREKA!*

But I have already told you that that afternoon in the Dillard's would be the last time a man would say this to me, and so you can guess how my days in the library could sometimes go, as though as I were moving through a watery dream, a fantasy constructed by someone else, possibly the principal (a man with a sharp goatee and cartoon ties), or possibly someone even bigger, someone writing these memos that Jane would deliver to my desk, drilling out the learning objectives, spotted with tacky clip art. A script I kept falling behind in, as though I had read an earlier draft and everyone was zooming along with a new one. I looked up pink-faced from musical chairs and saw Lady Grey with a piece of bright white paper in her hand, her fingernail to the bullet points there, the sheet still warm from the copier. "These are your missing reports," she said, thrusting it at me. "Due last week."

The news about my mother came on a Thursday, and it was not expected. She was older, certainly, within range of death, but she was a sinewy old bird, with all her teeth still in her head. When she dropped the cap of a bottle, she could still bend down and get it with barely a grunt. She was not my best friend, though people seemed to expect that, seeing as I was unmarried and had no overnight friends who knew the smell of my neck and my miscellaneous secrets. A person without this is at least expected to be close to her mother. But the truth was that after I'd graduated high school I'd barely seen her. When I was growing up she had been airy and distant, fully immersed in her husband's life, working as a secretary at his business, uninterested in the books I read, drowning in something that was not liquor or Vicodin but something else, something that kept her on the porch for hours, smoking long thin cigarettes, even in winter. My father, setting the table with his back to the window, through which I could see my mother's tall back and her tight braids, told me, "Your mother needs a little more space than the rest of us." Once he leaned towards me. "Did you know her parents sent her to Europe? Just for a painting

class." He shook his head at the marvel of this.

My mother still painted, on pieces of old sheets stapled to wooden frames that she nailed together herself in the backyard. These were the moments she came alive – I'd wake up in my bedroom and lie there grinning to hear the sound of her hammer smacking wood, to peek out the window and see her in loose jeans and my father's shirt, the short hairs around her face sticking to her temples with sweat, the sinews in her wrists flexing to swing the hammer. Sometimes she came alive like this to dance with me and my father in the living room, or switch an album my father had put on, and refuse to put his back. On the truly thrilling days she slid his album back into its case and snuck into their bedroom to hide it, while he chased her.

After my father died my mother stayed in the house they'd lived in most of their lives, and during this time, three times before she died, she called to ask me to come over there at midnight. The phone would ring and her voice would be clear on the line, as though it were the middle of the day and she'd already had coffee and breakfast. "Georgia," she'd say. "What are you doing?"

"Sleeping, Mother," I said. The second time, I said "Dancing, Mother."

"Come over, please."

It was a forty minute drive out of Boston to my parents' little house – but considering the rarity, that first time, I went. On the second call, I began to worry – you know, first a woman begins to visit her mother at all hours, then she finds that her mother is the only person who really knows her, and who else does she know but children, who are more like joyful reptiles than people, and soon she will be so alone she will just *become* her mother, and there will be nothing left of her but the leaves that have blown through her open front door into the hall. But I was convinced I would have plenty of time before this happened. That there would be some warning signs.

That first time I went over, she had Mahalia on, and was sitting at the kitchen table in her light blue robe, the front door unlocked.

There I saw what my mother had been doing in the free time of her retirement: swarming the wallpaper, overlapping in thick swabs of paint, were animals—turkeys and chickens and cows and horses, galumphing along the paneling. One old sow had made her way onto the red metal teapot on the stove. My mother looked up from the table. “Georgia,” she said. “How good of you to come. Do you want tea?”

My mother still wore her hair long, instead of the usual cropped white halo women her age wear. When I was young she’d always braided it up, and now with it down around her shoulders I realized how thick it was, almost entirely gray, practically glowing. As I sat down across from her, my skin suddenly prickled with an overwhelming anticipation. My mother, the distant artist, was going to impart some hard-won wisdom. She was going to slide a slim bag across the table with a gleaming gun inside—*always protect yourself*, she’d say. She was going to lean back with a deep sigh and proclaim, *There’s only one thing a woman can do in this world*. And I would hold my breath.

Instead, she poured me a cup of tea, then slumped luxuriously onto her elbow on the table, tilting her head onto her hand to look at me. “Georgia,” she said again. “Are you entirely all right?”

I stuck a fingertip into my tea to see if it was too hot. “Well, of course not,” I said. “Not *entirely*.”

“I mean, Georgia—are you happy? Do you feel that your life has a purpose? Do you feel that you are loved?”

“I’m fine, Mother.” I was disappointed by these questions. I wanted declarative sentences.

She sighed. “Georgia, I worry about you. I worry about you being *lonely*.” She looked hard at me as though to quell any protests, but I was quiet. “You can spend your whole life not needing companionship, but then one day you’ll need it. And where will you be?”

Where will I be? I will be falling through the canopy of a jungle, I will be toothless and rattling hard across the grocery store parking lot. I will be dead on a park bench. I will be painted into a painting, somewhere. I will be smearing ice cream across the floor of public

places with abandon.

“It’s not so bad, Mother,” I said. “Loneliness.” Because I do believe it, or at least I believe this: loneliness is a horse you can learn to ride. And I know who I learned this from.

The funeral was three days after her death, planned by her younger sister, whom I had met twice or three times before. She was from the West Coast, and wore lots of silver jewelry. She and I were the only two in attendance. I had a front row seat. And I surprised myself, how soothed I was by Aunt Jo’s overwhelming floral-and-baby-powder smell and the jingle of her earrings when she hugged me. The room where the funeral home served coffee and dry cookies had a white tile floor, and we shuffled around on it, and then I drove Jo to the airport.

For the eighteen days that followed, I took train rides from the tip of the Blue Line and back, and car rides, too, that took me far from my mother’s house, and finally, finally back to it, to pick up my father’s company van. The van coughed and creaked its way down Comm Ave, like a dragon. It hadn’t been driven in years.

Other days, I hung eighteen Lipton tea bags over the lip of a glass bowl and brewed gallons of tea, then poured it into jugs of ice. I cut lemons. I sat outside and I drank this, and I might have even read a book or two. I sat in my porch chair in the bright afternoon, with the cars rolling by at 25 mph on my side street, blowing leaves towards me, and I leaned back and pretended to be falling into the rain forest. Doing this out in the sunshine was exhilarating. *It made me feel alive!* I brought out some of my oldest *How Things Work* books, which tell you how things no longer work, and I flipped and flipped through these.

While I was busy on the porch, Adeline Grey left six messages on my machine. Jane left three. Jane is a wee slip of a thing, as my mother would say, just out of librarian school, and I could barely hear her voice on the machine. I called her back.

“Miss O’Donnell!” she said. “Where have you been?”

“Traveling, a little,” I said.

"The children have been *asking* and asking about you. I wish you'd come back."

"Do you really need me?"

"Of course!" She was a little breathless. "They've been walking all over me."

"OK, then, Jane," I said. "I'll be back soon."

She sighed. "Thank you, Miss O'Donnell." I heard a faint sneeze, as though she'd turned her face from the receiver. "Where were you traveling?"

But this, as you already know, did not last long. A week later I was peeling out of the school lot with a cardboard box of stolen books. But I did not quite make it to my car before I saw Barry, who was beating a stick into the ground at the edge of the playground. He looked up at me and I could practically see the panicked excuses scrolling across his eyeballs: "Miss! Miss! Mrs. Adams sent me out here! To get a scientific sample!"

See? I am (I was) surrounded by tiny geniuses.

They soak the nuggets in ammonia, Barry, I wanted to tell him. *And Mrs. Grey keeps her bulk bag of Reese's on the left side of her desk.* But he probably already knew all that.

I parked my car by a supermarket, and took the train back to the Blue Line, directly. A woman my age can step onto the Blue Line and a slouchy young man in a baseball cap and white headphones will stand up and offer his seat, shuffling past me. If you take the Blue Line as far as Revere Beach the walls around the train begin to look like they are crumbling, the tiles peeling and the wires hanging low like vines, but I didn't need to ride it that far. I got out at the Aquarium stop and headed for the harbor, where the waters flash and blind you, where the boats leave on the half hour and the hour. I paid seventeen dollars in cash for the ferry to George's Island, where I got a gleaming white plastic seat near the front. This is where the spray was, the polluted, brilliant spray, splashing over the deck. This time of day it was just

me, the captain and two truant teenage girls in purple lipstick. After ten minutes or so, as we steamed away from the city, I stood up and leaned over the silver bars. I imagined flinging my purse off the deck and a man running up from behind me, screaming, *I got it!* Then he'd swan dive over the bars. I laughed out loud at this and grinned at the girls, who glanced sideways at each other, disturbed. The hem of my dress was soaked.

"What will you do now?" Lady Grey had said at the close of our meeting.

I had something in mind. I could fill the back of the Heating and Cool truck with stolen books and drive around throwing them at children. *Here! For you! Read, read, read!* A citywide Drop Everything and Read, in which you drop everything because a rogue librarian has brained you with a paperback, and in the following shock there's simply nothing left to do but read, right there on the sidewalk. And one fat-fingered boy seeing the truck coming a half block away would run towards it on his stocky legs – as a five-pound hardcover comes bombing out the driver's side window he would scream, *I got it! I've got it!* ■

HALI F. SOFALA

FREAK SHOW

My best friend
and I paid two dollars
to see the freak show.

Fat twins with oily
mustaches and stomachs
round as storage drums—

even a bearded lady
with a beard that twitched
as she laughed at the fat twins.

Two dollars more
and we saw a man turn
into a gorilla; green strobes

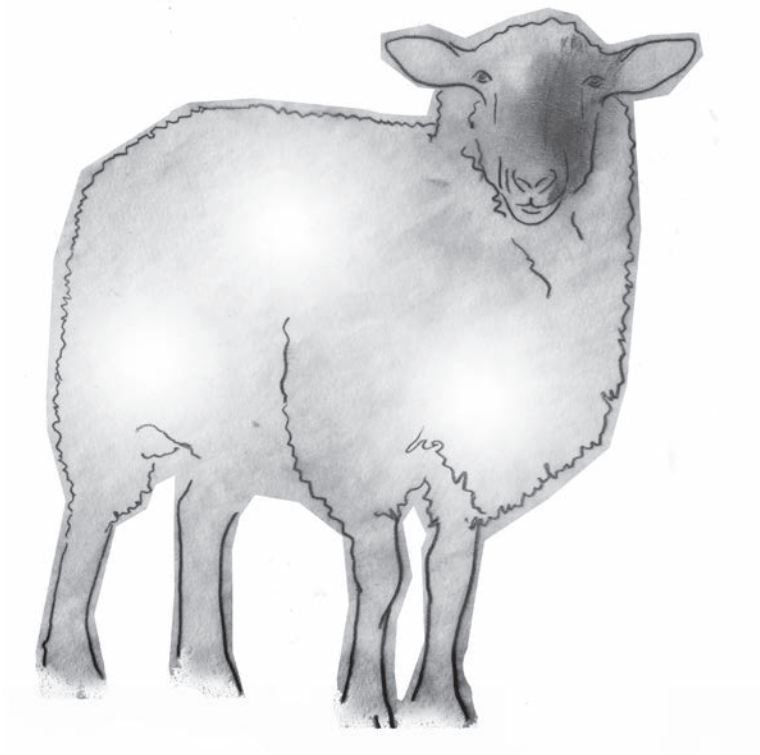
and smoke rolling as gorilla-man
bared his teeth at young girls—
lips curled, snarling, *run*.

And for one dollar more we saw
the world's smallest woman
in a pup tent beside the cattle show.

A dozen small machines
surrounding a body the size
of my left thigh. Manure in the air.

An oxygen mask fixed tight
to her face and band aids
like pockmarks scarring her skin.

My own image floating up to me
in the mirrors that surrounded her.



*These sheep are always in a pack and yet they
always seem so lonely.*

I WANT TO BE SOMEONE BETTER THAN ME:
A COMPANION TO HARMONY KORINE'S
MISTER LONELY

1. "I have been trying, for some time now, to find dignity in my loneliness. I have been finding this hard to do." Maggie Nelson, *Bluets*.

2. This is about a movie you haven't seen if you haven't seen Harmony Korine's *Mister Lonely*. [If you *have* seen it, go to #4.] Don't worry. That's why I'm here. Take my hand.

3. INSTRUCTION MANUAL FOR THOSE WHO HAVE NOT SEEN *MISTER LONELY*: There are four ways to do this.

3a. Read this, then watch *Mister Lonely*.

3b. Watch *Mister Lonely*, then read this.

3c. Watch 15% of *Mister Lonely*, then read 15% of this; watch 30% of the remainder of *Mister Lonely*, then read 30% of the remainder of this; watch 45% of the remainder of *Mister Lonely*, then read 45% of the remainder of this. And so on.¹

3d. Watch the *Mister Lonely* trailer on Youtube, get a *feel* for the movie, read this, and then watch *Mister Lonely*.

4. Ironically, this will make both you and I feel less lonely.

5. I watched *Mister Lonely* for the first time in a shopping-mall multiplex with a woman I was sort of dating. Let's call her Genevieve. I say *sort of dating* because nothing ever really happened between Genevieve

¹ 60%, 75%, 90%, 100%.

and I. We kissed a couple of times.

The first time Genevieve and I kissed she was drunk. She kind of had a problem with alcohol. She wasn't an alcoholic or anything, but when she drank she completely lost control. It really was a Jekyll and Hyde deal. I'd never seen anything like it. This little speck of a woman—very short, skin and bones, frequent giggler—drank a few beers and morphed from nebbish to femme fatale.

After watching *Mister Lonely*, Genevieve and I went our separate ways. She said she had to go be with her dog. (Genevieve loved her dog, a tiny black hairball, more than anything in the world.) When I got home I had an email from her with a link to a video of Bobby Vinton singing Mr. Lonely, the song that plays in the opening of Korine's movie. It's a beautiful, heartbreaking song.

6. The opening scene of *Mister Lonely*: Michael is riding a mini-motorcycle with Vinton singing in the background. Next to the mini-motorcycle flies a small stuffed monkey with angel wings. The monkey's not flying, of course, it's held by a rod that sticks out of the mini-motorcycle.

Remember Michael's chimpanzee? Bubbles. Jacko adopted him from a Texan research facility in the '80s. Wikipedia: "During the *Bad World Tour* . . . Jackson brought Bubbles with him to Japan, where they both drank tea with the mayor of Osaka."

7. Plots are for dead people. So says David Shields. Plots are clunky and contrived. They stand in our way. What happens is not important. What's important is that it feels like what happens to you.

Let's get a big chunk of the plot over with.

The main character, played by Diego Luna, is a Michael Jackson impersonator living in Paris. Michael—for that's what everyone calls him, he *is* Michael—ekes out a living dancing in the park and every once in a while getting a gig in a nursing home.

It is in the nursing home where he meets (a) Marilyn Monroe (im-

personator). “Don’t die!” Michael is saying to the old French people in his Mexican English. “Never die! Stay young forever!” Marilyn, played by Samantha Morton, is helping some old guy clean snot from his face or something. I don’t need to describe her. You know what Marilyn looks like. You know which dress she’s wearing.

Michael has no friends and speaks no French. He is (Mister) capital “L” Lonely and hits it off with Marilyn – an American – while they walk a Parisian park after their workday. He asks her where she lives. Marilyn, it turns out, lives in a commune in Scotland populated exclusively by impersonators. “You should come, Michael!”

8. Diego Luna was the only reason I got to see *Mister Lonely* in a multiplex. I was living in Mexico City when it came out and it’s not easy to see artsy films there. But Diego Luna is huge in Mexico,² so there was *Mister Lonely*, in the city’s mainstream theaters next to shitty comedies and shitty love stories.

9. Before Michael leaves for the Highlands there’s a scene in which he stands in the doorway of his room and says his goodbyes. It goes something like, “Goodbye, room. I’ll miss you. Goodbye, bed. You’re a very good bed. Goodbye, closet.” And so on.

Loneliness is your apartment when you leave for a trip.

10. To become a celebrity one needs to be very good at pretending to be someone else. Celebrities are already impersonators. A paradox of celebrity culture is that we want our celebrities to be just like us but at the same time to be *more* than us. Celebrities are people who’ve somehow tricked us (and themselves) into thinking that they’re something bigger than people.

Madonna perfected the art of being Sexy and that’s why she deserves to be a celebrity. Who doesn’t want to be Sexy? How few

² His “big break” was starring in *Y Tu Mama También* alongside Gael García Bernal.

accomplish it. No one was as Sexy as Madonna. She achieved what we all desire: to make people believe that her disguise is actually who she was. The problem, however, is that the expert disguiser never succeeds in convincing him/herself of his/her own disguise, so eventually s/he wants a change of disguise.

There used to be a girl in my class who worked extremely hard at convincing everyone that she was a troubled, dark, rebellious youth with no morals. Later she became a full-on Christian. Another curse of the expert disguiser is that there's no middle ground. Think of an actor on a popular sitcom who complains that s/he can't get work anymore because everyone thinks of her/him as the character they play on television. That's surprising? You begged us for years to believe you were that character! And we believed you! And they gave you millions for it!

So we believed Madonna when she told us she was Sexy, but then she got bored or ashamed of that persona and thought she could make us think she was Elegant British Artiste. *I fooled 'em once, how hard could it be to fool 'em again?* Very hard. As George W. wisely said, "Fool me once, shame on . . . shame on you? You fool me you can't get fooled again." We feel betrayed and gullible when a celebrity tells us that the disguise was a disguise. That's why listening to Madonna's British accent is jarring and her cone bra isn't.

11. Michael voiceover: "I have always wanted to be someone else . . . To find purpose in this world."

12. Michael and Marilyn arrive at the commune on boat. Charlie Chaplin and Shirley Temple, Marilyn's husband and daughter, eagerly await Marilyn's return. We accompany Michael as he is introduced to the other members of the commune: Abraham Lincoln, James Dean, the Pope, Sammy Davis, Jr., Queen Elizabeth, Little Red Riding Hood, '80s Madonna, and The Three Stooges.

13. The reason Genevieve and I were attracted to one another was that we were both so incredibly lonely – apartments whose occupants had gone on vacation – and thought that maybe we’d de-lonely each other. But that’s not how loneliness works. Two wrongs don’t make a right. We the Lonely are not lonely because we are alone, but because we are lonely people. Loneliness is part of us. The lonely person must find a not-lonely person in order to feel less lonely. Even then, however, the illusion eventually evaporates and we’re left feeling lonely again.

14. From Frederick Exley’s *A Fan’s Notes*:

I would . . . get a girl. I once had a very clear picture of her: she was to have a degree from Vassar (I was willing to go as low as a B.A. in Fine Arts from Wellesley); she must have bobbed, blond hair, green eyes, and golden, vibrant legs; to offset my increasing “melancholy,” I determined that she must be a gregarious girl, spontaneously witty, and capable of thunderous laughter.

15. I’m drawn to people who wear their heart on their sleeve. I like to be around those who aren’t afraid to show (or simply can’t hide) their weaknesses. That’s part of the reason why my favorite U.S. president – by far – is Lincoln.

“I’m the loneliest man in the world,” Lincoln wrote once. He was a terribly depressed man. A loner, Lincoln was always trying to find peace from his demanding wife. The night he was assassinated Abe had actually wanted to stay home and rest, but he’d already announced that he’d be at Ford’s Theatre and he didn’t want to let “the people” down.

16. Harmony Korine wrote the script for the movie *Kids* when he

was 19.³ I remember watching it as a teenager lying on the floor of my mother's bedroom while she was away and thinking it was the coolest. Here I was, watching a movie on a Friday afternoon, while in New York – this movie dixit – kids younger than me spent their time doing drugs, having sex and beating people up with skateboards. I needed to get myself a nicotine addiction.

Korine then wrote and directed *Gummo*. Here's the beginning of the *New York Times*' review of *Gummo*: "October is early, but not too early to acknowledge Harmony Korine's *Gummo* as the worst film of the year. No conceivable competition will match the sourness, cynicism and pretension of Mr. Korine's debut feature." Then Korine made *Julien Donkey-Boy*, which I think is about schizophrenia. I have not seen either of these films. I've held their DVD boxes and considered renting them, but they just don't seem like movies I'd enjoy.⁴

At some point between *Kids* and *Mister Lonely* Korine had one of those too-much-fame-&-too-much-partying moments and moved to Paris to "clear his head" and be depressed and drug-addled in a more romantic setting. Also at some point two of his houses burned down.⁵ My favorite Harmony Korine story is that he's banned from *The Late Show with David Letterman* for (reportedly) pushing Meryl Streep backstage. The idea of someone pushing Meryl Streep makes me happy. She's one of those people who doesn't wear her heart on her sleeve. She's perfect. I hate her.

17. I only write so I can feel a sense of connection.

18. Why did Marilyn invite Michael to the Scottish Highlands? At first it seems like she's being friendly. Why *wouldn't* she invite him? He's

³ Or 22. Not really sure.

⁴ I'll eventually watch these movies and I'm sure I'll enjoy them as I've enjoyed the rest of Korine's work.

⁵ *The New York Times*: "The first one I don't know what happened," he said. "The second one was my fault. I fell asleep smoking."

an impersonator and she lives in a commune of impersonators. But very quickly we realize that Marilyn's relationship with Chaplin isn't, let's say, perfect. Marilyn is cold with Chaplin and Chaplin is an angry man. Their relationship is emotionally and physically abusive. (The interesting thing about abusive relationships is how contradictory they are: there's no stranger feeling than wanting to hurt the one you love.)

There seems to be something "brewing" between Michael and Marilyn. It's something innocent, though. Like my relationship with Genevieve. They certainly like each other, but what is it they like in each other? What are we supposed to look for in a partner? Michael's relationship with Marilyn is never consummated. She kisses him on the forehead once.

19. So is *Mister Lonely* about our obsession with celebrities? No, it's about loneliness, but isn't celebrity obsession about loneliness?

Our celebrity-obsessed culture allows us to be voyeurs of other people's search to find themselves. We're all always trying to figure out who we are, but celebrities do it in public and in an exaggerated fashion. Britney Spears is a Lolita.→Britney Spears is a wholesome American girl.→Britney Spears is a vixen, a dominatrix.→Britney Spears is a mom.→Britney Spears is a fat girl.→Britney Spears is a party girl.→Britney Spears is a punk chick with a shaved head who attacks paparazzi.→Britney Spears is back!

Don't we all live our own semi-private versions of this metamorphosis?

20. Plots are for dead people, we've been through this, but dead people invented cinema, dead people control the entertainment industry, and dead people pay good money to be entertained.

So the Korines⁶ came up with a plot. The impersonators want to put on a show for the townspeople—*The Greatest Show on Earth*. It's

⁶ *Mister Lonely* was written by Harmony and his brother Avi.

the only aspect of the movie that feels forced.

This reminds me of my fiction students. I ask them what they're planning to write their story about and they tell me this convoluted quasi-existential fever dream.

"Yes," I say, "but what does your character *want*?"

"Um," says puzzled student, "like, he wants like, love, and he's lonely, so he kind of wants to be less lonely."

"OK, that's definitely a start, but it's too vague." I'm playing the part of the dead people. "Your character needs to chase something *concrete*. Pick something that represents not being lonely and have the character chase that. What if you have them put on a show?"

"A show?"

"Yeah! For the townspeople. Then you can have scenes in which they're building the theater from scratch, rehearsing, panicking that no one will come . . . It's very *dramatic*."

21. Genevieve was a very strange woman. One night she called me drunk or stoned or whatever and while we were talking I suddenly heard a child's voice.

"Hey," said the child.

"Hey," said Genevieve, laughing. "Is your mom home?"

"Yes."

"Could you ask her for a cigarette? I'm from apartment 503."

"What are you doing?" I said

"Shh. I need a cigarette." When Genevieve needed a cigarette, I knew this well, she *needed* a cigarette.

The boy came back after a minute. "She said to give you two."

"Thanks!"

Then the boy said, "Are you the lady who likes to sleep on the floor?"

Genevieve laughed. "Yes."

"Why do you do that?"

"Because I like it."

When she was back at her apartment smoking one of those cigarettes I asked her the same thing the boy had, why did she sleep on the floor?

“Because I like it.”

22. “If there is a worse place than Hell, I am in it.” (The real) Abe Lincoln.

23. By the way, there is a sort of parallel B story in *Mister Lonely*. A group of nuns led by a priest (Werner Herzog) are travelling around what seems to be Latin America throwing rice “like bombs” from a small plane for the poor people to eat. SPOILER: One of the nuns falls from the plane. SPOILER: The nun prays to God and God lands her safely on the ground.

What does this story have to do with the Jacko-in-the-Highlands story? Nothing. They run parallel to each other.

24. From *Science Daily*:⁷ “The ‘Peter Pan Syndrome’ affects people who do not want or feel unable to grow up, people with the body of an adult but the mind of a child. They don’t know how to or don’t want to stop being children and start being mothers or fathers.”

Michael Jackson has always been compared to Peter Pan, an eternal child, pied-piper figure that children love and adults find unsettling. This is a comparison Michael obviously embraced since he called his 3,000 acre ranch Neverland Valley.

However, it seems to me that Michael Jackson did not suffer from PPS, but rather of whatever the opposite of PPS is. PPSers have such overprotective parents that they’re crippled for adult life; Michael had a psychopath of a father who treated him like a slave. While PPSers can’t seem to grow into adulthood, Michael spent his adulthood trying to live like the child he never was. The only reason Michael fetishized

⁷ “Overprotecting Parents Can Lead Children to Develop ‘Peter Pan Syndrome.’” (May 1, 2007.)

childhood was that he never had one. He didn't know that it actually sucks to be a child. Never-ending childhood sounds like the cruelest form of Hell.

25. A fan of Abraham Lincoln will eventually end up browsing the archives of something called *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* published by the University of Illinois Press. Upon browsing these archives said Lincoln fan will giggle when he comes across an article by Martin P. Johnson titled, "Did Abraham Lincoln Sleep with His Bodyguard? Another Look at the Evidence."

Listen, we've all heard the stories. It seems to me that (almost) every Lincolnist says the same thing: We're pretty sure Lincoln had sex with guys, but we can't confirm it. One of the oft quoted stories is that Lincoln slept in other men's beds. He slept in the bed of his friend Joshua Speed for years.⁸ But it's important to note here that in times of Lincoln it was common practice for two heterosexual men to share a bed. If you were taking a trip from City A to City C and your friend lived in City B that was on the way to City C, then you'd probably spend a night in your friend's bed.

The more weighty piece of evidence, however, is that there are accounts of Lincoln sharing *his own* bed with a soldier named Derickson while Mrs. Lincoln was away from home. Johnson's article cites two accounts, the first one is the diary of Virginia Woodbury Fox: "Tish says, 'there is a Bucktail Soldier here devoted to the President, drives with him, & when Mrs L. is not home, sleeps with him. What stuff!'" The second account is from a book published in 1895 with the catchy title of *History of One Hundred and Fiftieth Regiment Pennsylvania Volunteers, Second Regiment, Bucktail Brigade* written by Thomas Chamberlin who once guarded Lincoln. Chamberlin says, "Captain Derickson, in particular, advanced so far in the President's confidence and esteem that, in Mrs. Lincoln's absence, he frequently spent the night at his

⁸ Then Speed married, moved to Kentucky, and the two men sent each other what read to me like love letters.

cottage, sleeping in the same bed with him, and — it is said — making use of His Excellency's night-shirt!"

26. I have, in my adult life, watched too many hours of cable news. This politician said that about this other politician so we'll ask this "strategist" what s/he thinks. Oh my god! I can't believe the strategist said that! Why was s/he being so aggressive? Now let's interview the first politician and see how s/he reacts to the strategist's reaction. Now let's ask another politician why the political climate is so confrontational.

It's idiotic. I can't get enough of it. When I was a kid I remember relating CNN to information and overall seriousness, now it's difficult to watch *Anderson Cooper 360°* and not feel like I'm reading *US Weekly*.⁹

There are only two types of events I don't like to follow on cable news: natural disasters and celebrity deaths. Why? No dramatic tension. Cable news has cease-fires when confronted with natural disasters and celebrity deaths. I like to see fighting. When an earthquake devastates some far away land we're all on the same side, crying, *praying*, hoping for the best.

Take Michael Jackson's death. Jacko was a constant source of drama throughout his life, but what happens when he dies? All praise.¹⁰ As Paul Hollander explains in "Michael Jackson, the Celebrity Cult, and Popular Culture,"¹¹ "the solicitous reminiscences overlooked and in effect purified his dubious private life, including his reported payment of 20 million dollars to settle out of court allegations of child molestation . . . However those of us not enamored of popular culture find it hard to know exactly what his artistic genius consisted of."

The reason we're all so eager to praise celebrities upon their deaths

⁹ I wonder if media historians will be able to point out exactly when CNN went from being a news network to being The Worst Thing in the World.

¹⁰ Cable news cease-fires, of course, are quickly terminated. The Anderson Coopers and Greta Van Susterens immediately pivoted to, "Was it the doctor's fault? Should we lynch the doctor?"

¹¹ *Society*, Volume 47, Number 2.

speaks directly to our narcissism. Something big happened and we need to make it about us. So if [celebrity] dies and everyone around the world is crying their eyes out, we want to be part of that event, so we go on Facebook and post something like, "Still shocked from the death of [celebrity]. OMG I was just [watching/listening to] [his/her movie/music] last nite. Soooo freaky." Or, "[Dead celebrity]'s aunt lived two blocks away from my grandma. My prayers go out to [celebrity]'s fam." READ: *All of you are crying because of [celebrity]'s death, but it is me who is actually part of that death. I win.*

27. There are sheep in this movie. I hadn't mentioned that. They're in the commune, twenty or thirty penned sheep. If I remember correctly they're all black except one. Why are there sheep in this movie? I wondered the first, second and third time I watched *Mister Lonely*. The easy answer would be to quote the Bible. For some reason people are always quoting the Bible. So let us quote the Bible. Isaiah 53:6: All we like sheep have gone astray.

See? That got us nowhere.

These sheep are always in a pack and yet they always seem so lonely. Lonely together.¹² Like Genevieve and me. Lonely together. Like the Michael Jackson impersonator story and the story about the

¹² Is the concept of lonely together reminding you of that book *Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology and Less from Each Other* by MIT professor and Harvard alumnus, Sherry Turkle? I assure you lonely together is not in any way derived from *Alone Together*. I, in fact, have not read that book. I don't particularly like Sherry Turkle because she talks about the future with no intelligence or sense of adventure.

Example #1: Her 1999 essay "Cyberspace and Identity" argues that the internet will allow us to create online personae with names like "Armani Boy" and "MrSensitive." Boy was she wrong. The internet is all about us and our narcissism.

Example #2: She recently published an Op/Ed in *The New York Times* about the dangers of texting: "A 16-year-old boy who relies on texting for almost everything says almost wistfully, 'Someday, someday, but certainly not now, I'd like to learn how to have a conversation.'" Ok, grandma.

nuns. Lonely together. Like Michael and Marilyn. Like Bubbles and Michael. Like celebrities. Like reading *US*. Lonely together.

28. I think it's during dinner one night when the Pope says, "Dreams make us who we are!"

Very few of us—*none* of us—are who we want to be, but we are all who we are *because of* who we want to be.

29. Marilyn to Chaplin: "Sometimes when I look at you you seem more like Adolph Hitler than Charlie Chaplin." Inside of every funny man lives an angry boy.

30. Genevieve and I remained friends after we stopped dating. I moved to the U.S. and she moved to *el interior de la República*.¹³ We emailed and chatted "and stuff." Genevieve kept wanting me to visit her and I kept blowing her off.

ME: guess what??? i'm going to mexico in a couple of weeks.

G: !!! come visit me!

ME: too far. are you going to be in the city?

G: have to work. ./ but commmmme!!!!!!

ME: maybe.

In one of those chats Genevieve told me she'd been raped. Or maybe it was on the phone. I remember I was in Mexico. Let's say it was on the phone.

"Something bad happened to me."

"What do you mean *bad*?"

"I think someone put something in my drink."

¹³ Literally "the interior of the Republic," *el interior de la República* is a despective term used by people from Mexico City to refer to any part of Mexico that is not Mexico City.

I won't pretend to know exactly what was said next—a kind of dizziness had come over me—but basically Genevieve told me she was at a bar, drunk, made “friends” with some creepy guys and next thing she knew she was waking up on the concrete of a random sidewalk.

“Did they . . . *do something* to you?” What a stupid question. I should've said that I'd be at her house as soon as however much time it took to get to her house. I'd feed her soup or something. I don't know if I didn't do those things out of cowardice or out of selfishness. Maybe I'm just lazy.

“I think so. I'm going to the doctor on Monday, see what she says.”

Genevieve went to the doctor on Monday. The doctor said that yes, they had done things to her.

31. Seeing lonely people makes me sad. By lonely people I mean people who I've decided are lonely. I love going to movies by myself, but if I go to the movies in a group and there's some guy sitting there by himself, I feel sad for him.

Once I was with a friend walking a museum when I saw a man sitting on a bench. He was there with his daughter and her friends who were busy looking at the paintings. The father was tired, fat.

“That guy made me so sad,” I said in that *Oooh I'm so sensitive* voice that I despise in myself. He really had made me sad, though.

“Why?” said my friend.

“Because he looked so lonely just sitting there.”

“He took his daughter and her friends to the museum. That's what dads do.”

But when I remember things my parents did for me I also get sad. Like the time my mother and my sister went out and bought me

a red soccer ball. Just thinking about that makes me want to weep.¹⁴ But let's get on topic. There was also the time my mother took me to see Michael Jackson at the Azteca Stadium. Or the time she went to New York and bought me an almost exact replica of Michael Jackson's multi-pocketed leather jacket (black).¹⁵ Now let's get back off topic. There's the time my father drove me and a friend to watch a professional indoor soccer game and picked us up after the game was over.¹⁶ Thinking of these things makes me want to call my mother and father simultaneously and simultaneously apologize and thank them for everything and then jump off a bridge to honor life's deep sadness.

The other day my girlfriend and I were leaving our apartment when one of my neighbors approached us. He was a thirty-something Indian (maybe) man with some sort of congenital disease that, apart from making him very short and skinny, makes it impossible for him to bend his knees, so he walks like he just shit his pants.

"Excuse me," he said, "could you tell me where the laundry room is?"

I gave him directions.

"So far away," he said.

When my new neighbor parted ways with us I said to my girlfriend, "That was so sad."

"Shut up," she said. She's used to this. "He seemed perfectly happy."

¹⁴ I took that ball to school the next day so we could all play with it during recess, but when recess came everyone began to play with someone else's soccer ball, so I just walked around the school by myself kicking my new red soccer ball. But that's not what makes the buying of the soccer ball sad for me, which is why I'm putting all of this in a footnote.

¹⁵ Yes. Like every other person my age, I too *loved* Michael Jackson.

¹⁶ Wikipedia: The Mexico Toros were an indoor soccer team based in Mexico City that played in the Continental Indoor Soccer League. They played only one season in 1995. Their home arena was [the] Palacio de los Deportes. The average attendance for their games was ~4,000.

32. A year after Genevieve's *bad thing* I was back in Mexico City for a couple of weeks and it turned out Genevieve was there too. She was excited. We'd finally see each other again. One night I was at a bar with some friends and Genevieve called me—she was at a bar about fifteen minutes from where I was. She wasn't drunk. She sounded happy and calm. I blew her off, kept postponing our rendezvous until I stopped answering her texts. When I got home I had an email from her. It said that she was angry and sad. *I thought we were friends.*

I haven't seen Genevieve in years. We've stopped emailing and "chatting." Last time I spoke to her she told me her brother had gone crazy. He was hearing voices.

33. I won't talk about the end of *Mister Lonely* because the end doesn't matter. Movies always want to provide us with a sense of closure because people like closure. Why? Because we never feel closure in our daily lives. Which is also the reason why movies—art—should *never* give us a sense of closure: it's a made-up feeling only felt when consuming fiction.

34. Marilyn to Michael: "Does anything ever really change?" ■

MARK LEE WEBB

I DIPPED DUSK IN DEMEROL

turned on the darkness switch watched midnight
develop like a photo at the bottom of a Kodak tray

pleaded with shadows bury me up
on the fractured west lip of Lady Face

Mountain before the sun smacks her east
cheek and chases blue belly lizards under

pink oleander bushes electrifies
titanium ball bearings in my right leg

brace at dawn breaks my body Mom
soothes balm baths heat pads cries

silent in lightness why can't they just fix whateverits?

AN INFORMED IMAGINATION:
JIM SHEPARD ON HELPLESSNESS, EMOTIONAL
DILEMMAS, AND THE LOCH NESS MONSTER

Jim Shepard is the author of six novels, including most recently *Project X* (Knopf, 2004), and four short story collections, including most recently *You Think That's Bad* (Knopf, 2011). His third collection, *Like You'd Understand, Anyway*, was a finalist for the National Book Award and won The Story Prize. His short stories have appeared in such publications as *Harper's*, *McSweeney's*, *The New Yorker*, *The Paris Review*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and have been anthologized in *Best American Short Stories* and *The Pushcart Prize*. Regarded as a "writer's writer," Jim is celebrated for an uncanny sense of empathy for his wide range of characters, from high school football players to WWII Czech freedom fighters to the Creature from the Black Lagoon, as well as his ability to create imaginative settings that inhabit time periods and locations far from one we call our own. To read a Jim Shepard story is to undertake time travel, making quantum leaps from body to body, all the while gaining a greater understanding of the human condition in the world from which you came.

The following interview took place over email in early 2013.

J.W. Wang: My favorites stories of yours deal with doomed expeditions that illustrate just how powerless human beings are when confronted with nature (a giant shark, Yeti, a searing desert, frozen tundra, etc.) or an otherwise overwhelming force (evading the SS, flying rocket planes that explode). What is it about these ill-prepared follies that particularly attracts you as a writer?

Jim Shepard: I think that feeling of helplessness-that-needs-to-be-resisted is a commonplace feeling in our world, if one is to imagine any sort of meaningful political action at all, and so I like to try and re-imagine and recreate its contours. I also just find horrible things that are awe-inspiringly powerful cool and compelling things to write about, in a ten year-old boy kind of way.

JW: Your earlier collections featured a few stories that experimented with more surreal/postmodern features, such as “Ida” and “Alicia and Emmett with the 17th Lancers at Balaclava,” while your later collections are more grounded in traditional first person narratives. Do you see this as part of your evolution as a writer?

JS: I do. It’s as if with the earlier stories I was teaching myself how to give myself permission to go outside of my own experiences, I think. I’m a little bolder about that now, and a little more aware of the hubris of *any* kind of writing.

JW: Writers and writing teachers often encourage students to forego graduate school in favor of worldly experience. Go live on the streets of New York, they say. Go teach English in Thailand, work on a salmon boat in Alaska. You are, on the other hand, someone who has never left the academic environment (as far as I can tell), and yet you’re able to create these rich, resonant stories set across myriad locations and time periods. How do you do it? Or, how is that possible?

JS: Oh, I’ve been outside the academic environment, all right, and in fact, have had some staggeringly shitty jobs. But I don’t believe in the romantic notion that you have to have experienced Adventure before you can write Great Fiction. Homer didn’t fight in the Trojan War, and Stephen Crane didn’t fight in the Civil War. Flannery O’Connor didn’t get out a lot at all. It’s about the careful observation of the world, and

about never ceasing to try to learn about how the world, and people, operate, and about exercising one's imagination.

JW: What would *your* recommendation be, to a writing student just starting out?

JS: Read as much as you can and observe what's going on around you with as much intensity of concentration as you can.

JW: I tell my students you may spend up to eight months doing research for a single story, and that daunts the bejeezus out of them. When do you decide you'll make something up, and when do you decide you need to find out more details about what it's like to sleep in the crew's quarters of an early nineteenth-century bomb vessel?

JS: I start writing when I feel I have enough material in hand to begin to create a convincing illusion. Then I gather more details, from additional research and experience and my imagination, as I need them as I proceed. But in terms of my imagination: by that point it's an informed imagination, in terms of what I am making up.

JW: So many of your short stories have such a novelistic feel about them, when do you decide to make the jump to a book-length project?

JS: I've only done that once, when I felt as though what I'd covered in a story—in this case, a story called "Nosferatu" about FW Murnau's making of that film—hadn't gotten at all I'd wanted to explore. The story then became a novel.

JW: One subject of research that you didn't pursue in a project was Charles Lindberg, and I was fascinated by what you said about how you didn't "empathize with him enough, or in complicated enough

ways.” What is it that allows you to connect on an emotional level to a potential character? What are you looking for as you get to know one?

JS: It’s not a matter of whether or not what I’m reading about would “make a good story,” since any infinite number of narratives would do that. It’s a matter of whether or not I find the dilemmas I’m reading about—which are mostly emotional dilemmas—so compelling that they stay with me; that I don’t stop thinking about them.

JW: That empathy that you speak of feels integral to your ability to write so compellingly from a range of human experiences and perspectives. What is your relationship to your characters? Do you feel a sense of responsibility for them? Or are you more compelled by curiosity and the hope of understanding them?

JS: I’m trying to understand them. I’m teaching myself as I go. Of course I care about them, to some extent, in that I want to honor their potential humanity; on the other hand, I recognize that they’re at bottom really just an assemblage of words on a page. And of course I always want to be as clear-eyed about the choices they make as I possibly can be.

JW: Speaking of empathy, it is the rare writer who can shine a light on the humanity inherent in unlikely subjects, from Nazi pilots to French Revolution executioners to the Creature from the Black Lagoon. Do you find a particular attraction to humanizing what may seem at first unhumanizable?

JS: Yes. I think writing of the sort I admire is all about trying to extend your empathetic reach. I think the arts are all about that.

JW: In addition to the Creature, we’ve also had the Megalodon, the

Yeti, and cameo appearances by Godzilla and Nosferatu. Can we expect Nessie in the near future?

JS: I'd love to write about Nessie. I haven't found a way to do so, yet. Maybe I'll visit Loch Ness—something I've also long wanted to do—and see if something occurs to me.

JW: You're frequently referred to as a writer's writer; that is, you're universally respected and appreciated within the writing community, but like most other authors trafficking in serious, gut-checking fiction, virtually (and shamefully) unknown outside of it. Given that many of your stories address pertinent issues today (e.g. "The Netherlands Lives with Water" and global warming, *Project X* and widespread gun violence), do you think there's something more writers can or must do to reach more readers in order to help effect change, or is what we have now the best we can hope for?

JS: I would love to know what that something that writers can do would be. I try to do some self-promotion in the form of readings, interviews like this, etc., because I do recognize that if we believe in what we're doing, we *should* be trying to reach more people, but I also recognize the limitations of what we can accomplish, given the state of our culture's disinterest in literature.

JW: Is there a plausible alternative?

JS: Other media. Which is one of the other reasons so many fiction writers are seduced by screenplays, for example.

JW: I suppose a long term view would be, where do you think the state of this type of fiction is headed, if it is no longer deemed relevant to pop culture?

JS: I agree with Charlie Baxter, who sees literary fiction as soon occupying the sort of niche that poetry occupies.

JW: Your story, “Your Fate Hurtles Down at You” was first published digitally in *Electronic Literature*. Each year, more traditional literary journals are shuttering their print operations in favor of online/digital editions, and it is generally assumed that the transition from analog, paper books to digital is a *fait accompli*. Do you think this is something writers should prepare for?

JS: Maybe the good news is that writers don’t really need to prepare for it, other than learning about what sort of digital/online outlets are springing up. Writers should write, and worry about that first.

JW: I was struck by something you said in an interview with *Vice* about how time can shift a writer’s relationship to a project (or potential project) and that “. . . maybe the stuff that you might have been ready to write in April, by the time you get a chance to get to it in December you’re not that person anymore.” I wonder if this applies to your relationship to your past work. Do you ever revisit it and, if so, is there value in that process?

JS: I’ve only revisited very old work once to any advantage: the aforementioned “Alicia and Emmett with the 17th Lancers at Balaclava” was a story that I got stuck on in graduate school, and never wanted to abandon. I returned to it once I’d had children, and the hidden usefulness of the story’s dominant metaphoric comparison suddenly seemed clearer to me with that new perspective.

JW: What about in-the-drawer projects or threads of research you’ve abandoned? Does letting time pass help you glimpse subjects of interest in a new way? Or are you more compelled by what you’re immediately investigating, reading, or experiencing?

INTERVIEW

JS: Other than “Alicia and Emmett” usually if I don’t get to something within a fair amount of time, I’ve moved on and become someone else, and it never gets pursued. Although maybe Nessie will be another exception. ■

TED JEAN

COVER

you have been wounded. again.
rehearse the old algorithm, about
breathing, bleeding less, finding cover.

where is the creek?
down the scree, scramble;
through the astringent brush, descend.

bleed into the creek,
drink more of its gin by a factor of four;
bury your hobbled ankles in its gravel.

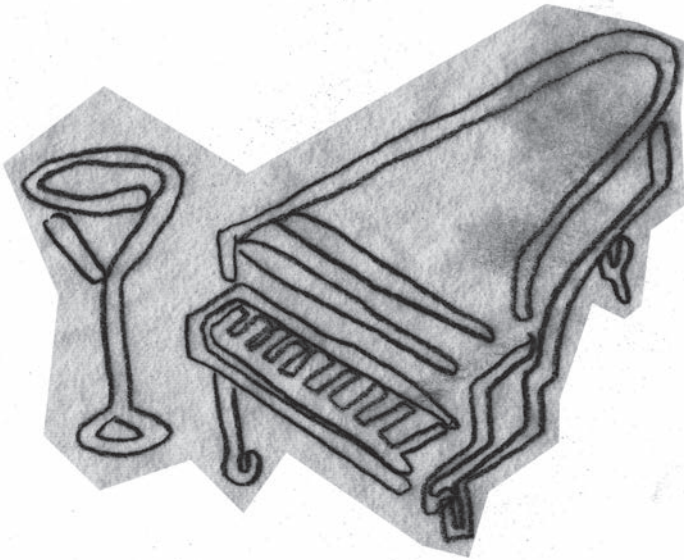
find a spot on a rock to receive the sun.
if the current suggests laughter, accept.
accept the circling red refracted crawdads.

your scoriated heart, the often broken
creek . . . they probably cannot be stopped.

BEER GARDEN RAG

Summer, this hour,
how beauty harangues—
trellis of trumpet
vines, under it, two
brothers drinking Bud
Light, the bottles of
which glint in late
light like anchovies
flitting by goggles
fogging now, just as
the huffing guide-dog
breathes on his own
ugly mug in the shoe
store's mirror and makes
it disappear, which
must feel weird, like
the first time leaving
your therapist's, heat
thumping the meek
pedestrian backs, yours,
the poor Chick-fil-
A guy in thermal cow-
suit, *Eat Mor Chikin*—
pathos, pathos!—you
want a stop-bath to
freeze: 1) the one
brother's pre-sneeze
stupefaction, 2) the
other's laughter
shook-out like a big
black trash bag, 3)

the waiter's Evan
Dando hair, by dint
of heaven, calling up
every beaut teenager
you ever hoped to be,
as if surfacing after
long-searching for
serious treasure at
the grubby bottom
of the public pool, the
second before your
good lung bursts.



Well, blokes, I think it's time for dueling pianos.

ANOTHER NONPROFIT

What he does, man, is eke his way into their social circle in such a way that it seems the social circle has eked its way into him. Because being near him is a privilege, that's how he makes it seem, and for the type of clients he takes on, those privileges are highly thought of. The black ponytail puts off every third or so client out of the gate, but before long his unselfconsciousness reins in even the skeptics and makes them think, like I did, and like they all do, how their own nonchalance doesn't hold a candle to Mario's simultaneous social fluidity and trueness to self. What they don't know, and what it took a lot of doing for me to find out, is he'd rather be holed up in his room reading *The Atlantic*. You'd never know from watching him raise beers, place his hands on women's backs, smile with his two rows of perfect, square teeth, shoot pool like a piece of shit and not give a damn, but it's true. He's a thinker.

Like I said, he works it as a nonprofit. His clients tend to be unaware that they're clients, in fact, until later in the game if dropping that particular knowledge is deemed prudent. Mario has always been of the opinion that his best work is done entirely incognito. Not that he's pretending to be somebody he's not. It's him out there directing the flow at all times. It's just that the sort of calculated element remains unrevealed. The calculated element being, though, strictly preliminary, which is why he can claim amnesty insofar as authenticity is concerned. He has to find his clients somehow, for Christ's sake.

Which process has become quite a bit more standardized now than it was at first, as I understand it. Kind of plodding at times, to be honest, where he's playing executive and we get to do the bottom-skimming logistical labor. When Mario first got into the business, he

simply met a few folks whom he thought needed changing, and as a sort of personal project went about trying to edify them. First fellow had initials for a name, as I recall, some A.J. or something like that. Let's call him A.J. That sounds workable.

So our man A.J. is something of a gentleman when he's at the workplace, eating lunch with his compadres, going to the grocery, the like. Mario knows him peripherally, friend of a friend, at first, but then they get to hanging out. You know how friends are made: in a sort of extended flash of blinding light. We could be friends in twenty minutes, you and me, that's how it works, nobody able to see it while it's happening. So soon enough they move beyond the handshake lunch and the bumping into each other about town and they end up out at the bars together where friendships are really cemented, right, such that you and I, we're in the right place for this kind of thing. You're having a beer, tiptoeing on the boundaries of everyday bullshit and then you slip into something that matters and all is lost, or all is gained, depending on how you look at it.

Except here's the thing. Mario's got tolerance like Jesus himself. Can drink like a shark, a whale, name me a bigger fish, and while he's having an even better time than he was before it's really because everybody *else* is drunk, and he gets to forget his own lucidity a bit. And so while our man of the hypothetical name, A.J., throws down beers with the group of them at a sticky lacquered table, and the geist goes from bitching about the nine to five to giving a buddy an empty beer cup to piss in because the bathroom line boggles the mind, Mario, between the fun of course, because you can tell, can't you, that he likes to have fun, is observing A.J. grow from a quiet, deferential bloke into a drunk, uninteresting bloke, if you want to put it that way. Which is to say that this fellow Mario's sure has some inner substance has imbibed to the extent that his best attributes are lost and his worst, muted during the daylight hours, basically come out. Now, A.J.'s not calling anyone a whore, or breaking barstools, or carrying women out of the place over his shoulder, or anything like that. This is not

violent drunkenness by any means. Mario practically wishes it is, though, as it's sad watching the guy, someone with veritable potential to *have a good time* throwing it down the tubes by giving free play to his anxieties and submerging into himself, more or less, breathing and staring at the ever stickier tables before him, with an occasional venture outward by way of shouted accord or disagreement. And everybody's bullshitting all together by that point so Mario doesn't let himself get bogged down, he keeps with the flow of the night, and before he knows it, despite his bodily homeostasis, he's lost track of time and they're at some other bar where this girl is sipping rum out of some skinny boy's navel, and there's consensus that it's time to go, so they admit defeat and get in cabs and say it's a night.

Point being that a few mornings later, at a show they both end up at with the mutual friend and related compadres, Mario inquires of A.J., or whatever his name is, whether he had a good time the other night. A.J. takes a second to even remember what the hell Mario is talking about but then he emits sounds of recognition and says that, *Oh yeah, it was a fun time, locally brewed beer is always good.* Mario doesn't remember the beer, he says. And A.J., in a moment of inexplicable, bald honesty, comes out with, *You know, to be honest, I'm not really sure how to have fun at things like that. So, the beer was good. That's what I remember.* Mario's a pretty convincing guy, is my take on it, such that he's going to get a bloke like A.J., who he's basically talking to one-on-one for the first time, telling him his deepest anxieties and all that. Look at him. Charisma, sure. But trust, that's what he gets from people. And that's the element not everybody's got.

And so, hell, this is the Eureka moment for Mario, who, as I told you, likes to have his beers and fondle his women but most of all is cycling through stuff in his head at any given moment and, truthfully, has a pretty acute aesthetic conscience, is struck by the sheer *sadness* of A.J.'s admission, and resolves, then and there, though more likely it was over the course of the next few days, when he had a chance to get permeated by it, to show this kid what fun is, to release him from

the choice between crippling self-awareness and oblivion. Because, as Mario had discovered from some fine-tunings of *himself* a bit down the line, those aren't the only options available. There's something, he'd tell you, and he told me, that at this point he came to classify as, as this A.J. kid had put it, *fun*, a state where you're simultaneously lost in the moment and present to enjoy it. Not flow, exactly, but an ability to both have a fucking great time and *know* you're having it, and remember it, and count it as one of the many experiences *you* have had, instead of that shameful alter ego that comes out when you've had a few too many and start slurring your speech at women you wouldn't think of talking to during the daylight hours.

And with this self-knowledge, Mario was equipped to essentially *save* this A.J. bloke, sorry piece of mess that he was, and he went about the same basic procedure that he subsequently ended up going about for every client, nearly a fool-proof thing, or the sort that at least works ninety-nine percent of the time.

Christ. You probably want to know how I know all this. *I* would, curiosity having killed the cat, et cetera. I can't blame you, my man. The truth is as soon as I was on board, Mario briefed me, like he does with all of his what he calls secretaries. Kind of a fruity name, I know. We're not secretaries, more like partners. Part-time. By no means all-absorbing, pro-bono as it is. But you want to do *some* good, right. So when opportunity comes knocking at your door, you take it.

He tells us because he wants us to know the story behind it all, is why. He believes in the mission. He believes in his methods, too, because to a certain extent the methods *are* the mission, insofar as the feelings that he inculcates are tied with the only barely physical states of being that are regularly achieved by each of us, but it's the mission that drives the thing. He says every organization's got to have a mission. Simple enough that it hardly needs to get said.

His methods, though, and that's why we're here tonight, not in a God-put-us-here metaphysical sense but in a why-we-physically-walked-down-the-cobbled-brick-road-and-stepped-into-this-particu-

lar-micro-brewing-bar sense, are time-tested. He, and I, to tell you the truth, never get bored of them. Even though same thing every time, every client. Give or take a beer, an hour.

After he has done the eking about which I informed you, the finding his way into the peripheral vision of the client for which we secretaries — partners really, like I said — give him administrative support, and has made sure he's on calling-and-asking-to-hang-out terms with the client, he sets a date on the calendar with careful precision, in one of his post *New Yorker* hazes, and this becomes the date. He text messages the client on the Wednesday before the date — early enough to guarantee availability but late enough to be nonchalant — and notes that he and a few friends are heading down to Morgan Street that Friday night, and would he like to come. All quite a bit less fancy than that, of course, this being a text message and this being Mario, who despite his seemingly cold calculations is flying by the seat of his pants too, to a certain extent, just like the rest of us. Invariably, the client will be available, and will text back after a suitably nonchalant interim that *Yeah, sounds kickin*, or some such noncommittal but in fact, if you read between the lines, fairly amped declaration of his consideration of the prospect. And invariably, the client will text that Friday afternoon asking for details, which he's worried about because of Mario's half carefully calculated, half simply negligent radio silence over the preceding day and a half. Mario shoots him back a meeting spot, and by the time the client shows up we're all out already — we being Mario's compadres, a ragtag bunch most of whom double as secretaries and/or partners — nursing beers and clicking our tongues around in our mouths at the women who walk by. When the client arrives, past the dirty glass windows of the bar's doors — and look at the things, I swear to God they never wash them — we're quick to assure him that we've only been there for about five minutes and this three-quarters-full thing in front of us is emphatically our first beer, and to ask him what kind he prefers. This isn't always one-hundred percent true, of course, because the majority of us have day jobs with

long hours and sometimes you just have to get in there and have a couple the second the day is done, but it's harmless. When he wavers as to choice of drink, we wave him off and get whatever's the fourth on the brewery's chalked-up list for the day. Bringing it back to the table, we toast.

This is where tactics kick in. Mario drinks tremendously slowly. It's no difference for him, of course, because as I've told you he can drink like a megachurch at Communion and stay as lucid as he likes. The rest of us take his cue, though it's always hard to match his snail's pace. And one of the many unwritten, un-really-thought-about rules of drinking with your buddies, you'll note, is that you try to match their pace. When you sit with a table of blokes and look at their eyes, from time to time you'll each of them eyeing their buddies' glasses and taking a sip or holding back to even it up. It's no cold calculated thing. It's like Mario's scheming. Sure he's *doing* all this, per se, but it's all only half-conscious, and it's more etiquette than anything else. It's just that instead of trying to gauge himself off anyone else, he's inviting people to gauge off him.

And then two beers in — and this is what shocks everyone, each time that we do it, even though we know what's about to happen — just as we've begun to warm up our systems and consider doing slightly stupid things, Mario slaps his hands down on his thighs and says, *Well, blokes, I think it's time for dueling pianos*. And if we're shocked, having seen it twenty plus times, God knows that the client is shocked, with this two-beer declaration that a bunch of *dudes*, for Christ's sake, are about to go dancing. And not in the male-bonding misogyny of the street's basement clubs, even, but in the unhip dueling pianos bar just down at the end of the next block.

At least the client thinks it is unhip. The bar itself is key to the plan, and Mario chose it, insofar as he chooses anything, wisely, because it looks like the kind of place where your grandma'd go to cut the rug but really, inside, it's funky and has walls of uncovered brick and in front of the two flamboyant pianists there is a wooden dance

floor, some shoddy lights, and a few leather chairs and then a bar, all of which take up maybe the size of your second apartment, not that I know your personal living history, just grasping for a comparison factor here. The bar hums, to put it briefly, and you wouldn't know it from the gaudy neon sign that hangs above the brick staircase into the basement.

The client is generally ice cold by this point. He's got a little alcohol in his blood, but it serves mostly to compound his anxiety and make him feel like a fuck-up, and so he is eminently grateful when Mario heads to the surprisingly unpeopled bar and orders another round from the tender. On a platter, with the panache of a Paris waiter, Mario carries the requisite number of beers to the edge of the dance floor, where there's inevitably a leather chair vacant. He sets it down there, and we use the chair's arms as props for our drinking and goofing around. It's all a warm-up, see, by this point, and we all know what's going to happen, except the client, and there's a sense of energy that builds up, what with the crowded small basement, the Elton John tunes, the clinked necks of the beers, the swiveling hips just inches away, the carbonation making its way leisurely through our esophagi, whatnot. We stand there, bullshitting, moreso than usual because nobody can hear each other anyway, and we kill our beers, nice and slowly, torture them really, draw and quarter them. When they're dead, we look at Mario. This time, there's no call to action, nothing of the sort. There's only his own swivel out in the direction of the dance floor, doing the John Travolta from *Pulp Fiction*, subtle but engaged, his pointed toe digging a hole in the wood paneling. And we follow, a dearth of glances between us. We don't even look at the client. The idea is to show him that this is just what's done. Three slow beers in. Very little chemical alteration in the brain. And he's thinking, *Oh shit oh shit oh shit*, until he realizes he'd be more embarrassed standing on the sideline *watching*, and so he creeps his way onto the dance floor and swivels a little himself.

Before you know it, we are dancing like lunatics, karate-kicking

and Elvising and doing all this unstylish, fun shit, straight in the center of the dance floor, shone upon by the hot lights and working our way toward sweating our balls off, even if it's the winter. Mario looks like a complete jackass, in his own respectable way, and the rest of us dance like wooden Indians caught fire. The client sees this bizarre casting off of self-awareness and, due paradoxically to his *own* self-awareness, which tells him he'll look like a jackass if he doesn't look like a jackass, ends up having a pretty fucking rollicking time himself.

The women take care of themselves. This is not something Mario needs to organize beforehand, though he could, he's got that sort of pull in the land of beautiful women. It's just luck, I guess, or the consistently right collusion of circumstances—a group of decently good-looking blokes, a casual bar that's not too worried about appearances, the pheromones that Mario must carry in his back pocket or somewhere—that we usually end up finding a group of women and dancing with *them*, cutting off the potential gay vibe of the whole endeavor right when it was about to begin. And be assured, please, that it's not *grinding* that we end up doing with these girls, because though we all assume that each other is in possession of the so-called proper anatomical machinery, we've no need to grope one another's until the off-chance that somebody takes somebody home and gets down to business. The kind of dancing *we're* doing, and they're doing too, totally into it, is the nearly Spanish flirtation type thing, where you hone in on somebody and they hone away, or you grab their hand and spin them for no reason at all, or you just rock out in the same general vicinity and look at how odd the other person looks, swinging their limbs around, but how sexy, too, because you can tell there's a brain in there controlling their weirdness, and it doesn't look like all the other ones. Sexy to *me*, at least.

This is the night. This is how it works. From time to time, one or the other of us will go grab another platter of drinks and we'll dance with those for a while, but always the alcohol is peripheral to the fun we're having, an accessory devoted to keeping the high even though

the high is going to be more or less there anyway, and nonetheless eventually the client will speak up and *himself* go buy a round for the bunch—and let no one say we’re not a nonprofit, we bought beers for *him, too*, for Christ’s sake—and though by this time we’re usually six beers in or so, this is over a period of like four hours, such that it has no time to sink in and blur the vision, or fuck with the memory, or soften the impact of the to be frank with you kick-ass time we are invariably having, and so self-awareness has been cast off and oblivion not reached and the client realizes, the goal is, that there *is* a middle ground, that active relaxation doesn’t have to consist of getting absolutely sloshed, that, in our man A.J. or whoever the hell’s terms, there *is* a such thing as fun.

Though the client’s specific reactions don’t always follow such a tight pattern. The goals happen, we think, to all of them. But these realizations come in different forms. Some clients end up taking one of our girls home with them, a chick impressed with his coherence even in the midst of having a good time, and he, vice versa, too. Some clients just plug away the rest of the night until we’re ready to go, and hop in a cab with us and hightail it back home to collapse in bed. Some clients take up smoking, sort of inexplicably, trotting outdoors every half-hour to share a chain of unprecedented fags with whoever’s out there. It’s bad for your health, but whatever gets the job done, is what we say.

Me, it was this quasi-religious experience, almost a fugue state. I was like all the rest, right, coming off a sort of obsession about being nonchalant but finding it hard to make the jump between everyday engagement and that thing we call fun, because my actions are very *tick, tick, tick* and everything has its place and knows where it lies, including my own states of being. And I always found that quite a *pleasurable* thing, really, because think of the sense of control it gives you, being able to say *This is where I am* and comprehend what that entails and know the future and the past. Or at least this was fantastic up until this concept of *fun* came around and started inhabiting the

circles I was around and, if you pay attention, all circles. And so suddenly people were spending time at bars and going to parties and looking forward to the weekends where I was taking my pleasure from the everyday predictableness and order of the week. Except that pleasure didn't extend to Saturday night. My body still wanted something, its consistent knowledge of what it was getting itself into during the week and all the dopamine that got released by way of that not sufficing and what was missing, I'm not afraid to tell you, is that sort of spiritual, fluid, non-schematic pleasure that my body couldn't get out of the stuff that I thought made me happy. I didn't know what it was then, of course, but when my brain would say *Boy, I'd like to relax tonight and watch a movie with the girlfriend* my body, or something more than my body, some sort of transcendent set of human particles, would be pushing against it saying *No, no, there's more*, and my brain knew that was there and pushed back, and it said *But when you go to these keggers and things you're just sitting around a table drinking beer having a boring time and talking about shit that's unimportant or you're getting fucked-up and ending up one of the stragglers at a party that died a long time ago and you end up stumbling home and puking in your bed*, and so I was always in discomfort after about seven p.m. those penultimate two days of the week. And ever since, this was high school and then college and now, hell, I'm twenty-eight years old, I didn't want to go out to bars and get obliterated but then again I did, too, or I made myself, because I knew come eleven p.m. I was going to regret it if I didn't. Then, Mario showed up.

I was as hesitant as ever when he asked me to come out, and this particular night I was fucking *tired*, more so than usual, and I was really on the verge of calling it a week and sitting on my couch for the rest of the night playing with my canutzens and feeling pitiful. But regret came out of the future and nipped me in the neck and so I rose and threw on a button-down and went downtown. Turned out that these blokes were cool, his compadres, though I felt out of place, their comfort with one another, the nicknames, et cetera. And we were

drinking so slowly, I didn't understand why we were here, what the *telos* was, if this was awkward just for me or for the whole crew. And then he proposed the dueling pianos bar.

In my head at first it was like I described to you. A dueling pianos bar? For Christ's sake, who are these people. My concerns went unvoiced. We went to the bar. As per the plan, I didn't want to dance but I *had* to, at the behest of me looking like a tit if I *didn't* get out there, because everyone was.

And by the end of it, true to form again, I'm bringing out platters of beer out of companionship rather than out of the need to fuel the high, I'm dancing like a maniac, there's this whole circle of people on the dancefloor and we're all at the center and simultaneously none of us are at the center, and no *decisions* were being made, that's the beauty of the dancing element of it, that in its flow to a rhythm that doesn't cease but every three or four minutes or never if you've got a good set of piano players it leaves you no time to consider the silliness of what you're doing. And for me, in my brain, there were these little flashes, little joys, when I'd look in the eye of some girl or when Mario'd do something particularly bizarre, but for the most part I was just dancing, man, that's all there was to it. And at the end of the night—we're talking like four hours after we went to the second bar, and by this time we're half on the leather couches half on the dance floor—we're all in the same mental place and we say, fuck-all, it's late, and/or early, let's get the hell out of here.

And so we do and by the time I get back to my home it's nearly light out and the following day is lost, of course, something I might have bemoaned before, but not now, and so what I do is simple and nothing different than normal, except when I collapse into my bed, the room isn't spinning, I'm coherent, my legs hurt, and my soul feels nourished. Not so much nourished, I guess, as not empty. I was so used to it feeling empty, it needing to get refilled by the stark routine of the week's days. But as I kicked it to sleep on *this* night, I had the mental presence to think for a bit until my eyes closed for fourteen hours, and

I didn't feel empty, at this particular juncture, and, I don't know, it just seemed like whatever I had to do the next day wasn't so important. So I woke up at five in the evening, called up another friend and went to dinner, went over to his place and had a few beers with his comedy troupe, and took my leave to prepare my body for the week. And it's like all those interactions, and all those following them, became sort of natural. Or, put it this way. Life became *easy*. It's perpetually hard, we all know, but the things previously of anxiety were no longer so *robust* as they once were, and I said what I wanted to say, and was aware of myself, but didn't let it stop me, and it started to seem like people began to like me more, too, though some people clearly thought I was a little off, but I felt *on*, in a way that those people weren't getting, like *I* was the one who knew.

A month down the line, I got another call from Mario. I hadn't seen him since that night, figured he had better things to do, no big deal. And he took me out for pizza, with his blokes, and without a dash of hesitation explained his scheme. I was fairly floored, you know, to find myself a client for something I'd never signed up for, but soon the sensibleness of it struck and I was simply happy to be scarfing a meat lover's and a Hawaiian with these fellows despite the organizedness of their enterprise. And I told them that. I sort of glowed with positive reviews. Had Mario's set-up been the public sort, they might have asked me to do a testimonial. As it is, they asked me about the secretary and/or partner thing. And I said yes, you know, because how fucking cool.

And I'll tell you what. No matter who the client, no matter if another secretary is needed or no, Mario follows up. He calls his clients about a month post, and arranges a sort of low-key event, a dinner, without the party element, with a few mutual friends. He gets your social groups back together. And then you dine, and he and his posse – and now I'm in that posse, believe it or not – get to see the results. And invariably, the client is better for it. Somehow both quieter and more outspoken. Funnier, though not funny. Oddly sort of now

there, as they weren't before.

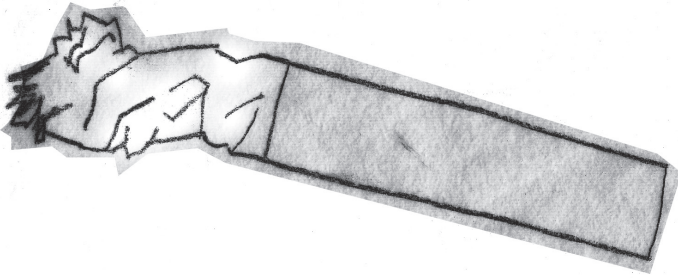
Anyway, don't know whence the genius, how Mario keeps it up, the chief that he is. But he does. He's the authentic article. Beer? ■

MEG THOMPSON

NEW COMPANIONS COMING SOON

I find myself
at the pet store,
bent at the waist
reading how to care
for Leopard Geckos.
Origin: Pakistan.
Great starter lizard.
Eats crickets
dusted with calcium,
side-step
to the Russian Tortoises,
gray faces crinkled as linen,
they would add slow
life to my apartment,
poker chips of carrots.
Some tanks barren,
a sign reassures:
New companions
coming soon.
Crouching lower,
thighs tight from yoga,
the Central American
Boa Constrictor eats
a defrosted rodent, and yet
I'm drawn to snakes,
cable cords of bodies,
especially the baby
corn snakes, candy pink
with red-hot eyes,
some asleep in braids,
some awake

winding like taffy through
a miniature tree where
their skin peels off
to hang like sheer,
crisp tinsel. A boy
walks up next to me,
touches their glass tank
with one finger.
Wearing a Sturgis t-shirt
he has white-blond hair,
slick-shorn to the scalp
like lamb's wool.
Gross,
he whispers.



*"You fell asleep with a lit cigarette. It happens,
and this time it happens to us."*

SMOKE

It's simple, really. All he needs to do is have a smoke.

"Let's review it one more time," his brother Jerry says.

They're in the living room of Jerry's house, "the great room" Jerry calls it. It's twice the size of Kevin's studio apartment.

"It goes like this. We'll leave *The Wall Street Journal* on the floor by the couch. It'll take a few seconds to ignite but once it does it'll go quickly. That's all you need to do. Get the fire started and get out of the way. Don't forget to light the incense, too. If they ask, tell them you lit it so we wouldn't smell any smoke when we got home. It's important that you tell them that—you weren't supposed to smoke in the house."

Kevin imagines the smoldering newsprint, the scent of burning pulp.

"Tell them you looked for the fire extinguisher but you didn't know where it was."

"It's in the kitchen under the sink."

"Like I said, you didn't know where it was. Same with your cell phone; leave it by the pool table in the basement. Make sure you get Mozart out safely . . ." Mozart was a three-year old Husky. "By the time the fire trucks arrive, well, too bad about the house but at least no one was hurt." Jerry smiles, and sips from the bottle of Sam Adams he's been nursing all afternoon. "Hey, that's why I pay the insurance bill every month, right?"

Kevin nods, still unsure if he'll go through with it. He'd love to walk away but doesn't see many options. If the engine on the Honda hadn't gone, if painting jobs hadn't all but disappeared, if his credit cards hadn't maxed out, if the rent wasn't three months late; he could

keep going, follow the long miserable trail back to its genesis, the moment of original fuck-up. If he hadn't been busted for possession and lost his financial aid, he might have stayed in school, graduated, landed a decent job and built a life like his brother.

Jerry walks over to the sliding glass door that leads to the patio and the Olympic-sized pool that dominates the yard. Outside his wife Melissa is finishing her laps, cutting through the water in a perfect breast stroke. Jerry doesn't talk about money much, doesn't like to pin a number to how much more he has than his older brother. Kevin appreciates this, but he knows more than Jerry thinks. Five years earlier Jerry had bought the house for \$1.4 million. After the crash it's worth half that, maybe less, but the insured value hasn't changed, and with the cash out option, Jerry will clear a good half million over the mortgage amount. He and Melissa own a townhouse on the local golf course, an investment property that's been vacant for almost a year. They'll stay there for a while and wait for the market to change.

"It's this damn economy," Jerry says. "It all comes down to liquidity."

Jerry runs a real estate agency and a rental management company; he also has a piece of a car dealership and three Kentucky Fried Chicken franchises. There are other investments too, yet Kevin wonders if his brother could actually be struggling. Over the years Jerry has been quick with loans whenever Kevin is short, loans that are rarely paid back. But there's no talk of a loan this time, only an offer of a job at KFC, seven bucks an hour and a paper hat. Though he's had his share of crappy jobs, Kevin can't do it, or won't. Maybe it's the paper hat, but he still has some pride left, and working for his kid brother frying chicken wings for minimum wage would certainly kill the last of it.

"This is too good an opportunity to pass up," Jerry says, staring into the yard as his wife climbs out of the pool. "Things will improve. They always do. But this is a smart move. Only a fool doesn't leverage an asset as its highest present value."

Is that what you're doing with me? Kevin thinks. *Leveraging an asset?*

He joins his brother by the door, wondering how Jerry can appear so calm. Kevin knows what prison is like. Ninety days in County Jail for possession only sounds easy if you're not the one serving it. There's still a scar on the back of Kevin's tongue where an inmate had snuffed out a cigarette.

"Are you sure about this?" Kevin asks.

"I've thought it through a thousand different ways," Jerry says. "Hey, I have more to lose than you do."

As if to prove it, Melissa steps away from the pool, waving to them as she towels off and shakes dry her hair.

"It's fool proof because we're not lying," Jerry says. "We'll admit that you burned the house down—by accident. You fucked up. How could they ever prove intent? You fell asleep with a lit cigarette. It happens, and this time it happens to us."

"What about the sprinklers? A house like this—"

"There's a short in the system. I made the call on Friday. The service guy is coming out on Tuesday. Bad timing, right? Look, don't worry, I've thought of every contingency." Jerry slaps him on the back. "Seriously, don't worry, bro."

Kevin hates the expression "bro" and fights an urge to smack Jerry across the face. He wonders what Melissa would think: her master of the universe husband plotting a felony with his dropout housepainter brother.

I had her first, he thinks as he watches her stride across the patio in her swimsuit, her body taut and youthful from all those private Pilates classes and facial wraps and sessions with nutritional counselors. She stretches out in a chaise lounge and leans back into the sun, closing her eyes.

When Kevin first met her she was a sophomore in high school, his younger brother's platonic friend from the Yearbook Committee, easily impressed by the older Kevin, an Art major at the state university. He'd bring out his sketch pad and observe her from the corner

while she and Jerry played video games; he'd give her the drawing and she would beam at how beautiful he had made her. Eventually she started asking him for a ride home, and on one of those rides they'd stopped and parked. After two weeks of parking she wasn't a virgin anymore. Jerry had seethed, but so what? Younger brothers were supposed to lose.

When they'd asked Kevin if he could get them any pot he'd said "yes" automatically as if he really did have a connection, as if he were the type of guy who could get them anything, anytime, like he could give them the world. But the only guy he knew was an undercover cop, and though he laughed about it for a while, thinking no one ever went to jail for a little weed, he stopped laughing when the court date arrived. Certain judges liked to set an example, and it turned out that some people really *did* go to jail for a few ounces. Ninety days in an overcrowded county facility was an eternity for a twenty-year-old white kid from the suburbs. There were murderers and rapists in the county lock-up waiting for space to open up at the state prison, men who had done hard time, knew how to make time hard for others. After eighty-two days they let Kevin out. By then Melissa and Jerry had grown into a couple, giggling and humping in the basement while Kevin smoked alone in his room, the cigarettes a habit he'd picked up in jail. For hours he'd stare at the Marlboro's smoldering red tip, trying to push from his mind what had happened in the dark of his cell. Sometimes he thinks if he could just go back and keep walking instead of approaching that damn cop, his whole life would be different.

"Remember to grab something on your way out," Jerry says. "It doesn't matter what, but it'll seem more legit if it looks like you tried to save something. Are you remembering this?"

"We've gone over it twenty times."

Kevin looks around the room, entranced by so many objects, vases, paintings, floor lamps, porcelain bowls, a Persian rug stretched across the hardwood floor. He's seen them hundreds of times, but as he imagines them aflame, it seems so overwhelming, like torching a

museum.

"Hey, do we need to go over this again? You're not going to fuck this up, are you?" Jerry asks. He finishes his beer and sets it on the table. "You need to pay attention. It's always the little things that do you in."

When they were kids Kevin had forgotten to lock the back fence one day and their German Shepherd Roscoe had dashed into the road. They lived on a busy street; Kevin had watched from the front lawn, frozen, while the dog had chased a leaf across the double yellow line. When a black Ford pick-up rumbled down the asphalt, Kevin had turned his head. Had he chased after him Roscoe might have come back. As punishment his mother had made him wash Roscoe's blood from the side of their mailbox.

"When the fire department arrives, play it up good," Jerry says. "Tell them it's your fault, you fucked up and your brother is going to kill you. Give them a real mea culpa."

"I'll grab a knife and commit hara-kiri."

"That's the spirit," Jerry says. "Hey, you should be smiling. My insurance company is top notch. A week from now you'll have ten grand in your pocket."

"And you'll have half a million."

"To each his own," Jerry says.

On the patio Melissa turns on her side, hands folded beneath her head like a pillow. Kevin daydreams about curling next to her, slipping his hands inside the damp fabric of her swimsuit. He thinks about setting the fire, watching it all burn down.

"So we're good, right bro?" Jerry asks. "Tonight's the night. No turning back."

"I'll stop at the Quick-Check and pick up the cigarettes," Kevin says.

"What do you mean? You're out of smokes?"

"I quit six months ago. I guess you didn't notice. I haven't smoked since Christmas."

“Hey, good for you, man.” Jerry reaches for his wallet and pulls out a ten. “This pack’s on me. Make sure you smoke at least half of them before you do it. It’ll look better for the cops.” Jerry laughs. “Let’s hope you don’t get hooked.”

#

His car hasn’t worked for almost a month, so he bikes the eight miles back toward his apartment, not even asking if he could borrow one of Jerry’s cars, the BMW or the Lexus or the Porsche that never leaves the garage. A few years back he’d borrowed Jerry’s Jaguar, his brother’s first really high-end car, and had doubled-parked on a busy street while he’d run in for cigarettes. Kevin was at the check-out line when he heard the ice cream truck smash into the back of the Jaguar. The insurance company had paid out, but Jerry had loved that car, had never really forgiven him.

At least the biking keeps his legs strong, and on the rare occasion when he’s called for a painting job, his boss Cliff picks him up in the van. Kevin loves the bike, craves the velocity and motion, the synchronicity of body, pedal, and wheel. He leans into the wind, propelling himself through curves and straight-aways, ignoring the cars as they zip past him. He imagines biking across the country, across the world. Screw the Honda and the back rent; with a backpack and a bike, ten grand could last for years. All he really wants is to be somewhere else.

To reach the Quick-Check he needs to cross three lanes of surging traffic. Horns blare, fingers flip, but he makes it across, swerving left at the last second to avoid smacking into an Escalade. In the parking lot he chains the bike to an old abandoned pay phone and enters the Quick-Check, grabbing a bottle of water and a Power Bar before getting in line. The guy in front of him, mid-forties, dressed in sweats and an Allman Brothers Band t-shirt, drops twenty bucks on lottery tickets, the scratch-off kind. A sucker born every minute, Kevin thinks, but when it’s his turn he buys a ticket too. He imagines winning ten

grand, riding back to Jerry's place and telling him to stick it; he's not a fucking felon, not a fucking torch.

"A pack of Marlboros," he tells the woman behind the counter. He's pretty sure her name is Nira. She's plump, dark-skinned, wrapped in a sari with a red dot on her forehead. Kevin likes Nira; she smiles at him on days when no one else does. He once went home and looked up the red dot on Wikipedia; it has a name and a purpose but it slips his mind.

"Oh, but I thought you quit," Nira says. "You've haven't bought the cigarettes for a way long time. We sell them to you, sure, everyone has their choice, but if you quit, why go back?"

Kevin can't believe she remembers this, that someone actually noticed that he'd quit.

"They're for a friend," he says.

"You're friend should quit, too."

"He's trying."

"Maybe you give him half the pack and throw away the rest. Show him how you quit. Be a good example."

Kevin smiles, but grabs the Marlboros along with his change and shoves them into his pocket. As the customer behind him steps up to the counter, Kevin rubs the scratch-off ticket with his thumb, the dark shavings pooling beneath his nail. A winner — two bucks.

"Your lucky day," Nira says. "I give you two bucks or another ticket. Maybe next one you win big."

He thanks her and picks another ticket, tries again, his thumb turning black from the shavings. He scans the prizes, looking for matches, but it's a loser, and he flicks it into the trash, the pack of Marlboros coiled in his pocket as he fights an urge he hasn't felt in months, the urge to slide out a cigarette and light up right there at the counter, the urge to fill his lungs with a long sweet trail of smoke.

#

Back at his apartment there's a note threatening eviction taped to his front door. He leaves it hanging, goes inside, and finds a message from his mother blinking on the machine.

On the eighty-second day of his sentence, when they finally released him, his father came alone to pick him up from the jail. It took four days before his mother even acknowledged he was back. Had his father lived things might have been different, but within six months his dad was dead, a massive coronary that his mother blamed on the stress of Kevin's incarceration. Never mind that his Dad was overweight and a chain smoker, his diet loaded with sugars and grease.

His mother's message is brief, the usual complaints about her varicose veins. He hits "delete" and tries not to think about her.

He kills time, takes a shower, watches TV, still not sure if he'll go through with it. In his head he tallies how much he owes, realizes that ten grand will only make a dent, buy him some time. It would get the landlord off his back, but what about the next month's rent, and the month after that? If he could find a job, sure, things might work out, but he's been saying that for almost two years, and the jobs that do come are sporadic, the hourly wage lower each time. Cliff had once paid him twenty-five an hour, but the last few jobs had paid fifteen, and after the most recent one Cliff had mentioned another contractor who had started hiring Mexicans for less than ten.

I should have asked Jerry for at least half the money, he thinks. A quarter of a million bucks would give him a chance to start over, do something useful with his life. But Jerry had offered ten grand and he'd said yes, hadn't even considered asking for more.

As he counts down the hours he keeps hoping for a sign, for the universe to slap him upside the head and tell him what to do. He doesn't believe in God much but wouldn't mind some divine intervention. After Jerry had first mentioned the plan, Kevin had biked to the nearest church, St. Thomas the Apostle, and waited on the sidewalk hoping he might feel something. But all he felt was hunger so he rode over to Taco Bell, trading God for a chimichanga, and it was

in that booth that he first decided to do it, he would burn down his brother's house. He was not a bad man, not a criminal; but if you're eating alone in a Taco Bell, shoveling refried beans into your mouth and sucking on the free ice cubes because you don't have enough cash in your pocket to buy a drink, what the hell did you have to lose? No one would get hurt. That was the important thing. Who cared if an insurance company, a giant corporation, had to pay out a little cash?

It's not like I'm hurting anyone, he thinks.

He pulls out a cigarette, remembers that sense of relief that always comes with the morning's first smoke. The sweet scent of menthol lingers as he sniffs at the tip. What could it hurt to light one up? But he's proud of having quit, doesn't want to fall back like everyone expects, and he jams the cigarette back into the pack and swears that he's done with them.

He's not due at Jerry's until five, but the apartment feels hot and cramped, the air conditioner wheezing as it coughs out air almost as hot as the air outside. Kevin grabs his helmet and his keys, hustles down the three flights and pops out the door, where his bike is chained to an old rose bush that hasn't bloomed once in the four years that Kevin's lived there. He tries to focus on the future, the possibilities that might open once he has a little cash, but as he mounts the bike his stomach boils and his head begins to pound.

#

He circles the neighborhood, hoping something might distract him, send him back to his apartment, kill the whole sorry idea. He even takes a few turns with his eyes closed, thinking a crash might scuffle the plan, but traffic is light, the roads clear, and as he reaches Jerry's block he coasts into the driveway, jumping off the bike and leaning it against a green shrub shaped like a double helix, an unmoored strand of DNA sprouting from the lawn. The landscape features all kinds of funky topiary; Kevin remembers feeling sick when he heard how

much it had cost, but it got his brother and sister-in-law on the cover of New Jersey Monthly, Jerry and Melissa posed seductively beside a pink hydrangea bush resembling a human eye.

Kevin lingers in the driveway, checks his cell phone and finds a text from Cliff.

Got a job. Tues-Thurs. 400 bucks. You in?

An honest day's work, he thinks. He could cycle back home and wait for Tuesday, maybe it's a sign that the jobs are coming back. Yet four hundred bucks won't even pay a month's back rent. Kevin looks up at his brother's house, towering and majestic. He sees himself at the KFC dunking chicken breasts in grease, the paper hat clipped to his hair.

An honest day's work.

He rings the bell and Melissa answers in a light yellow sundress, the thin straps hanging loosely at the edge of her sleek shoulders.

"Kevin, you're early but come on in," she says. "We really appreciate this. It would just kill us to bring Mozart to a kennel, even for one night."

"No problem," he mutters, stepping into the perfected cool of the foyer. The scent of her perfume wraps him in its pleasures and he leans toward her for a familial peck, wondering, as he always does, if they'd still be together had that damn guy not been an undercover cop.

"You look nice," he tells her. She has to squeeze by him to shut the front door, her bare upper arm brushing his bicep. The pearls around her neck could pay his rent for a year.

"We'll be out of your way in a few minutes," Melissa says. "Make yourself comfortable. There's plenty in the fridge."

Mozart rumbles into the hall and sniffs Kevin's shoes, wagging his tail as he looks up with bright blue eyes. When things were better Kevin had volunteered at an animal shelter, walking dogs and cleaning out kennels every other Saturday afternoon. At first the dog runs had freaked him out, they were too much like jail cells, and on his

second visit he accidentally locked himself in one of the runs. He was trapped for a good twenty minutes before another volunteer finally found him pushing against the chain-link door, his face dotted with sweat. Yet with time he came to love the shelter, loved the moment he could unlock the door and guide a dog's head into the slip leash, lead him out into the sun and the fresh air.

Melissa heads upstairs to finish getting ready and Mozart follows, swinging his tail as he trots down the hall. Kevin wanders into the living room, sees *The Wall Street Journal* on the floor, the porcelain incense bowl set up on the table by the lamp. *The crime scene*, he thinks, and the term freaks him out, confronts him with its honesty. He tries to focus on the ten grand and the eviction notice tacked on his apartment door. He's sick of being broke and humiliated.

I already paid my dues, he thinks. *Eighty-two days' worth.*

All he needs to do is light a match and he'll be back on his feet; if it's a crime so be it — they aren't hurting anyone. But the argument feels hollow, like all that BS he'd heard during his time in County, every damn inmate an innocent man. He doesn't want to be that person.

Text Cliff back, he thinks. *Take the job. Don't do this.*

Jerry enters the room, dressed in jeans and a sports coat, ready for his night on the town. "Almost show time," he says, checking the tickets in his jacket pocket. "Is everything good?"

"I don't know," Kevin says. "I'm not sure I can do this."

Jerry checks the stairs, making sure Melissa is out of range. "I don't want to hear that. Goddamn it, don't you fuck this up."

"It's a *crime*, Jerry. We could —"

"We won't. I told you —"

"I know, you're too fucking smart to get caught. So what? It's still wrong."

"The whole world is wrong," Jerry says. "This won't amount to a single speck on the mountain of wrong we live in. Look, tell me now, Kevin — are you going to do this or not? Whatever you decide is fine but don't come to me when they evict your ass. I'm giving you

a chance to catch up, to do a *job* to earn money. Either you take the job or you don't."

They hear footsteps, Melissa's heels tapping their way down the stairs.

"I should have known you'd fuck me over," Jerry whispers. "Maybe it's too damn complicated for you, a little too much for a man who earns his living pushing a paint brush against a wall, a man who couldn't even buy some pot without fucking it up."

Kevin sees the contempt in Jerry's eyes, not just anger but what his brother really feels, and for a moment Kevin could strike a thousand matches, burn the whole world down and not feel a fucking thing.

Melissa sweeps into the room, a white sweater over her sundress, her purse dangling from her hand. Jerry turns his back on Kevin, as if he isn't even there.

"Ready, sweetie?" Melissa asks.

Jerry slides his arm around her waist, kisses the side of her neck, his lips lingering in the crook beneath her earlobe. *Fuck you*, Kevin thinks. *I had her first*. He reaches into his pocket and grabs the Marlboros. He rips open the pack, pulls out a smoke.

"I thought you quit," Jerry says.

"I did," Kevin says, "but I'm back in."

"If you don't mind, can you please smoke outside?" Melissa asks. "It's just too difficult to get that scent out of the house."

"So true," Kevin says, glaring at his brother. "But don't worry, I won't leave any evidence."

He breaks the cigarette in two, crushing the halves between his thumb and forefinger, grinding the tobacco to dust.

#

Even as he strikes the match he wonders if there's still time to back out.

He's done everything as planned: lit the incense and moved the bowl closer to the drapes, taken the photograph of his parents off the

foyer wall and placed it face down on a deck chair on the patio. The last step: *The Wall Street Journal*, inches from the couch. Kevin imagines the flames spreading like dominoes falling — the paper, the couch, the incense, the drapes, the sheetrock, the wires and beams. He expects it to be beautiful, hypnotic. He'll wait nine minutes, watching the burn, and then walk to a neighbor's house to call for help.

"Don't fuck it up," Jerry had told him. "If you call before nine minutes, they could get here in time to save the house. That would be bad. We need a total loss for the cash-out option. Understand? Nine minutes!"

Kevin crouches near the floor, holding the match, staring at the tiny blue-orange flame. *I am not a bad man*, he thinks. If nothing else, he'll prove his competency to Jerry and maybe to himself and walk away with ten thousand bucks. Moral absolutes are the privilege of the comfortable. He says this aloud as he strikes the match, his voice ringing beneath the room's vaulted ceiling.

He brings the match to the edge of the paper but the movement extinguishes the flame. Since he quit smoking he's lost the knack. The next two matches snap and wilt; he tosses them aside, hands shaking, his fingers stiff.

I should have brought a lighter, he thinks, but the next match holds its spark and the flame catches the edge of the paper, devouring it, trails of black smoke twisting off the page. The trim of the couch is next, the flames jumping toward the cushions. Kevin knocks over the incense and the fire leaps and forms a web, a network of jagged flames and dancing orange heat. When the drapes ignite, the fabric curling like a seared onion skin, Kevin steps back, shielding his face with his hands, and when the drywall finally crackles and spits, he slides open the glass door and walks onto the patio, stepping backward toward the pool, his eyes transfixed by the blaze.

Already he is thinking of how he might shake Jerry down, squeeze another ten or twenty grand for his services, a bonus for a job well done. With thirty grand, or better yet, fifty, he could drive down to

Mexico, live on the beach, screw the landlord and the back rent, he would start over completely. He knows a little Spanish from working with so many immigrants over the years. He checks his watch—another three minutes and he'll run to the neighbor's house, shout for help and bang on the door like a madman. Through the second floor window he sees the flames swirling in the master bedroom, smoke billowing through the screen, and he crosses to the other side of the pool to escape the growing heat, his eyes gazing at the flame. The fire is everything he expected, hypnotic, beautiful, and pure.

A dozen fire trucks wouldn't be enough now, he thinks. Jerry was wrong. I didn't fuck it up.

He's almost ready to run next door when he hears Mozart barking, sees the dog pushing against the upstairs window.

The heat cuts into his skin. Kevin closes his eyes, feels his body weaken, as if his bones and muscles have started to melt. Smoke twists across the patio, hovers over the pool. He remembers the bite of handcuffs snapping shut against his wrists and begins to slip back and forth, his thoughts unmoored. Suddenly he's watching Jerry as he pulls Melissa away from him. He's scraping Roscoe's blood from the white metal mailbox, his mother peering at him through a slit in her bedroom blinds.

He's back in his jail cell, surrounded by faces, cowering on his knees in the dark. He sees himself growing older, gray hair tucked beneath a paper hat as he scoops another order of chicken wings up from the grease.

It surprises him when he doesn't hesitate, when suddenly he is running, dashing across the patio into the house, the acrid stench of burning synthetics digging into his eyes. *I'm not a felon*, he thinks as he cuts through the smoke, *I'm not a fucking torch*, and as he charges up the stairs toward the barking dog he feels the pack of Marlboros jammed inside his back pocket, still untouched but already starting to burn. ■

J. RODNEY KARR

SNIFFING GAS AT SIX

Red tank, rusty tank.
Tar paper flapped.
July was all sloppy.

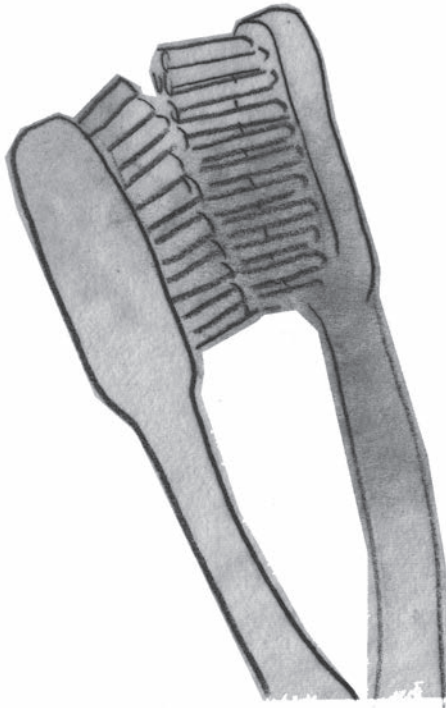
I sucked the hole.
Chickens smeared.
The wheelbarrow

whorled. Santa,
jocund and greasy,
jingled. Rainbows

oozed. Long voices
scorched the field.
They found me.

I was out.
Doc came:
Don't let him sleep.

Because he loved me,
Dad had to slap me
all night long.



*He prepares the bristles beneath a spout of scalding water,
then the paste, then him in her mouth adjusting the lay
of her lips with his fingertips.*

BEFORE THIS THAT THEN

Lloyd finds Poppy in the hospital at last. He's flown in from overseas, a country now in night while here is day, Poppy's alteration announced to him while he should've been dreaming but was instead out with a man and a woman and all their spines curled over a bar in a row, them shitty enough that to speak or remain silent felt largely the same. In his beer's puddled sweat his phone began to throb and he pictured quite clearly some beetle boring wood.

Lloyd, he'd answered, articulating his syllable. Then, as an afterthought: Erickson?

The man and the woman, one small-mouthed and the other -eyed, squinted to listen.

Do y—have—you, Mis—on? he was asked amid extra noise in the receiver like the person were an ocean, too, its steady roar and, intermittently, something more. Lloyd saw weedy legs and arms and a whale torso, no neck but everywhere hair rippling in waves. An accident, he heard himself told, and at some point he must have, thought Lloyd, been offered a name, the title required to announce Poppy hit with a stroke, recovering, experiencing loss.

Poppy? he asked.

—an—one—you?

Speaking, Lloyd said, and then, though knowing he shouldn't, he began uncontrollably to laugh.

They three had eaten Japanese the day before, late then instead of now being early. They'd finished workshops and presentations and notes or doodles and had changed from finely crafted suits to jeans, t-shirts, the woman as stickish as Poppy, both naturals on a beach. Lloyd had thought this when the night was yet to start, they emerg-

ing one by one by one from the elevator cars and pushing their damp hair around or tucking it, the woman's behind her ear in a way his wife's hadn't been in years, Poppy's shorn so that from behind she was just another man.

In the lobby, seeing his narrow colleague, Lloyd recalled clearly Poppy in a ruffle-edged bikini that had surprised and disturbed him, as if he were her father and not someone to arouse which Poppy's figure in that outfit had not, and if she'd tried Lloyd couldn't now remember, so focused he'd been then on wishing her coverage. She'd for once in their life together burned, so when she'd stripped of the suit he found she wore still its evidence, having blistered thickly.

You should've been more careful, he'd said. Worn more, he'd chided, and Poppy, nodding, said: Thanks, from which he couldn't decide the meaning of her tone. She handed him a tube to use to cover her in cream, then facing a mirror and her head drooped down so as he performed his gentlest application he couldn't tell if she winced.

When Lloyd met the man and woman in the hotel's golden lobby he saw the slim woman's billowy t-shirt printed with Poppy's favored Lloyd, not whom she'd married, Poppy had been known to say, her lower incisors looking especially long in her smile, but he who in the movie held aloft a love-belted boombox like an Olympic dead-lift champion.

It was all I had, said the woman to Lloyd, shrugging and blushing and he didn't believe her. Earlier that day they'd pressed shoulders close when there'd been no need, and she'd told a joke that was funny but not to the extent that it called for his grabbing her around the waist to pull her toward him, their bodies clanking and bouncing apart, then jostling again. Lloyd had sweated thinking they might return to a single room that evening. He might be undressed by her teeth. She might find his tongue in her folds.

In the lobby, perhaps because they'd both considered these outcomes, they remained on either side of the man who'd come along, too,

someone uninterested in their imagined infidelities, possibly oblivious, but curious, he said, about what fish they'd eat. One earthquake is all it takes and we're in the ocean, he'd declared earlier at lunch. The fish is nearly in our laps, he'd said, spitting passion, and when I eat it, it should taste like I'm its sea.

Lloyd had waggled his eyebrows at the woman and made a face, helpless in his features which acted like they owned him. He'd not been prone before to such gestures, had never been good around children, was always the one others called cold. The woman giggled and Lloyd felt briefly weightless and dizzy in his skin.

The restaurant was made in high cool light and dark exposed wood and anything said was absorbed by the surrounding blasting mouths unless they tipped forward across their small table, seated as they were on knees on mats, their leaning that much more imbalanced. They ate rolls of shredded crab in spicy, creamy sauce, and snapping, briny eggs over sweet, shiny rice. Then ruby and white and peach slabs of fish, the suction cups of an octopus and clams looking like claws, their sake tab soaring, by the meal's end each having fed the other two with his or her chopsticks very carefully, licking their sticks' tips after. The woman's shirt was hand-cut deeply around the neck, its edge jagged, and when she bent for either of them a tunnel showed between her lemon breasts. Behind her on the wall hung a painting of a fat horse rolling with legs in the air and pinned ears and angry nostrils. Lloyd's intestines had begun to gurgle and he growled at the animal, You're makin me sick, but the place was much louder around them so he sounded like only more sound to which his dinner-mates, who didn't ask that he repeat himself, shook heads, shrugged, and grinned.

If she'd been here, Lloyd thought. Had the doctor finished speaking? The chain of events had been said? He'd already slipped the phone inside his pocket. He should call Poppy to be sure this wasn't a joke — she'd answer, wouldn't she? Or should he call her mother and father

who'd be calling him soon, he sensed this, and began again, though this time like it was some kind of sigh, to laugh. He hiccupped and what bile rose tasted of sea, its weeds, the salmon that should've been cold butter to crush in his molars but had been, he was suddenly sure, unpleasantly aged. There'd been an off scent and he'd steamrolled past, caught up in their odd intimacy, eating without pause. He'd been a glutton and would reap the consequences.

The woman grabbed his wrist and Lloyd wondered without Poppy as a pin in his map where his road might have curved or backtracked or bolted without bend.

You look awful, she said and didn't ask was everything alright. It was obvious, Lloyd thought. Things were not as they'd been, for him or for her, now, locked on his joint.

Time for bed, she said smartly. She stood. For all of us. Let's go. It's beyond late.

Lloyd didn't resist but slipped from his stool and his knees didn't catch but his elbow did on the rail so he hung briefly cliffed, his trunk and disobedient limbs slowly firming. His stomach rolled, a high spinning ride, a spawning trout. I'll be sick, he thought, then said, in sounds he couldn't believe were his: Watch out. And then he was. And then was gathered. And then settled in his room and the body in his bed didn't belong to him.

Lloyd's small hand flutters above Poppy's face, her prairie bones wide and flat and in the light and her poorness everything greened. He breathes You and thinks What and recalls her bare spine's pearly line, a coarse white neck whisker he'd bit and of her teeth within her familiar mouth: broad, boxy, unforgiving.

Through the doorway comes Poppy's mother and then her father, too, in from the hospital's hall with brown bags heavy in hand and skins damp with daylong mist. To see Lloyd so abruptly causes in Poppy's father a gargle and he chokes, Oh! and in two steps Lloyd's crushed to his chest as if to stuff him inside to use him for food, to

glean his young fats for fuel.

We didn't know, Poppy's father says in Lloyd's hair, when to expect you, and his wife looks at Poppy's husband, then Poppy, then at Lloyd again and then at her own husband who wears eager, pooling eyes above the slope of his nose, his torso tilted forward in the pits of his hips.

You haven't missed much, Poppy's mother says. It's really your luck, she says, to get here just now.

She thought if she could just hold Lloyd's knee in her hand that would fit like a mitt. That you're here, she begins again, then grasps her mouth, then mumbles, Jesus, and Lloyd says, I was late. I'm sorry. I'm here.

He'd woken and been sick on himself and found the woman still clothed as a line along the bed's edge. He'd felt sure she was awake but didn't ask, only sat himself up and began to make calls: the company, the airline, the car service, the hotel. He should've heard her leave but didn't and was hopeful such an oversight could be a result of his shock, his concern over Poppy with whom he'd not been in touch since arriving there so far away, several days before. He'd sent her a short message over the computer—*here*—and she'd sent him one back—*here*—and they'd both been either satisfied or busy or at a loss for what more they should say.

Having made his return arrangements he'd sent another message, as if Poppy might find her old self and receive it. Almost, he wrote. Wait.

Poppy had stood as a tall tower amid carpet-squared children, their thick syrup scents and tendencies to tattle, her within their soft swarm a queen among workers before the punch in her temple, sharp with a snap, so down toppled her tower that trapped kids beneath, their loose-toothed bays drawing more towers to pull snivels free and smack awake Poppy's cheeks and to punch and hear her heart and put an ear near her mouth for breath, Poppy ultimately coming-to but knowing

then only to crawl, believing and seeing herself long on a quartet of unending legs whose stride, even so, couldn't thwart being caught.

For a week, another, in close quarters Lloyd fogs Poppy with his lungs, clots her eyes with snapshots of large speckled stones they'd visited and camped between, their snappy blue tent, and once fenced orange field made neon beneath a violet gray sky for which they'd pulled off the road, unsure of the light's meaning, and another time Poppy hugging the joint of an oversized brown plastic bison fiercely, choking it, her neck's tendons bulging and her mouth a bright white.

She keeps watch of Lloyd's throat's bobbing apple. He says *mayonnaise kale zeitgeist July carrier fuchsia Notre Dame bronc opal thirty-three Sunday better spur*. His language in its persistence mimics silence and no matter their proximity — a chair between, two lengths on her bed, several steps apart, the skin of their lips — the space they feed fats deep.

The season is hot and the fires begin and the valley is a yellowed, hazy globe.

Lloyd touches Poppy's dry knuckle and pictures them up above lights, fields, cars, people in shoulders pinked and spotted, throats packed with grease. The sun's set had made a lilac frosting across the mountains' tops. They'd knotted elbows. Let's always be this, he'd said to her, and she'd turned and laughed to him, her head dipped back and her mouth agape, her tongue curling until its root showed. You'll get bored, Poppy warned, and Lloyd shrugged and said: Not yet.

Alone in her hospital room Poppy's intent on the high windows stained with sky. She recalls a dappled place, a different view, a tree's outstretched arm which no language now matches but she knows it's right, what was there and so was she and all before. Before this that then. Before, when.

Poppy's mother sits with Lloyd while her husband is out, while Poppy feigns sleep.

We don't expect, she begins and thinks of seeing him first, his

narrowness in jeans like Poppy wore, them twins and both curveless in matchsticks she'd not've fit as a girl. Always she'd been balloon hipped, slacks requiring oversized waists she'd cinch down to compensate, Poppy's shape like her features her father's—narrow and bony and prone to disappearing. And now there'd be another: Lloyd. The light's strike and shadow, her mother had thought to see him with her daughter and had felt pleased with her poetics, mouthing the words. Poppy, beside him, could've been a son, androgynous in hair clipped to a black shining cap where Lloyd's same style flamed red.

In the hospital room Poppy's mother finds Lloyd's face, his weak beard, cheeks caving in on his mouth. She puts his hand in hers. Let me say, she begins again.

I'm not, he thinks, then is unable to finish. He's *not* often, he thinks, in all different versions, but in this instance, which?

Poppy's mother doesn't grip him but holds his palm's weight as if her own were a mattress, his a wearied traveler. I, she says carefully, don't care.

No one sounds to Poppy's mother like anyone she knows. All frequencies are too high or thin or crackling or, worst, obscured. It's as if her ears have turned against her, her brain their hostage. She seeks bed where everything sleeps, limbs stripped of feeling and foreign to move, while Poppy in the daylight, once returned to her homes, visits streets with her father, Lloyd quickly back to papers, pens, a desk, suit and tie. He closes sales feeling sharkish with no thought towards his prey, only that he must feed, then begin to hunt again.

The show must go on, Poppy's mother thinks the first time Lloyd drops Poppy off as if she is his daughter, so Poppy's, too, to be watched for the day by doting grandparents. As if Poppy is again as small as when their hopes first began.

Poppy's father engraves an identifying tag. Names. Numbers. Colors. Measurements. Zip. Her mother holds and bounces it in test as if its

weight matters. If you're ever unsure, she says at last and presses the metal into Poppy's softened chest. Remember this, her mother says. The air is dry and the woman's flannel nightgown holds her skin and sparks and snaps in shifts.

Her father keeps seeing Poppy as a girl and her mother then so hard yet to keep off of, the world nothing but where they were, which was up a mountain in a trailer, road disappearing in the rock around it, the sage and bunchgrass, cedar they'd burn in the pit. Mornings they set out sprayed and slathered against sun, Poppy's head kerchiefed flashy pink amid pine needles and puzzle trunks and the boulders, the snags, the lichen. They climbed, dropped down ravines to climb far sides and then down again, all the while ascending, shale taken by zag, steps slow over stumps for rattlers, woods navigated as if no legged creature could be there but them. They reached cliffs that overlooked treetops, stream threads, rocks slid in piles, and Poppy threw more rocks from the edges, whole handfuls released, so they looked to her father like a swooping dove or pigeon flock, a net tossed to catch.

Poppy's father once visited the same city called to find Lloyd, the father's visit when Poppy and her husband were only Poppy and her boyfriend but already the young man traveled the world, spoke very carefully new languages with his patient tongue and attention to teeth, paid exorbitant prices to be outfitted well enough to mute his remaining inabilities because he appeared so tailored, professional, aloof.

Lloyd had been in that city then, too, and they'd met, each having attended and been dismissed from meetings — Poppy's father's on the study of cancerous cells and Lloyd's for whatever it was he sold, her father didn't understand it then and still doesn't now, knows only it's a thing very small and particular and imperative to the workings of another thing very small and particular and imperative, the combination of the two so particularly, imperatively small as to be required in countless peoples' lives. Poppy's father had time to change to look even more a tourist while Lloyd arrived still immaculate in a three-

piece number, height accentuated by his light fabric's grab, its charcoal brightening the pink of his cheeks and his olive eyes.

Her father thought then without thinking: I'll kill you, and as they ordered beers, then coffees, and the boyfriend loosened his tie, then unbuttoned his collar and coat, Poppy's father's heart flapped erratically and he grabbed his thighs, his elbows, locked his bare ankles until Poppy's boyfriend at last breached their tiny table to touch the father's arm. Something's wrong, said Lloyd lamely.

They'd so far only ever shaken hands and the boyfriend's grasp nearer Poppy's father's chest wasn't a cure but did reroute what beat itself wildly: his valves, his brain, the well of his throat. Her father's gasping had aim.

I just hope you'll take care, the older man said, but did he speak to Poppy or of her or to this young man bent towards his, Poppy's father's, face, Lloyd's concern a strange look of desire, like he might begin some ritual, and the father began to see his skin peeled by tweezers as if it were wallpaper, a job for delicacy, him treasure beneath.

Lloyd's smile appeared simultaneously with his jaw's glandular ache. He couldn't translate his brain. Everything I do, he said and paused. His throat had quilted quickly in mucous which he tried clearing but like a trick candle it flared back. Instinctively he said again: I do.

Poppy's father stared at Lloyd and his head shook the type of shake he couldn't stop. Everyone, he thought and felt moved by his clarity, is ultimately unstoppable. His eyes began to sting and he bulled his choke and said, harshly: For *her*.

They'd looked away from each other, one blushing but chilled and the other shaking, each disappearing somewhere in the day's final brilliant light.

Lloyd in Poppy's parents' drive pulls a thumb below Poppy's eye, across its ridge. There, he says.

Poppy leans her face to him which he knows now to meet. The first time she'd positioned herself so he'd sat motionless, unsure.

The woman from the conference had made no move to contact him while he'd sent a message to her phone from his, a single word found in his and Poppy's home, him thinking not of hospitalized Poppy, nor of him alone in the kitchen sitting the counter couched by cabinet corners, but of a magazine's photos of a foreign country, its garden-choked cottages and the sun setting the sky pinkly beyond a pond and broad single tree, in the water a set of white-shirted girls among wide-backed horses, some waist and chest deep and soaked already, horses submerged to their armpits, their bellies, all hair and clothes pasted to edges and one girl's vertebrae bumping shadows on her as she was caught midair leaping from her animal's back, an upwards arc beginning in the moment to trail down. Everything was so exquisitely lit that Lloyd's body arranged a sob whose swell he couldn't swallow. His thumbs shook in their sockets and he steadied them against buttons choosing: Anything? As if the conference woman had been searching, as if he'd been her pair.

When he'd looked again at those girls and their horses he'd passed through their impact, they no longer stirred him. He flicked himself hard in the throat and yes, there he was, still.

Lloyd thought of the woman and her Lloyd shirt that evening which had worn a small red heart. He reminded himself how Poppy wore a small red mark right on her chest. It was raised and smooth and she'd once returned home with a penlight for its examination. This was months before the accident, between Lloyd travelling, and beneath their covers with all the lights off she'd pulled her collar down and pressed the beam to her bump.

It's like I'm trying to grow another organ outside myself, she said, and Lloyd peered closely, unaffected by her exposed nipple, its dark nest. The growth held tiny thread veins and glowed orangely inside.

What other organ could you need? Lloyd asked.

She combed his neck's nape and they felt, Lloyd abruptly thought, he and Poppy, like an unattractive chair. It wasn't all looks, he knew; more important was the feel. But then this was precisely what he no

longer grasped: one day they were soft and obvious and the next a tiger's trap, an idea of ground with nothing to ground it: shocking impact to heels, all breath swiftly lost.

An extra sieve, Poppy said of her spot and when Lloyd asked her, Why, she clicked them to darkness and turned on her side. It would know, she said, I'm just the host. Lloyd found her for days after standing and holding herself by the tips of her fingers, twisting that small globe like a knob.

Poppy, the first time she leaned near to him in the car after her incident, pressed her skin to his in explanation. She'd had a flash of his throat pushing whiskers, had thought effort and sweating, remembered nothing on her but an armpit's mark like a rabbit's little shit, and her husband's teeth there, their space between, and how he'd held her tongue with his and overrun her mouth with his own.

Inside the house is Poppy's mother at the stove, flipping ham slices and dropping eggs in old tuna tins to contain their whites, her hair spiked in yesterday's spray. She hands Poppy bread to slip in toaster holes. Bread, says the woman slowly, her finger on the bag. Toast, she says, placing that same finger on the metal getting hot. Her hair inside is powder soft.

Poppy dumps her bag in a seat, Lloyd's hoodie and its breaking cuffs hanging off the stool's edge to fall when she'd long been a neat adult, intent on corners and stiff creases and clutterless space.

Says Poppy, bread airborne still: Toast.

Her mother's chin lifts and her thinned nostrils flare and Poppy thinks cobra while her mouth forms a tunnel and with the steadiness of a master says: Co. Bra.

Poppy's nearby father's eyes clot. He and his wife should be dying in peace, he thinks. In a sunset and in love a way they've never before been and never could've been because it's meant this long to make it, which they have but are now engaged too in some cowboys

and Indians, horses and headdresses, them not stretched or warmed but Poppy strapped to their backs or slung from their skulls, their unprepared bodies riddled with pain.

Poppy, Lloyd discovers, is perfect on a bike. They spend a weekend together, alone.

We won't see you until Monday, he tells Poppy's mother who looks at Poppy's father gazing out the window at flickers pitching chaotically through trees.

You've got her tags, says her father, still looking nowhere but at those birds.

Lloyd flexes his teeth. Her tags, he nods.

Be good, says her mother and Poppy all the time in the room is on her husband's eyes, what lines dig his cheeks, his forehead, all around his lips. His hair, Poppy thinks, and recalls a den of foxless kits: their unbridled gymnastics and sunset fur.

We'll be great, Lloyd says, and holds Poppy's arm to steer her from the kitchen, down the hall and out the door. As they pull from the driveway there stand her parents at the picture window, the day's setting light dissolving their faces so just bodies show, hands grasped between hips. Poppy's husband lifts his own in a last wave, shifts smoothly into gear, and drives them away.

Her father coughs. Poppy's mother nods. She doesn't say a word of her head's spinning or her shoulders caught in rotation, the ways in which her organs seem a funnel inside her, everything on an axis other than the earth's. She grasps the nearest curtain or chair in a fist and puts her other hand flat against the window as she's not before, the prints she'll leave.

Sweetheart? her husband breathes.

Darling, says Poppy's mother, knowing her voice but not its distance which seems placed beyond a hillside, beneath a rock, behind a wall. He doesn't grip her but should and then she's wheeling from the glass and feeling her way out to the yard, acting blind, stum-

bling into furniture pieces, knocking a shoulder frail enough to chip against a cupboard's corner. Is she wailing? He can't decide. There's a deep sound coming from somewhere but it holds several layers, the topmost could be a cry. She's bent over her center, folding more and more clearly in half. How she continues, her husband marvels. She grabs hold of a blueberry bush's delicate, fruit-laden branches, her nose neatly to her knees.

I'm coming, her husband thinks, now crashing his own path through their house. He throws the screen-door off its track and the boom to the deck doesn't move her or cease her moan. She's a corn-stalk in a breeze, core steady while periphery flaps. This is a moment, her husband thinks, and will pass. They'll forget or pretend to. This is nothing, he thinks.

At home they build dinner slowly, Poppy the best with knives she's ever been, mincing onion to a fluff. Hey, Lloyd says. They're in the counter's corner, both bodies fitting, and he offers his hand and Poppy takes it and smiles. Poppy, she says.

In the overhead light she's her richest color, her husband his purest. They finish preparations and place things in baking degrees, then eat until their tiny tummies push like they've both been made pregnant, are beginning to show.

Lloyd brushes Poppy's teeth out of habit, a task begun when she couldn't and continued now as she can. As she will in the mornings but at night their ritual is this: her before him and the slightest bit taller, him peering up to her enamel, her gum line, her teeth's textured edges. The light is always at her back. He prepares bristles beneath a spout of scalding water, then the paste, then him in her mouth rearranging her lips. Considering, when their rhythm's established, that he could've been a doctor, a surgeon, someone whose touch renders skill, his pressures and approaches. Last of all he cleans her tongue and then she bends for the water cranked cold, swishes, and spits.

Out of another new habit they fall asleep naked, Lloyd feeling not

like a husband or a brother, nor a lover or a father, but like Poppy's as he's not before understood. An extension of her frame and hide and also a cave for it to fill or a crest across which she'll stretch, their skins bare so she gives him color and he filters hers. In the morning they wake as Poppy their lid and all their limbs woven.

The afternoon brings the bike. They've weeded what will be garden, turned the soil to work compost through choking clay, and while Poppy's placed each seed carefully in its well and covered it gently and made a mark of each crop at each intersection – beets, then kale, next broccoli, sprouted potatoes last – Lloyd has pricked himself pruning dead roses, sucked his wounds and continued on after browned lilac bunches and the desiccated heads of spent daisies, new growth at their bases beginning brightly to poke. Poppy allows a hornet to cruise her arms and neck, her eyes.

Careful, her husband warns but she alters nothing, elbow and cheek fuzz afloat by its wings.

The bike is in the shed and Lloyd moves it for a shovel, a bucket, something needed, and behind him Poppy eyes the machine. She takes it from where he's leaned it and out into the day.

I don't know, Lloyd says.

It's an old rusted cruiser whose peeling seat he holds while holding also his chest as if pledging allegiance, thinking pump, pertinent lobes willed to engage.

Poppy palpates the tires and gets in the shed and makes scrapes and reemerges with the air-pump which she sets beside the back cap, squatting. Lloyd, as he's often, is impressed with her remembrance of mechanics, what's going where and when to fiddle and when it works.

I think, he says, but Poppy has filled and moved frontwards, finished there and grabbed handles.

Poppy, he says.

Lloyd, says Poppy.

His name in her voice is quick to disorient.

I think, he re-begins while her leg swings over the seat he continues to hold, all her weight taken in his fingers' ends so when they're retrieved they've bled to white by her weight. She eases away, helmetless and exposed, and begins smoothly to pedal.

Watch it! he shouts and dashes after to be her catch. He remembers learning horsebacks from his mother's lap or father's but no memory of their bodies behind, just the arch and sway of each animal's hope to shake loose his panicked heels dug close.

Lloyd is trim but not fit. He stops and clutches his thighs in the street, Poppy already too much the lead to hear him but still he wheezes her name, over and again, stooped. She follows a straight line and when something—a rock? a crushed tail? a branch?—cuts her path, she curves sweetly, elegantly, faultlessly steering.

Lloyd pictures a car and her struck so she sails through air, his inability to reach her arc's end, her father's face approaching his to destroy it, her mother's face looking even less hers than now. He blinks and straightens to run again and begins, head down, new steps in the beat of Poppy's name and the pulse of hearts, while Poppy traces an unshaking, unseen loop of return, simultaneously recalling muscle, valves and chambers dissected, incisions made well along cleavage so portions parted as if prior positions were forced. Something inside her shifts leftward in a move painless but tweaking her lung. Poppy, charting Lloyd's head-down run towards her, notes this is the space in which she'll catch and hold him in her tight. Here is shade, here light, there the arch of a branch above street like a long burly arm. She is blinded but hears clearly his chanting, him charming them near. They're on a crash course. Neither breaks stride. ■

CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

CHUCK AUGELLO lives in New Jersey with his wife, dog, three cats, and several unnamed birds that inhabit the back yard. His work has appeared in *Word Riot*, *Hobart*, *decomp*, *Red Fez*, *Muse & Stone*, *The Santa Fe Literary Review*, and other journals.

JEFFREY BEAN is an associate professor of English at Central Michigan University, where he teaches creative writing. His first full length collection, *Diminished Fifth*, was published by David Robert Books in 2009. Recent poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *FIELD*, *RHINO*, *Bateau*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *New York Quarterly*, and *Subtropics*.

AIMEE BENDER is the author of the novels *An Invisible Sign of My Own* and *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake*, as well as two collections of stories, *Willful Creatures* and *The Girl in the Flammable Skirt*. A new collection is forthcoming from Anchor Books in the fall of 2013. Past work has been featured in *Granta*, *GQ*, *Harper's*, *Tin House*, *McSweeney's*, and *The Paris Review*, among others. She lives in Los Angeles and teaches creative writing at the University of Southern California.

STEVEN MATTHEW BROWN studied sculpture and painting in Detroit, where he began a career that includes over forty exhibitions and community projects in six countries. He coauthored the catalog [*COSHOCTON*] with Anne Cornell to document one such community project in a small Ohio town. In 2006 he moved to the former East Germany, and in 2008 earned an MFA in Public Art from the Bauhaus-Universität Weimar with his illustrated novel *Body Palimpsest*. His essays and stories appear in publications like *Black Warrior Review*, *DIAGRAM*, *Word Riot*, *Public Art Dialogue*, the acclaimed German magazine *DUMMY*, and the seventeenth edition of

the MDR anthology *Frühstück mit Axt*. Distinctions include an Allesee Fellowship, and grants from the Ohio Arts Council, MCACA, and Elizabeth Firestone Graham Foundation. He has worked as a cook, builder, gallerist, translator, librarian, tree surgeon, and grant writer. Currently, he lives in the town of Jena, Thuringia, where he is fortunate enough to practice his disciplines full-time, for now.

MARY CATHERINE CURLEY grew up in the shadow of a nuclear reactor in Vermont. She received her MFA from Hollins University, where she was a teaching fellow. Her work has appeared in *Punchnel's* and the *Harvard Advocate*, and is forthcoming in *Barrelhouse*.

MIKKO HARVEY is a student at Vassar College. His poems appear in *PANK*, *decomp*, and *Word Riot*.

TED JEAN is a retired carpenter. He writes, paints, plays tennis with his wife, Lai Mei. His work has appeared in *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *DIAGRAM*, *Pear Noir!*, *Gargoyle*, *elimae*, *Magma* (UK), *Other Poetry* (UK), dozens of other publications.

LESLIE JOHNSON's fiction has been broadcast on NPR and published in journals such as *Colorado Review*, *Glimmer Train*, *Cimarron Review*, *Third Coast*, *Threepenny Review*, *Chattahoochee Review*, and others. She has received grant awards for fiction from the Connecticut Office of the Arts, and she teaches at the University of Hartford.

J. RODNEY KARR has published in some journals and magazines here and there, most recently in the online journal *Canary*. He has work coming out in *5-2 Poetry*. He lives in Copenhagen.

Originally from Cleveland, **MATTHEW KILBANE** lives and writes in Indiana as an MFA candidate at Purdue University, where he also serves as Co-Poetry Editor for *Sycamore Review*.

SARAH NOREK lives and works in Oregon. Her stories have appeared in *Wigleaf*, *The Collagist*, *Keyhole Magazine*, and others, and can be found on the bottles of Harris Bridge Vineyard dessert wines. She is currently at work on a collection and a novella.

JIM SHEPARD is the author of six novels, including most recently *Project X* (Knopf, 2004), and four short story collections, including most recently *You Think That's Bad* (Knopf, 2011). His third collection, *Like You'd Understand, Anyway*, was a finalist for the National Book Award and won The Story Prize. His short stories have appeared in such publications as *Harper's*, *McSweeney's*, *The New Yorker*, *The Paris Review*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and have been anthologized in *Best American Short Stories* and *The Pushcart Prize*. He teaches at Williams College and in the Warren Wilson MFA program, and lives in Williamstown with his wife Karen Shepard, his three children, and two beagles.

SARAH J. SLOAT lives in Germany, where she works in news. Her poems have appeared in *Bateau*, *Court Green*, *Birdfeast* and *Linebreak*, among other publications. Her chapbook, *Excuse me while I wring this long swim out of my hair*, was published by Dancing Girl Press in 2011.

HALI F. SOFALA is a Samoan poet and teacher originally from Eatonton, Georgia. She is a Ph.D. candidate in English at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln where she serves as coordinator for the Prairie Schooner Book Prize Series. Her work appears most recently in *New Madrid*, *WomenArts Quarterly*, *basalt*, and *CALYX*. She earned an MFA in poetry from the University of Wisconsin, Madison. She lives in Lincoln, NE with her adorable mutt, Tortuga, and her husband, the writer and editor, Eric Jones.

PABLO PIÑERO STILLMANN has received fellowships from the Foundation for Mexican Literature and Indiana University. His work appears or is forthcoming in *Cream City Review*, *Este País*, *The Normal School*, *The Rumpus* and *Tierra Adentro*. He lives and writes in downtown Indianapolis.

DENIS SWEENEY's stories and poems have appeared in *alice blue review*, *DIAGRAM*, *Mid-American Review*, *Pear Noir!*, and elsewhere. He lives, for now, in Boulder, Colorado.

MEG THOMPSON spent a year teaching English in South Korea before returning to live in Cleveland, Ohio. Her work has appeared most recently in *The Adirondack Review*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, and *PANK*.

JAMES VALVIS is the author of *How to Say Goodbye* (Aortic Books, 2011). He has published in places like *Anderbo*, *Arts & Letters*, *New York Quarterly*, *Poetry East*, *Rattle*, *River Styx*, *LA Review*, *Potomac Review*, *storySouth*, and *Washington Pastime*. His poetry has been featured on *Verse Daily*. He lives near Seattle.

MARK LEE WEBB now lives in Kentucky, but he grew up in California, and he still carries memories of the Santa Monica Mountains and the hills of Agoura in his heart. His poems have appeared in many publications. A writer and photographer, he is the editor and publisher of *A Narrow Fellow* journal of poetry, and an active participant in the Louisville-based Writer's Workshop Project and the Columbus, Ohio-based Pudding House Poetry Salon.

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