

Juked

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2009 *JUKED* FICTION AND POETRY PRIZES

FICTION

WINNER

Jill Widner, "Bisu and the Missionary's Daughter"

RUNNER-UP

Dan Coshnear, "Or Stay on the Line for Operator Assistance"

Selected by Dan Chaon

POETRY

WINNER

Joellen Craft, "The First of Many Decisions" and other poems

RUNNERS-UP

Ben Mirov, "The Hole in My Friends Where Ben Mirov Should Be"
and other poems

Chris Pexa, "Two Poems for Delmore Schwartz" and other poems

FINALISTS

John Biando

Sara Burge

Danielle Goncalves

Donna Isaac

Ellen LaFleche

Elizabeth Langemak

Marcus Wicker

Selected by Dora Malech



*There are several ways to arrive in Brugge:
Plane. Bus. Train. Drunk.*

BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO BRUGGE

City Centre

Brugge is a little-big city and therefore full of contradictions. You can safely navigate its medieval streets and buy Belgian chocolate right from the source—in fact, from any dozens of sources. Every third store is a source, but no one gives free samples. At least, not to a guy still wearing his backpack and walking from the train station to save on bus fare. You'll have that money marked for other attractions: Belgian beer, silk crocheted knickknacks, and tours of World War I battle sites you feel guilty into visiting since World War II sites get all the crowds and somebody really should honor the original. If you don't have the first, you reason, you never get the sequel—a point you'll argue on the train with a girl whose backpack has a maple leaf sewn to it. When she starts to out-reason you, you tell her you think she's not really Canadian, just some grad student from Syracuse who thinks socialism works but wouldn't dare say it around the dinner table back home. (Deep down, you know she really is Canadian, but now that you're certain you do not have a chance with her—because she is smarter and because you are American—you hit her with her worst fear, being mistaken for an American).

Despite everything you read in the guide book, all you really want to do is see a windmill and eat a Belgian waffle. That is your secret. Your hidden, clichéd, closeted secret. You are certain no one will understand such primordial motivation, so you tell anyone who asks you're interested in Flemish history and culture even though you would have spelled Flemish with a *Ph* six months ago, before your

ex-girlfriend gave you the guide book. Before she was your ex-girlfriend. Back when the trip was for two, was only supposed to be a week, and only supposed to go as far as visiting a mutual friend studying at Oxford.

Getting There

There are several ways to arrive in Brugge: Plane. Bus. Train. Drunk. You arrive via train from Paris, seventy-two hours removed from London, two weeks removed from L.A., and two months removed from your girlfriend.

You sleep sporadically on the train from Paris to Brussels, too tired to drink from having drunk too much to sleep. By the time you arrive in Brugge, you feel disheveled, especially after the conversation with the Canadian girl. You study a city map at the station and begin walking to your intended accommodation, only stopping once to admire a windmill made of chocolate, then walking away quickly before anyone notices such a thing could catch your eye.

Where to Stay

Though you are twenty-six, you choose a youth hostel on a nice, white-washed street of uniform buildings neither old nor new. Your bottom bunk sits amongst three other bunk beds: eight people in the room, six of them Scotsmen. (And by Scotsmen you also mean Scotswomen—four young men and two young women.) The seventh person in the room, your brand new upper bunk-mate, is the Canadian girl who you think hates you, but it's actually worse: she ignores you.

You are fine with this. It's not messy this way.

The Scotsmen do not sleep the first night. They sit out in the small garden attached to the room, speaking English in a way you do not understand, laughing in sudden crashes that come and go like a tide. At first, you lie beneath the Canadian girl and feel the five or six years you have on all of them. Then, one of the Scotsmen sneaks

back into the room, pulling his backpack out from beneath the bunk across from yours. He sees your open eyes in the dark and whispers, "Did we wake ye?"

You are not certain what to say. "Here," he says and the light, comfortable weight of a wine bottle nests in the blanket atop your chest.

You wrap your fingers around the bottle. It is smooth and cool and pulls you up, out of the bunk. The Scotsman hands you two more bottles as you stand and whispers, "Carry those."

Though it is dark, you can see well enough to know you are nearly eye-level with the Canadian girl in her top bunk, and it looks as if maybe her eyes are open, staring at you. Or maybe not. Just as you lean in closer, the Scotsman stands up. "Let's go."

Out in the garden, you discover that the first bottle of wine is *your* bottle of wine. No glasses necessary. The Scots tell you all about Brugge. They've been here two days, seen and done it all, and now have to kill one more day before the tour they're part of sends a bus and takes them to Paris. One of them tells you of battle sites, poppy fields, and windmills just outside of town.

The Scotsmen glow red in the face with wine; their legs glow white from a summer under the merciful Scottish sun. The two Scotswomen speak quietly to each other, laugh at your jokes, but do not speak directly to you. You tell tales of Los Angeles, carefully editing your ex-girlfriend out of every story even if they're not as good that way.

In the grainy light of sunrise, you slip back to your bunk. The Scots remain outside, still talking, still laughing. The Canadian girl rolls onto her side. Curls of brown hair trickle down her cheeks, half her face emerging from tiny folds of pillow, and clearly you see one open, green eye.

You feel connected to her. You shared a train. You share a bunk. "Would you like to kiss?" you say.

She shuts her eye wrinkly tight and rolls away from you.

You take refuge beneath, staring up at her form—convex in the mattress—hoping sleep will soon take you, hoping she will be gone when you wake up.

What to See

In the even light of late morning, your room appears cramped with dirty clothes and backpacks peeking out from under bunks, leaning against and over bedposts, and partially blocking every route to the door. The Scots are still asleep when the Canadian girl steps into the room. Her hair is wet and she is dressed for the day: long, brown pants with zippers everywhere, even in places that have nothing to do with body parts; a gray T-shirt, the word *Roots* across her chest, the first *o* and the *t* curving out slightly. You suddenly realize this means you are staring, but it does not matter now, so you keep staring.

She does not look at you when she says, “If you’re going to stay another day, you better go tell them.”

You nod and feel around under your bunk for sandals.

The Canadian girl grabs her daypack and jacket and opens the door again. “You missed the free breakfast,” she says.

“Yeah?” you say, the remnants of wine sour on your mind. “Maybe tomorrow.”

She looks at you as though you have insulted her cooking. “Maybe,” she says and lets the closing door follow her out.

Getting Around

Because of the gray haze and misty air, the bicycle rental shop is empty when you arrive. The quiet man behind the counter opens a map. With a pen, he circles where in the grid of Brugge you are. It is a maze of canals and curving roads; three, four, and five-way stops; street names that change arbitrarily, sometimes reappearing a few intersections later.

The shop bell rings as a young man in shorts and a windbreaker steps into the store. He busies himself looking over and past you at the terms of rental posted on the wall behind the counter.

You tap the map and in a quiet voice, so it does not sound like a whisper, discreetly say, "Windmills?"

The clerk draws a line through the town, out to a canal, alongside it for a few inches, and then draws a crude windmill on the map and circles it. "Forty-five minutes," he says. "Thirty, if you ride hard."

"Are you going to make that ride?" you hear another voice say. It is the young man in the shorts and windbreaker. He is standing beside you, staring at the windmill.

"I think so." You fold the map quickly, the way you did at eighteen when you first bought a dirty magazine and the clerk asked if you were sure that was the one you wanted.

The young man looks outside. "I've been waiting to see if it would clear up," he says. "This is my only day here."

"It's not so bad," the clerk says and you know there's no getting out of this now; you have a companion for the day.

Of course, you were supposed to have a companion every day. Even after the breakup, you thought it might be exotic strangers who knew lots of secrets about the world. Or exotic women who were worldly and knowing.

Clark is shorter than you and this makes you feel somewhat better, like you could take him in a fight, though you can see, even through his windbreaker, that his chest is more developed – not in that hulking, compensatory way, but proportional to his body.

You'd have guessed Clark is from the Northeast before he spoke, before you noticed his *Colgate Lacrosse* t-shirt. His blue windbreaker brings out the slight, blue stripe on his gray hiking boots. His lean, athletic legs disappear into cargo shorts that are too short to be stylish, too long to be completely out of fashion. His mussed hair is not like the mussed hair of the Scotsmen; it is sandy, both blonde and brown, possibly highlighted, and mussed rather precisely.

Outside, you discover Clark's *Colgate Lacrosse* t-shirt is actually a gift from a friend. "I play, but at Holy Cross," he says. "We have some funny t-shirts that say 'Holy Crosse!'"

You nod and smile but the laugh does not come.

"I should have one," he says and stares at the bikes. "I don't know why I don't. I guess because it was a fundraiser and it didn't make sense to buy a t-shirt from yourself."

"Did you buy one for your friend at Colgate?"

"I should have," Clark says and shakes his head. "I can't believe I didn't."

Sights Outside Brugge

The white-washed buildings of residential Brugge give way quickly to open spaces, more trees and wider roads running along the edge of town. A pedestrian bridge funnels you onto a trail running alongside the canal from the map. Clark rides in front of you with smooth, long strokes, the bike surging ever forward, the back tire fanning water out behind and misting your face even more than the air. You try not to think of the World War I memorials you could be visiting, all those gravestones waiting for just a moment of your time; try to reason that it's best to visit them on a clear day when you can really take it all in; and try not to feel guilty.

Later, through the gunmetal gray of the horizon, a windmill emerges slowly, like a pencil sketch, the lines growing more distinct as you push on. When you are nearly upon it, you realize it is on the opposite side of the canal and you must ride past it, hoping for a footbridge.

It takes maybe ten more minutes to arrive at the bridge. The windmill has slipped back into the gray and there is a sign for a town just a few kilometers farther.

"You hungry?" Clark says. "We can ride on to that town to see what they've got, then hit the windmill on the way back."

Clark does not look directly at you as he says this. You are older and more experienced than Clark, and you suddenly see yourself in a quiet café, a plate of something in front of you, and neither you nor Clark speaking. But you're hungry. You missed breakfast because the Canadian girl did not have the decency to wake you. Lunch was not part of the plan, however. Windmills. That was it. But it would be nice to eat with a person and not your guidebook for once. That was how it was supposed to be.

"Yeah," you say. "Let's grab something."

Where to Eat

Many of the restaurants have A-frame signs on the sidewalk out front, daily specials chalked in a rainbow of colors, boldly announcing what you are thinking: Belgian Waffles. It's as if the locals are saying, "It's okay; we know why you're here."

Clark stops his bicycle out front of a hotel cafe and laughs at the sign. "I hadn't even thought of that." His look is little kid mischief – playing ball in the house, spying on the neighbor through the fence. "Should we get a waffle? We are in Belgium."

The cold air and lack of sun make it feel like morning has lasted all day. This is the excuse you use to say *Yes* to Clark and go inside.

The waffles come with almost anything so they can be breakfast, lunch, dinner, or dessert. You both order the waffles with a side of ham and a beer. That makes it seem more like lunch, a more casual meal.

Your wet hair drips in soft taps on the table. "You're soaked," Clark says. "How come I'm not?"

"I think it's from your back tire," you say.

After the waitress takes your order to the kitchen, the café is empty. Clark leans over to the next table and grabs the neatly folded cloth napkin nearest him, leaving the silverware behind. "Here," he says and tosses the napkin so it hits you gently in the chest. "Hurry, before she catches us."

You smile and dry off, tossing the wet cloth beneath the table just before the waitress returns with the waffles and beer. This is a union you wouldn't dare think of back home, much less ask for, yet it seems to work. The waffle is sweet, even without syrup, and would quickly dull your taste buds if the salty ham were not there to shock them back to life. The beer smoothes everything over, makes everything agreeable, and you soon find yourself over an empty plate describing your rent-controlled apartment in Santa Monica.

"So you live five minutes from the beach," Clark says, "and you never go?"

"Yeah," you say to yourself. "Why don't I go?"

Clark leans forward, elbows on the table. "I know why. Because you can't always see how good you've got it. At least, not while it's right in front of you."

"That's a cliché."

Clark picks up his beer. "Of course it is. Because it's so true." When you do not immediately respond, he takes a swig from the nearly empty bottle and sets it on the table with a pop.

Rare Sights

You must ride hard to the windmill. The rain has picked up, the drops now stinging your face. When you look up to see how far down the path the windmill is, a raindrop thumps your right eye like a flick from a finger. Your contact lens lifts and slides to a corner of your eye, blurring half your world. To stay focused, you close that eye and stare only as far as Clark's back tire until you reach the windmill.

It feels warm inside, and you do not care that the windmill is nothing more than a grindstone for grains. Deep down you knew that; you think maybe you learned it in the third grade. Yet, from a distance, the windmill seemed so majestic.

You are drying and warming, silently following Clark through the short, self-guided walking tour until he stops just before the exit

and says, "Is something wrong with your eye?"

"My contact."

"Oh," he steps closer. "I hate that."

You nod even though you've only had the contacts a few months, the last good thing your ex-girlfriend got you to do.

"Want me to see if I can get it?" Clark says, now looking into your eyes one at a time.

You look him over with the good eye.

"I had a roommate," he says. "I've done this before."

Clark tells you to close the good eye. Through the bad one you see his blurry face, not far from yours. His hands, warm despite how wet you both still are, lightly rest upon your cheek and forehead while his fingers, firm like a good mother's, spread open your eye. "Look up. Now down. Left." You feel a scratch with each change in direction. "There it is; don't move." Briefly, Clark's fingers fill your vision. It does not sting or poke. There is a moment of pressure, and then your eye feels washed over, as though someone has draped a silk sheet across it.

You blink a few times before Clark comes into focus, staring into your eye, concerned. "Did that get it?"

"I think so," you say, studying Clark's eyes, brown with chips of black and green. You blink twice. "Yeah, it's good. Thanks."

Off the Beaten Path

You get back to town just after three. With the hostel still closed for cleaning, Clark points up the lifeless street to a pub. "Maybe we should kill some time and grab another beer."

The televisions are all tuned to a World Cup soccer match, the way they have been everywhere you've been since arriving in Europe. Though the pub looks empty and Belgium is not in the match, the bartender takes little notice of you, pouring two pints and taking your money with little more than a glance from the television.

The beer and gradual rhythm of soccer tire you. You could fall asleep if the front of the pub, a series of glass-paned French doors, were not wide open to the street, forcing you to dry slowly in a damp breeze.

Clark says little. You say even less, the occasional *Yep* to his occasional *Nice play*.

On the way back from the toilette at halftime, you notice the pub has a loft. You tell Clark it's probably warmer up there, so you each grab another pint and Clark follows you up the stairs.

The loft has a long counter along the railing, empty chairs neatly lined up against it, a row of booths against the back wall, and an aisle between. Three booths in, you see sneakers sticking out, four pairs, two pair to each side of the booth. A few steps further you see two couples lying down in the booth and intertwined, their heads perking up to stare as you walk by. They are kids, maybe thirteen or fourteen, making out in a bar in the middle of the afternoon.

As you make your way to the far end and sit in a chair along the railing, you wonder if Clark thinks you knew the loft is a make-out spot. He sits down next to you. The teenagers are no longer visible, except for their feet. "Should we go back down?" you whisper.

Clark is grinning and whispers. "It's probably okay. They'll forget about us in a minute."

You shake your head. "They look like seventh-graders."

Clark nods and sips his beer, keeping his eyes on you. "I grew up in the wrong country," he says, no longer whispering.

You laugh, notice how Clark's eyes do not yet wrinkle when he smiles, and let your voice go back to normal as well. "Me too."

"How's the eye?"

"Good," you say as his hand finds your cheek. You open your eye wider, turn your head a little to show him, but Clark softly directs your face back square with his.

You tilt your head, breaking contact with Clark's hand, and look past him to the booth with the kids.

"They don't care," he says. "We're in Brugge. Who do we know in Brugge?"

He leans in closer and you close your eyes, feel his lips on yours, taste the beer on his breath. His face does not scratch you the way you may have thought. When his tongue flicks the roof of your mouth, searching, you realize your tongue is drawn down and back, a hollow mouth.

"I'm sorry," you say in retreat.

Clark's eyes look sleepy and intent. "It's okay."

"No," you say. "It's not." You look over at the booth, then down to the bartender, still focused on the television. You whisper: "I'm not gay."

Clark's eyes never leave you. "Back home, neither am I." He smiles and sips his beer.

You follow his lead and sip your beer, the bubbles tingling your mouth with cleansing alcohol. "I'm not gay," you whisper. "Anywhere."

"Okay," Clark says, the smile wiped from his mouth, his eyes open and understanding. "Nothing has to happen."

"Exactly," you say. "Nothing did happen."

Clark nods and turns his head to the television. You do the same, try to pretend it's just you and a buddy watching a game of soccer, but you don't even understand the rules, and you don't have a buddy who's ever tried to kiss you. A buddy, you keep turning over in your mind, whom you *let* kiss you.

"I better go," you say.

Clark allows you to stand, to slip away or storm off, whichever you need to do.

"I'm sorry," you say again, and this gets Clark to look up at you.

He says you don't need to keep apologizing, that you've done nothing wrong, and for the first time all day, he calls you by your name, the first time you've heard anyone besides a customs official say it in weeks, and it does not sound right. This is not who you are.

So you slide past him, between his chair and the booth, and walk with purpose down the stairs and out the door. A calm, controlled getaway.

Getting Away

You head directly to the room for your backpack and passport. The Scots are already there, preparing for a last, big night in Brugge: dinner, wine, dancing. They suggest you put on something dry and come along. When you hedge, they insist.

Over dinner, you share the details of your day, admit you ate waffles and saw a windmill, but you share these details as though you spent the day alone.

Much wine and many beers later, you find yourself in a club, dancing with one of the Scotswomen. She's telling you how much she loves your accent, how boring Scotsmen are, how exciting it must be to live in Los Angeles. Her voice blends with the music; her head nods every time you ask if she wants to keep dancing.

When you walk her back to the table, the other Scots take little notice of you both. "I'll be right back," you say and glance toward the toilette.

She grabs your arm. "We can go back to the room if you want. My friends will be here for hours."

You understand her completely. It is not late, just after nine, and the room will probably be empty. "Give me one second," you say.

You blend into the crowd on the way to the toilette then double-back, walking around to the other side of the club, avoiding the light of the dance floor, allowing the pulse of the music to push you out the front doors.

The quiet of fresh air explodes around you as if you've broken through the surface of the water. You walk the streets of Brugge, the whitewash still glowing from the late-setting sun, the sky scribbling purple atop orange. On the way back to the hostel, you try not to think, try to make yourself notice details in darkened shop windows,

count how many cars are American-made and how many of those you've actually seen back home, where, long after you're asleep, your ex-girlfriend will be out clubbing with the friend who stopped being nice to you when her boyfriend dumped her.

The lobby of the hostel is dark, everyone out or in for the night. Everyone except a single figure slumped in a chair. The Canadian girl. She looks asleep as you crouch in front of her. "Hey," you nudge her awake. "Are you sleeping out here?"

Her head rolls to life. "Hey," she says, her eyes closing as she speaks. "What've you been up to?"

The alcohol reaches you with the words. "Same thing as you."

"Mmm," she says, her mouth dropping slightly open after she's said it.

"Hey," you nudge her again. "You don't want to sleep out here."

She opens her eyes. "Are you afraid someone will get me?"

"I don't know. I guess."

She holds her arms forward without looking at you. "Then, get me."

You reach forward and she slides into your arms sideways, wraps her arms around your neck and leans her head on your shoulder as you cradle her to the room. "I hate you," she says.

"I know."

The room is dark and empty, and she blindly reaches for the light switch.

"Don't," you say. "I don't want them."

You step over to the top bunk and let her go. She spreads out over the blanket, then grabs for your shirt. You catch her hand, lace your fingers through hers, and push her back, softly, onto the bed. "Ask me," you say.

"Ask you what?"

"If I want to kiss."

Her head raises, eyes opening and catching just a little light. "Do you want to kiss?" she whispers.

“Not until after,” you say, climbing onto the bunk, feeling your way past all the zippers that don’t matter, to the only one that does. “I want to do something for you first.”

She watches you slip off her pants, watches as you lower your head before her, and breathes, “Yes.”

You find yourself slipping into the rhythm you had with your ex-girlfriend, but the Canadian girl does not respond in the same ways. You don’t know if she is too drunk or if you are a bad lover, but when she finally tugs at your shoulders you know she has given up on you.

She says it’s okay, that she appreciates the effort, and she proves this to you by returning the favor, though her mouth is too soft, too hollow, and you’ve had too much to drink. In the end, she crawls back up to you and uses her hand. “Like that,” she keeps checking and re-checking, her breath stale with alcohol. And when, finally, it is time, you begin kissing her until the warmth spreads across her hand and she sighs in your mouth, breaks off the kiss and whispers, “There you go.”

After, you slip back to your bunk and see her form relax into sleep above you. Hours later, when the Scots return, you close your eyes and feign sleep. You hear one Scotswoman tell the other, “See, he just came back and passed out.”

When they have all settled into their bunks, settled into the open-mouthed sleep of the drunk, you stuff everything you can feel in the darkness into your pack. You carry your sandals, knowing bare feet are quieter, and slip out the door.

In the morning, the Scots will wonder where you are and if you’ve gone. The Canadian girl will realize that she never caught your name, that she only knows you as the ugly American. She may wonder who exactly you are, and as you sit aboard the first train to Amsterdam, promising yourself nothing but battlefields and museums from now on, you try not to wonder this too. ■

JOELLEN CRAFT

THE FIRST OF MANY DECISIONS

I wait with the dog by the bridge.

Crossing makes him nervous.

I have a poem
where I build a bridge myself. It ends,

“Now

bring me water.”

The dog stops. There’s another dog in the tall grass hunting.

The others in my poem
are hidden from me.

I’d like some place

to finish, but he barks
when anyone comes near.

YOU AS TWO MEN IN ONE CANOE

Two men in one canoe
paddle, each to his own pulse,
elbowing the slushy dawn.

They cut through fog.
Each holds half the night
in his mouth. One tastes

the hare still, one dwells
on the fur's soft give.
They scrape ashore,

hoist their craft overhead,
bear it high, water
rilling from the hull,

run through the brush
arms up, run
bow-boned as wolves,

run like light carves
trees thin, carves day
to a weapon's spring,

run full
of low knocks, peering
from the keel, run

sure as a man
who steadies the horizon

that bears his path—

I have gold,

I have guns with inlaid pearl.

I would learn your names.

I hear your drums all night.

WE ARE EACH PART OF THE TRAIN

We are each part of the train
when the pistons and the throttle
we are each part of the train
when the boxcars of scrap metal

when the pistons and the throttle
where grooved iron flywheel tandem
when the boxcars of scrap metal
where the high, hurt sound

where grooved iron flywheel tandem
then the spreading field's pale body
where the high, hurt sound
then the mountain's chest pierced for us

then the spreading field's pale body
if the fast and if the true
then the mountain's chest pierced for us
if cold air, if bright

if the fast and if the true
if it stays, if or
if cold air, if bright
if I stand, if I

if it stays, if or
how the blood and all the organs
if I stand, if I
how the humming how an answer

how the blood and all the organs
beat, run
how the humming how an answer
beat, through

beat, run
we are each part of the train
beat, through
we are each part of the train

ON RELATIVITY

I

Einstein understood light and could
use it to explain cause and effect.
I know while I'll never understand relativity,
I can still accept light as constant.
They say write what you know.

II

I know you,
like a childhood language or favorite coffee mug
you are familiar to me.
There are mornings when your silence creeps
onto my side of the bed.

III

You keep Excedrin in your desk,
your car, your back pocket.
10 years, 4 jobs and 6 relationships later
you still get headaches
but remain a hopeless romantic.

IV

There are 6.6 billion people on the planet. Right now
108 million are smoking a cigarette while
24 million are having sex. Out of these
only 7.2 consider it making love though
not necessarily with each other.
6.6 billion yous and I prefer the pronoun we.

V

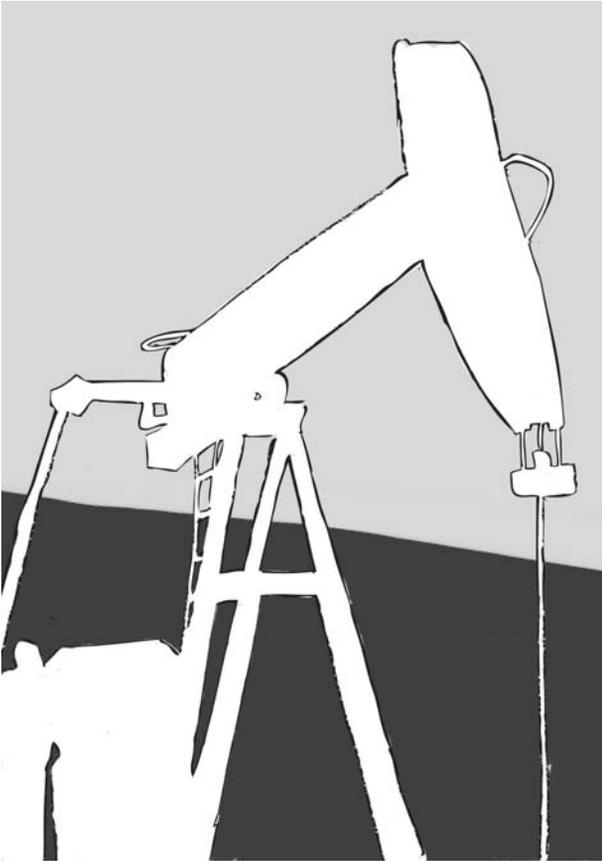
We've been around over a quarter million years.
28 thousand generations and yet
you still watch the news
with a sense of urgency.

VI

3.4 million people
suffer from depression
and every two seconds
one of them attempts suicide.

VII

I made the coffee in silence this morning
as you inched into our kitchen.
As I unloaded the dishwasher
you picked up my old cabbage patch mug
and for the first time
I looked up.



*She turns to the passenger seat. "It doesn't
look that high to me at all."*

PUMPJACK

Andrew and Laura are thirty feet up. They are cousins and in love, or at least Laura is. She insists on Thursday afternoon sex, and so every week they climb a rusted ladder to the maintenance deck of the family's pumpjack, the only one still bobbing over a live oil well and the only place she thinks they are safe. From the ground, the pumpjack looks like a giant cartoon grasshopper with a painted face and twin rotors thick as jumper's thighs. The swaying body blocks the entangled couple from the road, though Andrew claims that they don't need to hide. He thinks that most people know, but he still parks his pickup at the base of the collection tanks so no one will see his truck.

Other pumpjacks are rusted in arthritic poses across the four-acre section, and sometimes they shudder in the wind. There are twenty of them — all dead, but Laura can still remember when the air around the entire field wavered with natural gas fumes. She can remember seeing the first derrick light from the home place right after her daddy and Andrew's father plowed under their cotton right after her mother died. She remembers spending all the time with her father, Andrew, and Andrew's father Silas when the oil companies came in. But Andrew can't.

"Well?" He clears his throat and makes an act of fumbling with the blanket. He keeps it in his pick-up cab and always brings it to lay over the deck. Laura ignores it. She also ignores him because he laughed at her when one of the ladder rungs broke and she fell back to the ground. The seat of her Levis is coated in mud and crude oil, and the smell makes her eyes water. When they were ten, she

would've punched Andrew so hard he would've vomited, and then she would have told her father and they would have had a good laugh. Now, she sees very little of her father Lyndon, though she still lives in his house. He is more secretive than she is, and he glares at her if she is home on Wednesday afternoons. Laura is certain that he doesn't know about her and Andrew, but she knows without any doubt that Andrew's father has found them out. Silas is in the High Plains nursing home after a stroke. But even then his face is still supple enough to register disgust when he sees his niece. For Andrew he attempts smiles, jerking his head in the direction of a pretty nurse named Mandy, who flirts with Andrew. He flirts back.

"You know," Andrew says after clearing his throat again, "if I lit a match, those would be some real hot pants."

"You don't say." Laura kicks the platform with the toe of her work boot. When she turns, the wind nudges her dark hair from its ponytail. Her hair is thick, and she knows that it's Andrew's favorite thing about her. When they were thirteen, he was fascinated to discover that she washed it with Mane and Tail, a shampoo used for horses, though the family never owned livestock. He was watching her shower when he told her that he liked her hair best. This knowledge causes Laura to wear it long even though she is well over thirty.

Andrew reaches out and takes a handful of her hair in his fist and pulls her head back. At first Laura resists, tightening her grip on the rail, but then she allows herself to be pulled. She stomps her feet on the platform and the sound echoes. "I wish your hands were clean," she says. She keeps her face turned straight ahead.

"They are," Andrew says. "I have hand sanitizer in the truck. I scrubbed before I climbed."

"Yeah, but then you climbed."

Andrew smirks, and pulls on the waist of her jeans. An oil splatter has run down the inseam of her right leg. "Your pants are ruined."

"I can use them as rags."

"I wonder about your underwear." He slips his hand into the back of her pants into her panties. He grabs one cheek and squeezes.

"I can smell the rust on your hands," Laura says as she tries to wiggle away from him. "Now, you're getting rust all over my ass."

"And such a pure-as-driven-snow ass it is." Though his movement is restrained by her waist band, he attempts to spank her. Laura drives an elbow in his rib cage and frees herself from his grip.

Once when they were sixteen and goofing on Boone's Strawberry Hill on another maintenance deck of another pumpjack, Andrew bet an entire bottle that she couldn't hurt him. He was in training for football then, and sometimes Silas made him roughneck on the weekends. He had rolled up one sleeve and showed it to Laura, flexing and kissing his bicep.

"Go ahead," he said, "show me what you got."

Laura hit him so hard Andrew grabbed his arm.

"Is that all?" he said, and without warning, she socked him again, only harder. His entire body shifted on the platform and his cap fell off. He laughed and Laura punched him so that his nose ran.

"You're gonna hurt yourself," he said. He wasn't smiling any more, and he asked to see her fist.

"No," she said. She had had it poised and ready to strike again, but she saw Andrew's cheeks begin to flush. She had watched the blush grow to claim his entire face, and she discovered the thing she loved most about him: those red cheeks. They were like Cupid's on a Valentine's Day card he had once given her in elementary school, a pristine candy-apple red that only appeared on Valentine's Day. Everyone else gave her cards with Looney Tunes characters, but Andrew had given her an actual card with embossed letters and a real envelope. The other kids had seen the flashing red foil of the envelope's liner, and they tried to make up songs where most of the words rhymed with cousin. Then one of the girls told one of the boys that Andrew and Laura took baths together and another sort of kidding began that the teacher had to break up. Both Laura and An-

drew had blushed, and Laura had to own up to the fact that she had told Beth Grier she had painted Andrew's penis green with a Marks-a-Lot a few years before.

As an adult, Andrew's still looked cherubic when hurt or embarrassed. Laura knew it was the real reason he had never lasted on any rig crews. He claimed that the family's position had made him into somewhat of a target and that he really didn't like roughnecking as a life's choice anyway. Silas and her father had bought a few of their own rigs after so many of the early wells came in, and had started their own small business. Though it would never compete with the larger outfits, it was something, and Laura could imagine how a boss's son might find himself the butt of jokes. Her father had sympathized, putting Andrew to work in the business trailer with Laura instead, even when Silas protested. He wanted Andrew to work his way up, learn the ropes, and think up different ways of drilling. He wanted the family's name attached to something more than second-hand equipment. He wanted Andrew to use his degree. Andrew spent his time in the office, leaning back in one of the swivel chairs and looking out field side of the trailer, away from the rig. He wore clean pressed shirts and threw paper clips at Laura as she looked over the books or wrote out checks.

Laura knew Andrew simply couldn't bluff, even though he could fight well enough to win more than he lost. He fought all the time, a habit he picked up first in elementary school and then later when their classmates made kissing sounds and obscene gestures with their fingers. Laura had been the better fighter, even in high school when only a few of the boys reached her 6'3" height, but she let Andrew take the black eyes for both of them. The fights didn't change anything for Laura. She never had any friends in school: the stories about her and Andrew were shocking enough to keep potential friends away. She spent most of her time with her father and with Andrew when he was home. He always seemed to find someone to pal with—even if it was the twenty-one-year-old redneck still in high school.

He even dated a couple of girls before Laura found out and beat him up herself. Andrew was just too sensitive.

Lately, the punches and jabs she means to be playful are fierce. Not only has Andrew been flirting with Nurse Mandy, but Laura suspects that he has stepped out with Jody Maines, a candidate for the High Plains Oil Queen title, and ex-rodeo queen who used to ride around an arena, the American flag in one hand, the Texas in another, the horse's reins in her mouth. As the Vice President of the High Plains Oilfield Association, Andrew is in a strategic position to help Jody win the crown. She has seen Jody—a hundred-and-forty pounds of boobs and stomach—caress her cousin's belt buckle as she flashes sparkling blue eyelids at him. Laura cannot be sure, though. Jody has cooed at Lyndon, the Association's president, pushing her upper arms against her boobs so they pop at her throat. Laura has shaken her finger at her father—in a mock warning manner, but to Andrew she has balled up a fist. "Don't you even think about it," she says and hits him as hard as she can on the shoulder.

It is Laura who finally spreads the blanket onto the deck. She has watched the red face, and she feels guilty. They undress side by side, and Andrew does not blink as she removes her breasts from each cup. He grasps one, squeezing until she slaps his hand away, and leaves a rust red hand print. He licks a thumb in an attempt to remove it, but he has not clipped the nail in a while and the edge leaves a broken circle as he traces over the puckered gooseflesh of her nipple. Laura shivers.

"Does that feel good?" Andrew says, applying more pressure.

"Not really."

"Then why'd you get all shivery?"

"Because it's my nipple. It's sort of sensitive."

"I should think you would enjoy it, then." Andrew folds his thumb back into his palm and traces Laura's breast with his index finger. When more goose bumps appear, he blows on her skin.

"I enjoy that." Laura closes her eyes, but just as suddenly Andrew stops and starts unfastening his jeans. His eyes are focused on Laura's breast where a pink welt has risen, and he doesn't look at what he's doing. He grabs his jeans and the elastic of his boxer shorts in both fists and jerks them down. His gesture is so forced that he rocks the platform, and Laura grabs a rail, avoiding his feet as he tugs the denim over his knees. With her other hand, she keeps the pile of clothes she has folded from falling.

"Easy," she says. "I'm not going anywhere."

Andrew has not removed his boots, and they get caught in his jeans. Laura notices the problem first and laughs. She tickles the flesh of his exposed thigh and then runs a fingernail beneath his boxers. "Payback's a bitch, isn't it," she says.

"Just help me."

"Maybe I will, and maybe I won't." Laura twirls a lock of pubic hair around a finger and pulls.

"Okay, okay," Andrew says. "I'm sorry."

"Sure you are." She works the pants far back enough so that she grips the sole of one shoe, but the denim curls in a tight ring at his ankles. Andrew does nothing to help. As she tries another angle, she thinks of Mandy who had to strip Silas when he got tangled in his wind suit. She cut him out with a pair of shears. Andrew and her father left the room, but Laura had held her uncle so he wouldn't tip forward onto the floor. She had been embarrassed of his old man's underwear that gapped over his thin legs, his balls visible from all sides. Silas grew agitated when he caught Laura staring. He struggled against her, and Mandy had asked Andrew into the room to take Laura's place. Andrew's hand had found its way onto Mandy's ass. Laura's father had snickered and said, "That's Andrew for you," and Laura had snapped at him, telling him to not be so crude, and her father got mad and had followed her down the hallway and out into the parking lot. But when he caught up with her—she had been

stretching her stride, almost running—he didn't say anything. He told her to let Andrew be.

It occurs to Laura that Andrew has fucked Mandy by now, just as she figured he fucked Jody. Laura's threats haven't worked, and the thought makes her sick to her stomach, a sensation she has rarely felt. She was only slightly nauseated the first time with Andrew in the family's deserted migrant barracks. They were fifteen, and though Andrew hadn't followed her into the old building for that purpose, Laura had suggested it for the very reason. She had laid out old feed sacks beforehand in a corner, and grabbed his crotch, the way she had seen a woman do it on a satellite channel. Andrew hadn't wanted to, even though he enjoyed watching her shower and play with herself. He even enjoyed kissing her, but he had initially been shy about his own nudity. When she pulled his pants down that first time, he locked his hands over his penis and turned his legs inward so that he stood before her pigeon-toed. She laughed and punched him in the stomach so he would grab his stomach instead.

The first time hadn't lasted long, of course. He had barely pushed into her before he was done and vomiting into a corner. She hadn't had time to think *This is my cousin* while it was going on. It had hurt too bad, and when she dabbed at the blood on her thigh, she was sick to her stomach more because she heard Andrew throwing up, not because she thought of him as a close relative. She couldn't get her mind around it when she tried to hug him, and he turned to her crying and shouting that she was his cousin. He had this look on his face like when he had seen a dog carcass left by a wildcat. The dog had been ripped open, throat to groin, and its organs were bloated and pink on the dirt. The wildcat had not eaten very much before it had been scared off. The coyotes hadn't eaten either, though their tracks said they had circled a couple of times. Not even the buzzards dipped down to the body, and Andrew had been terrified that the dog was still a dog and not skin and scattered bones. He had wanted to bury it, but he couldn't look at it long enough to grab its legs and

lower it into a hole. Laura burned the dog when Andrew went to the truck and laid his head into his arms.

When she can't get Andrew out of his pants, Laura pushes him back. He says nothing, but he grabs her hips. Her hair comes out of the ponytail and hangs in his face. He doesn't brush her hair away, and he inhales so that a little of it is sucked into his nostrils and then out again. Laura's hair coils over his head so that he is covered completely. She tips forward – rotating her hip – and bites him hard on the shoulder until he complains. She tries for blood, but he pinches her hip with equal pressure to make her stop. And she does, lifting her head to see sunlight glinting off the pump. She is so close that she can't focus, but she watches the blurred rivets anyway, her eyes crossing involuntarily.

She stays like that for awhile, looking and not looking at the pump, moving enough to chaff her knees where the blanket has slipped when Andrew tries to lift her.

"Hey," he says and slaps her ass when she doesn't respond.

"What?" She grabs her hair with both hands.

"There's someone coming," Andrew says. He smiles.

"Uh, yeah," Laura says. She giggles, but Andrew shakes his head.

"See for yourself." He gestures out to the pumpjack field, and Laura sees a red pick-up turn off the coleche road onto their land.

"Shit," Laura whispers. She covers her chest with one arm and pulls at Andrew's pants with the other.

Andrew doesn't move. He smiles up at her. "What's the rush?"

"It might be Dad," she says. She struggles with the denim until it rips.

"So, I guess I've ruined a pair of jeans today, too," Andrew says. He laughs, tries to catch Laura's eye, but she reaches for her clothes.

"Get dressed," she says, struggling with her bra. She turns it so that the hook is in front, fastens it, and then twists it around. It's looped, though, and she can't get her arms in the shoulder straps. She twists the elastic until her bra makes two complete circles around

her ribcage as she looks for the problem. Andrew unfastens it, straightens it for her, and holds the shoulder straps so she can fit one arm in at a time.

"Why don't you ever put your underwear on first?" he says. He pulls his pants up to his waist very slowly and examines the tear.

Laura exhales as an answer, shakes her head.

"Seriously. Why not?"

"Do you really want to talk about this now?" Laura says. She is about to put her t-shirt on over her head, but she stops and grabs her panties. She stands, thinks better of it, afraid the pickup's driver will see her, and she sits on a corner of the blanket.

"I just noticed. It seems like you would be more concerned about that," he says and gestures in the direction of her crotch with a smile.

"Should I be concerned?"

"No."

"Then what?" Laura lies down to pull her jeans on. "Why does it matter?"

"Well, the whole getting caught with your pants down thing." Andrew buttons his jeans without looking and then zips the fly. "It just seems you'd be more embarrassed to be that kind of naked."

"And what about boobs? Boobs don't matter."

"They matter, but you can see them on TV, you know." Andrew speaks as he pulls his t-shirt is over his head, so his voice is muffled. "In magazines."

Laura, dressed except for her shoes, helps Andrew straighten his t-shirt so that it covers the rip. She looks back over her shoulder for the pickup. It fishtails down the turnrow in a large figure eight around two old pumpjacks. There hasn't been a rain in several months, so the dust cloud is solid and opaque red when the brake lights flash.

"Don't worry," Andrew says. He glances at the vehicle and back at Laura. "They can't see us."

"Yeah, but what are they doing here?" She starts to whisper. "Who is it?"

Andrew shrugs and speaks more loudly than normal. "Probably people wanting to get laid." He kicks her in the side until she turns to look at him. "You know."

"Yes, I know," Laura says, still whispering. The truck slows as it approaches their pumpjack. The headlights are on, so it's difficult to make out the driver, but Laura can hear the faint sound of music. "Just be quiet," she says.

"What?" Andrew cups a hand around his mouth and yells.

"Stop," Laura says. She forces a hand over his mouth.

Beneath her hand, Andrew mumbles. "It's not a big deal. Everyone knows."

"Shut up."

The truck's engine shuts off, and the driver opens the door slowly so there is a long, drawn out whine. Jody Maines steps out. Her blonde hair is rolled in large barrel curls, and she is wearing a rodeo queen outfit: black Wranglers and a snap-front Western shirt with red sequined roses curling across her chest. Her torso is ample, but she has tucked her stomach into her jeans, fastened with a silver conch belt. Jody puts her hands in her back pocket and rocks back and forth. She glares up at the pumpjack.

"It doesn't look that high to me," she says. She turns to the passenger seat. "It doesn't look that high to me at all."

Laura's father opens the passenger door and steps down from his seat. He is wearing a shirt similar to Jody's except that the red sequins form flames instead of roses. The thin flap of hair over his scalp is hardened with Brylcream, and he wears a large turquoise-studded belt buckle. He slams the door behind him, placing his free hand on his stomach.

Laura can tell he is holding his gut in. She turns to Andrew, who refuses to look at her, and then back to her father. His boots are polished, his pants freshly pressed so that the crease is straight and white all the way down to the hem.

"You'll change your mind once you get up there," Lyndon says.

"I doubt it."

"Get with it then," Lyndon says.

Jody makes a show of prancing to the pumpjack ladder, wiggling her hips, and when Lyndon whistles, she runs to him and kisses him on his bare forehead.

"What are you looking at, old man," she says, tracing a finger along his belt buckle.

Lyndon looks at the ground and clears his throat. "I don't know," he says finally, and then reaches back into the pickup bed to lift out a blanket. The gesture is clumsy. He bumps Jody so that she stumbles and brushes up against the truck's side. Laura is certain that he is blushing, though she is not close enough to tell. She taps Andrew on the shoulder, but his eyes are closed.

"Did you know about this?" she whispers. Andrew doesn't act like he hears, and the skin at the corner of his eyes crinkles as he clamps his eyelids tighter together.

Lyndon drops the blanket into the dirt, and when he and Jody both bend to retrieve it, they bump heads.

"I'm sorry," Lyndon says. He opens the truck door, blanket now unfolded, and climbs back in.

"You do this every time," Jody says. She puts her hand on the door so that if he closes it, he will crush her hand. "It's ok."

Lyndon says something that Laura can't understand, and then she sees him shake his head in silhouette from inside the cab.

"Oh, no you don't." Jody plants her feet in the dirt and tugs on his arm. She is successful in dragging him partially out of the truck. Lyndon is laughing now, allowing himself to be pulled, and when Jody jerks her head at the blanket, he grabs it in one hand.

"There you go," Jody says, speaking calmly as if to a horse. "Easy now." She pretends to pull him toward the pumpjack. "Easy."

"Andrew," Laura says. She smacks his forehead with an open palm, not loud enough to make a sound, but hard enough to make him open his eyes.

Andrew looks at her and cringes. "Yes," he says. "I knew about it."

Laura opens her mouth, then closes it. Andrew shrugs.

Lyndon is following Jody, towing the blanket in the dirt. When she gets to the ladder, Jody turns, and Lyndon moves his hand to her hip. "Now you keep it right there," she says.

"Yes, ma'am."

Laura stands as Jody puts a foot onto the first rung. "What are you doing?" she yells.

Jody freezes with one foot poised on the ladder and her hands gripping the rail. Lyndon's hand stays where it is, but he doesn't look up.

"What are you doing?" Laura says again. She hovers over the ladder so that her hair droops into masses on either side of her neck.

"Hey, Jody," Andrew says. He stands beside and a little behind Laura.

"Hey, Andy." Jody lowers her foot back to the ground and drops her hands. She looks at Laura. "How are you?"

"Good. And you?"

"Never better." Jody smiles without showing teeth or blinking. "Laura."

"Jody," Laura says.

Lyndon removes his hand from Jody's ass and starts to fold the blanket. Laura can tell now that he's blushing.

"What are y'all doing out here?" Jody says, moving her hands to her hips. Lyndon clears his throat again.

Laura doesn't answer. She looks back at Andrew who speaks for her, "Pumpjack riding."

Jody laughs too loud. Laura notices that her eye teeth are very white as compared to the rest of her smile. "Oh. Pumpjack riding." She looks to Lyndon, but the scowl on his face forces her to stop laughing so she turns back to Andrew and Laura. "Pumpjack riding."

"Yeah," Laura says. She flips her hair behind her shoulders, but it falls back.

"Why didn't you ever take me pumpjack riding, Andy?" Jody says. She raises an eyebrow, purses her lips.

Lyndon grips her upper arm. "We're leaving," he says.

Jody shakes Lyndon off. "Why not, Andy?"

Andrew laughs and pretends to scratch his head. "Well . . ."

Lyndon finally looks up and meets Laura's eyes. He isn't frowning anymore, and the corner of his lips jerk in a brief smile as he glances at Andrew and then to her. She feels sick to her stomach.

"Laura, why does Andy only take you pumpjack riding?" Jody says. She is almost purring now.

"Jesus, Jody," Laura says. She moves so suddenly that one of her shoes falls from the platform and onto the ground by Jody. "It's just pumpjack riding." She climbs easily onto the pump from the platform. Her long arms and legs wrap around the neck of the machine and she slides from side to side trying to maintain her balance. The gears stall, then work to support the extra weight, moving faster than before. Laura crosses her ankles and wrists, and lays the side of her face against the metal top. Her cheeks are smudged with grease, her mouth is slack.

"Laura," Andrew yells. He reaches out to touch her, but he is too hesitant and only brushes a boot. Laura doesn't answer. She doesn't even blink. The metal is cold on her face and the world bounces in her vision. She knows she should close her eyes so she won't be sick but she can't. She can make out Jody's spangles and her father's flames. She can see one of Andrew's red cheeks.

She remembers when Silas and her father plowed over the last cotton crop and disked the field flat so that a series of semis could transport the derrick in in pieces. The tower was up within twenty-four hours, splitting the horizon. She and Andrew came every day after school to stare up at it and the men climbing the ladders. She held his hand when a roughneck wiggled thick eyebrows at her and

climbed onto a platform with a lit cigarette hanging from his mouth. He turned to her every minute or so to wave and tip the ashes as he climbed higher and higher. When the well finally came in, there were only a few spurts of liquid and Uncle Silas said, "Is that all?" A pumpjack replaced the derrick and lasted ten years.

Laura is not immediately aware that Andrew straddles the pumps and clasps her jeans. He is trying to pull her back onto the platform, but he can't get a good grip. He reaches for her waist and belt, but her legs are too long even as they are folded around the machine. Lyndon shouts up at them, pacing on the ground.

Andrew finally grabs a belt loop, but Laura gags and slips. She dangles on the pump by her thick arms, her eyes closed and her mouth held in a thin slash across her face. Andrew calls to her, but she falls to the ground just out of the way of the pump's trajectory. She is disoriented, shaking and kicking, not sure where to move, and Andrew is airborne.

He will break his ankle when he lands, but he will not know it because as soon as he hits the ground he is pulling Laura away. Jody and Lyndon rush to help, each lifting a corner of her body and transferring her to Jody's truck. Andrew rubs at a speck of oil on her face, but smears it instead. When he tries to kiss her, she pushes him away, looking at her father.

"Are you sick?" she says. She balls up a fist and hits him as hard as she can in the gut. He bends over, almost to his knees. "I'm your cousin," she yells. "Your cousin." When Andrew looks at her again, his face is white. Jody puts an arm around his shoulders, and he rests his weight on her as he turns and limps away.

"It's okay, Laura," Lyndon whispers. He covers her in the blankets, tucking it up around her chin. "I knew," he says. "We've all known." He pats her shoulder, feeling for broken bones, and then follows Laura's gaze as she watches Andrew and Jody vanish around the pumpjack and the collection tanks to his truck. ■

Thank You, Steel China: Chapter Two

BORN AFTER DEATH

I was over her as I was over being alive.
I thought for years something else would happen
Then I sat up. It took one week to stop loving her.
It was a comfortable week that never came.
I thought she couldn't menstruate without me.
I was trying to put her to sleep
with all the things she promised not to do in my absence.
I wanted to replace the walls with photographs
of different walls she hadn't leaned on.
I threw all her dreams on the floor and called them
ugly pop culture lubrication.
I spray painted my face to kill nutrition.
I still had her goose bumps taped to my goose bumps.
I was called bitch in a chorus of hyenas
when the heads on my wall ran out of ideas of what to be.
No wonder they never bothered learning anyone's name.
They built this museum in imitation of sweatpants.
I mean ribcages. They built this museum
in praise of looking down.

GHETTOS ARRANGED TO STAY GHETTOS

Steel China agglomerates money from the blood of her citizens.
I sold my crying for the names of people
that were killed in search of who I loved.
Trumpets filled with steak sounded off inside the mass grave.
Paintings of I'm Sorry were shot from cannons twenty-four hours a
day.
The celebration, the middling meat, the sperm of those who
loved her from better angles, crowded as the street two blocks
away
where animals sold the hide fresh off their backs.
I squeezed the seller's gums until the seller was me.
Different species said that I smelled like a tumor of constant bitch.
I began to hate anyone who looked different.

Toward a megaphone her voice held warm confetti.
I'm Sorry bestrode a lawn chair above the roofs
bathed in money and looking down.
I was below the point of talking but could enlist.
They gave her her own army when she developed breasts.
I demanded to be its general and was cleaning toilets by sunrise.
From the tickle her presence waved
through boot camp, I knew where to kill.
After graduation, the vents were clogged with so much confetti
three janitors died.

VOICEMAIL MESSAGES FOR I'M SORRY

I dialed I'm Sorry so much her secretary died:

My dreams are having rigor mortis without you in them.

Please save me from being saved.

I miss you at variable ratios.

How I miss you involves my extinction and so much less.

If I saw more of the world with your money

I could make you love me back for at least ten minutes.

Please get hypodermic on my shift again.

I need to watch you pale or the moon gets it.

Alright. Your name is stupid. I say it all day.

I miss you more than childhood.

I can contract just as good a case of tuberculosis as any boy.

I didn't think you knew I raped you until you woke up saying
father.

Why are you with other people when I'm leaving such good
messages?

I will give you a list of reasons why you are coming back.

I know, if I really loved you the world would stop existing.

I'm working on it.

If you love me back I will stop the world from happening.

Promise.

When I call again I will be the man your life grew up around.

You will mail me a plane and all your blankets will be outdated.

JUST TO BE ASSHOLES

In Paraguay, our clits grew to the size of motor oil
and I remembered my parents. We bit a woman until her husband
laid down with us and we stopped having relatives.
We were chased by a pack of slave labor Walt Disney drawings.
We helped change the jaws of the babies of Paraguay.
Before we got there they had never suffered any Lugar Automatic
Pistol damage.
Even our own t-shirts wouldn't support the revolution.
I told Pico that war is heck. "My name is not Pico," Pico said.
Pico mailed I'm Sorry all his mosquito bites and was given the
Purple Heart.
We took turns stuffing him up the entire woods.
Our gunpowder mixed with heroin was wearing off
which meant bullets could touch us
and that rich people weren't our friends.
We disconnected all the doorbells in Paraguay.
When our supplies ran out, we were sent lip gloss and cell phone
batteries.
We were sent screen pics of pre-packaged meals.
Our fleas began to starve.
There were rumors I started that I'm Sorry never existed,
that we fought for a machine, that only I could speak machine, or
love.
Just to be assholes, we threw a parade.

MARCHING FOR A CAUSE SONG # 903

I've come to lick the airport out of your hair.
I've come to play Spades in your eyelid.
I've come to teach you how prisoners dance.

You will cry before the museum closes.
Your tears will smell like carpentry.
Thanks.

I've come to scream in your pocket.
I've come to swim on your doorstep.
I've come to build a statue of your arms.

You will play jump rope with my DNA.
Your head will stink like grinning.
I only touch cancer patients.

I've come to come on your light bulb.
I've come to whistle in your sister.
I've come to perform because I hate you.

You will drive a car more expensive than my life.
Your motor will be a groin of baptisms.
Arrested for honking at yourself.

I've come to extract the prayer from your corneas.
I've come to sing about the glory of Kmart.
I've come to shotgun the couples.

You will crack me open like a pale vice.
Your tongue will send roses.

SEAN KILPATRICK

Roses of please die.
I've come to bury you in piss mold.
I've come with my hospital beard.
I've come to shed at you.

You will fake a bowel movement for Jesus.
Your pseudo-Jewish hat will never be funny.
Don't live in my direction.

I've come to won't in your haven't done.
I've come to disturb contemporary vaccines with culture.
I've come to sin in your face-water.

ANTI-PROCREATION SQUAD

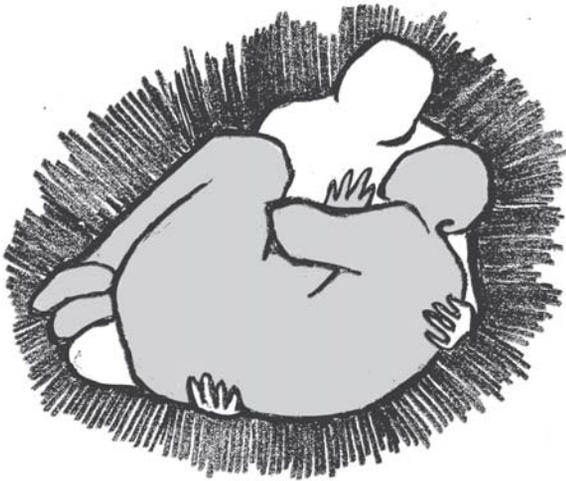
I was flown to South America to poke fun at natives.
I arrived with a suitcase of giant foam hands.
I painted the hands black because black people's hands are funnier
than mine.
I was tied to a tree and high-five'd all day.
I told the kids erotic tales about birth control.
They cut me down and I slapped everyone with both foam hands.
I chased them into the same hut and yelled about anal sex.
I replaced their gods, one by one, with my giant hands.
In the dark, I built a fire and put my hands in.
They became stiff long fingers that drew a clock
in the dirt and we wound it back to stop our births.

We shared some corporate AIDS and went nice.
We became pregnant and starving. Our stomachs balanced out.
We wrote hamburger poems in an empty television.
We sang around the fire. We sang on purpose.
We rhymed by accident. We hated signing.
When we sang, we covered each other's ears.

We were raped by soldiers until we choked up
all the cardboard we had ever eaten.

Then a moralist photographer arrived and conducted
vital research while raping adolescent bullet wounds
in the name of courage.

"Give me 'Squiggling Botulism Pussy'
for the cover of *Time*. 'Loud Mom Face.'
Give me all your 'This Is Wrong.'"



*From the moment of that decision I was Max Feldstein
and Max Feldstein was not I.*

FELDSTEIN AND HUNCH

I am Max Feldstein, but my name is Todd Hunch. I am Max Feldstein because one day while strolling the city I tripped over a small child and fell into the arms of Max Feldstein. Now he is everything to me. Max with his unusually horizontal face, curly short cropped hair, and checkerboard cufflinks that reflected the sunlight into my eyes, partially blinding me for an instant and making my smile into what Max probably saw as an ugly grimace. This is how he knows me, how he sees me, how he remembers me: a falling idiot not gracious enough to respond to his generosity.

His name is Max Feldstein (I think) and he is everything to me. What I am not, he is. Max Feldstein and me, Todd Hunch. There is no magic in the world anymore. The alchemists have grown modern and old and turned to pawnbroking. But their legacy is everlasting: I will turn this Hunch into a Feldstein, this paltry Todd into Max. The shit of me will go gold. I need this new existence to exonerate the one I am about to shake off my back.

My destitute mistress told me in bed: "You are not Max Feldstein. Any more than I am Max Feldstein." But a scheme was already unraveling in my head. In order for me to become Max Feldstein I simply had to become Max Feldstein: this was the easy part. The difficulty lay in convincing others I was Max Feldstein.

Five Reasons Why

1. Max Feldstein has inconceivable wealth, and though I'm not a stickler for privilege I do care very much about how I am perceived.

2. Max and I look startlingly alike; but for the comb of his wavy hair and sporty clothes he is my double. My doppelganger and my fetch. The other I.

3. I am not contented with Todd Hunch, nor with his mistress Claudine. They live in a one bedroom apartment with potted plants and a single bathroom. The TV is always on, though muted, because Todd and his mistress are conspired against by silence. At any moment a conversation may occur.

4. Todd Hunch works as an electrician. He is unionized, routinized, mechanized, walks to work and sulks back, plagued by middle-class demons of his own conjuring, static and hectic, quiet and loud. Attends union meetings that quickly turn orgiastic with booze and thinly disguised homosexual overtones. At home he nukes his dinner and drinks his breakfast with a straw. On the other hand, Max Feldstein is what? A broker? A publisher, man of the world, cocaine distributor? Film director, producer, fruit tycoon? Prince in exile of a small island in the Pacific (the natives, jealous of his riches and beautiful wife, formed a primitive coup. Max's majordomo, faithful to the last, though sharing the island people's blood, got wind of the plot and informed his master. Max escaped by helicopter to the mainland. Suddenly, about to duck under the rotars, he realized that he's forgotten his wife in the tumult. He returned in the dress of the islanders as a seller of knives, managed to cross the entire island during heavy rainfall, and, with wife in hand, made his second escape, pursued by arrows and ungodly taunts and curses). Whoever Max Feldstein is.

5. I am not happy.

Physical Description

Max Feldstein has a long face and a wide jaw; both replicate my own only too well.

His eyes are blue. My eyes are blue.

Max's voice is a hollow bass. So is mine.

Max stands six feet four inches in low shoes; I miss this height by a quarter of an inch, far too close, fortunately to be mistaken for Todd Hunch.

Max Feldstein has a square mole on the right side of his forehead, just beneath his hairline, which he always forgets to shave. It is not a coincidence that I suffer the same mark, but on the opposite side, so that if I were standing in front a mirror, we would be identical in our shared attribute.

Max dresses appropriately for every occasion: suit, red tie, loafers. His leisure days are spent trying to attire himself in such a way as to appear at leisure. (Note: when I am Max Feldstein I must enforce my business dress with a silver-plated walking stick. That should be enough. Whether he carries one or not, no one would suspect my fraud, and actually, I would be more Max Feldstein if I enhanced his style.

On Personality

Max is outgoing, sociable, amiable to strangers. Due to his status he is unconcerned and unafraid of rejection. I am none of these things but they can be learned quickly if one grasps at the power he has learned to exude so effortlessly. He would do anything for someone in need and that makes him feel even more secure. Yet, to anyone who chastises or in any way abuses his righteousness he is brutally judgmental. Like god, or a troubled angel.

My destitute mistress remains at my side because she is destitute and ethically terrified of social experimentation with others. She is becoming by the minute more indifferent towards me, though she probably doesn't realize this; if she did, she would never say as much. We barely speak now, have taken different shifts at our respective jobs — she is a hairdresser or a hairdresser's assistant.

Of course I cannot know how Max and his wife respond to one another, what they talk about in the morning over eggs and French-pressed, fair trade coffee, their favorite sexual positions, how many

times they eat out in a week. Mrs. Feldstein is much younger than her husband, but he has the stamina of a man of my age, thirty something. His wife is a former soap opera star. She couldn't take the politics of the business, nor the producer's frequent bouts of groping female leads. After that it was nothing but hardships and disappointments: secretary for a used-car lot, barmaid, hotel maid, salesperson in a furniture emporium. A hard life. One child when she was eighteen (I guess she must have been pretty young on the set), the father a waste, trailer park, empty bottles clanging down wood stairs. The producer isn't such a bad guy in retrospect. But then she meets Max Feldstein at a party she's catering. It's a long and romantic courtship. He saves her. Sometimes she wonders about the child in the orphanage. Max Feldstein saves her life every day. I'm confident that I will make her even happier.

I had first to reconcile my wish with a steady hopefulness that it would be carried through. This I achieved by acting less and less like Todd Hunch, who I do not like one bit. Sometimes I, Todd Hunch, will alter my voice in imitation of his in a demand to be respected. In haste I am approaching the quintessence of Max Feldstein. (And he of me?)

What Occurred That Day

When he caught me in his masculine Max Feldstein-arms that summer day near the park, he said: "Are you okay? Good thing I happened to be walking by when I did." But this was Max Feldstein, Max the Unquestionable, so I could not question more and he strode off. When he was gone I said, "Huh." People were standing around, curiously staring at the odd epiphany. But had he truly been watching me before the fortunate incident, and why would he do that? Was it because we shared a likeness and he yearned to fill the abnormally large boots of Todd Hunch?

On My Poverty and Aspirations

I am very poor, sickly so. Loathed by my mistress Claudine, whom I adore and who says she adores me in turn. I would become anyone. I have a list of dozens of people I could become, from game show hosts to used carpet salesmen, influential, successful people. Anyone, really; anyone but Todd Hunch and his debilitating sadness and anxiety. To be Max Feldstein I had to *be* Max Feldstein. That has been my calling since I awoke one day, suddenly perplexed with the stark realization of Todd Hunch in my mirror and in my brain.

Obvious Problems of the Todd Hunch Method

I did not have an inkling where Max Feldstein resided, whether or not he wore a toupee, how many times he had traveled to Europe, what he desired, what was missing in his life, or if indeed his name was Max Feldstein (I had no reason to assume it was. Or wasn't.) These dilemmas made me shudder, kept my eyes floating around the ceiling far into dawn. I grew restless for some solution, and snarled meanly at all those (Claudine) who did not present one at arm's length.

Deductions from His Words

What had he said? "Are you okay. Good thing I happened to be walking by when I did." Looking around for I don't know what (the object of my stumble), and directly into the blessed clasp of Max Feldstein, a nice man. His words signified a nice man, outgoing, sociable, amiable to strangers. Did he know me personally? Max was watching all along, yes, perhaps, but had he plotted it in his spare time? What had he plotted? Had he informed his wife what he was up to while letting his eyes stray across the surface of his ceiling as he lay awake far into dawn? Was she in a position to guess? What was her role? Did she have a role? Maybe she'd been the one who egged him on. I had too many questions. Everything was a question, and questionable.

Things I Repeat to Myself About Max Feldstein

Max my all
Max my sunshine-cloud of pre-joyful memory
Max the max
Max Max Max
Max my doubt relinquished
Max the taster of moons
Max the elliptical habit of identity
Max who smells of Italian leather and peach cigars

I will put myself in the position to occupy the man's life. The reassuring thought accompanies me that I am not Max Feldstein, no, not yet, but soon. So soon I am already nearly smoking down a large cigar on the veranda where Max Feldstein currently enjoys the same. The stench of a city there below, the whirring of a scratched jazz record playing in the den, his wife preparing some tuna seasoned with red wine and sweet mustard then sprinkled with unsalted peanuts and left in the oven not too long. I can taste it already. Until then I am a mess. Nothing makes me happy except dread and I know that nothing makes me happy except dread, making me feel all the more dreadful.

E.g. My destitute mistress Claudine: "Why do you always look so unhappy?"

"Because I am," I say to her. Because I am, I say to myself. I want so badly to tell her why; tell her the whywherewhowhat, for they are all answered with the same remark: Max Feldstein.

Claudine: You don't do anything anymore. Just sit around by yourself all anxious. What are you waiting for?

Todd: Max Feldstein.

Claudine: You quit your job I can't believe it —

Todd: Max Feldstein.

Claudine: What are we going to do, Todd?

Todd: Claudine . . .

Claudine: No, Todd, what are we going to do? It's always the same thing with you. Always. It never ends.

Todd: I don't feel like myself.

Claudine: No shit.

Todd: I'm not myself lately.

Claudine: You better start —

Todd: Max Feldstein.

Claudine: What?

Todd: Max Feld —

Claudine: Who?

I've grown fond of the intimate little silences we used to inflict on each other. Now she won't stop barking at me. Claudine doesn't understand. So help me, Max, I've tried.

The Night I Broke into His House

The night I broke into his house the moon, I remember, didn't show, but the grass, I remember, bristled in the wind, pointing towards the dim curves of the secluded Feldstein mansion. For hours, until at least three in the morning, I sat on the front stoop and talked to myself by whispering into the ear of the green plastic elf next to me. His arms were reaching out in friendship. I couldn't believe Max Feldstein would have a decoration so awful, so clumsily undecorous. Must have been his wife's idea. Ridding the place of that green stump would be one of my first decisions, having moved in.

Thesis: I would climb up the drainage pipe and smash a window with my bare fist.

Antithesis: No doubt I would fall or gash my hands or face on glass.

Synthesis: Something else.

Thesis: I would muster extraordinary strength and hoist the garage door.

Antithesis: Not likely: I would invariably throw out my back due to an inconstant level of concentration and get pummeled by the heavy door, halfway in.

Synthesis: Something else.

Thesis: I could take that green fool who was listening to me and toss him clean through the window.

Antithesis: He was made of flimsy material, and even if he was successful I would never be able to explain why I had done such a thing if I was indeed Max Feldstein (which I was).

Synthesis: Something else.

All of these means and more until I heard myself say: "Why not just ring the doorbell?" It was such a mediocre entrance, one designed to be as inconspicuous as possible; nothing melodramatic about ringing a doorbell and announcing myself. From the moment of that decision I was Max Feldstein and Max Feldstein was not I.

Synthesis.

The Tricky Business of Having Discovered the Whereabouts of the Max Feldstein Residence

I typed a letter and had it placed in the local newspaper:

Dear Kind Man Who Saved Me After I'd Tripped Over
A Child,

Thank you for saving me from a certain deathly fall last week at the entrance to the park. I cannot thank you enough for what you did. After this unfortunate accident and the kindness that ensued, I feel obligated to notify you that once you had walked away and disap-

peared into the afternoon crowd, I realized that you had dropped your wallet during my rescue. It is in safekeeping, I assure you, and I have not opened it to discover where you live, as this, to my mind, would be a breach of common decency. Please respond to the post office address supplied below and I will mail your wallet ASAP.

Thank you again,

(Signed) A Grateful Person

Here is how I knew the correct letter when it appeared, since a lost anything will cause a veritable riot of responses: Max Feldstein had not lost his wallet (to my knowledge) and due to his unabridged kindness, would definitely reply that I had made a mistake and the wallet was not his.

The letter arrived in three days.

Dear Grateful Person,

I humbly appreciate your thoughtfulness in this matter. I remember the day well. However, the item must belong to another, insofar as I am holding mine in my right hand as I write. Thank you for your consideration; it is a rare thing to encounter such true selflessness.

(Signed Max Feldstein? No, but I did have a return address).

The End

I pressed the doorbell incessantly until a woman's head peeked out and the door was thrown back. The interior of the house was dark.

"I thought you were in Nashville," the woman said.

"I am," I said, "but Max Feldstein always returns to the place of his origin."

I convinced her to move away with me the next day. She found the prospect exciting. I guessed my successor had been somewhat of a snobby bore. Her wonderful name is Claudine.

That night over pickled herring I told her all about my self, what she assumed as my clandestine self (Max Feldstein apparently didn't spend much time at home) and learned from her remarks everything I needed to become Max Feldstein. Now I am a particularly resurrected Max Feldstein: a caring, adorable Max Feldstein. I also told her about Todd Hunch. A man I've always liked, a working man, a peasant if I may be blunt, but big-hearted. Enough of a man to be two men, perhaps even three. He missed out on this veranda scene. The sky a lush gray cloud. The smell of leather and cigar with a hint of peach. You're down there somewhere, Todd Hunch.

My wife comes up behind me, her green eyes glittering over a glass of sherry.

"He's down there somewhere."

"You are always trying to be someone else," she says. It's true, and I hate Max for that. ■

KATIE CORTESE

AN IDEAL PURSUIT: RON CARLSON ON WRITING,
READING AND TEACHING

*"You get to be the bad guy and the good guy in your stories:
you have to be."*

Hailed by *Booklist* as "a master of the short story," Ron Carlson is the award-winning author of five story collections and five novels, most recently *The Signal* and *Five Skies*. His short fiction has appeared in such magazines as *Harper's*, *Esquire*, *The New Yorker*, *Playboy* and *GQ* and has been featured on NPR's *This American Life* and *Selected Shorts*. A former Pushcart Prize recipient as well as a National Endowment for the Arts Fellow in Fiction, his work has been widely anthologized, including in *Best American Short Stories* and *The O. Henry Prize Stories*.

Carlson recently received the 2009 Aspen Prize for Literature, adding his name to a list of past recipients that includes Wole Soyinka, N. Scott Momaday and Salman Rushdie. In the same year, his novel *Five Skies* was selected as the 2009 Reading Across Rhode Island selection. In 2007, he published his first non-fiction book, *Ron Carlson Writes a Story*, which features one of his short stories and details the process that led to its creation in order to discuss the craft and practice of fiction writing.

Carlson taught fiction at Arizona State University from 1986 until 2006, rising to the rank of Regents' Professor. Later that same year, he became the director of the UC Irvine creative writing program and currently lives in Huntington Beach, California. Though he has

garnered praise from such publications as *Publisher's Weekly*, *The Washington Post* and *Booklist*, as well as from such writers as Rick Bass, Mark Spragg and Antonya Nelson, it is perhaps Stephen King's advice that cuts best to the chase when he suggests: "Do yourself a favor and read Ron Carlson."

The following interview took place over several email exchanges zipping across the continental United States between Florida and California in the Fall of 2009.

Katie Cortese: You've published five collections of short stories and five novels over the past thirty years, as well as the incredibly efficient craft book that I'm using this semester to teach my first year students something about writing their own fiction. With that history, it would seem you are comfortable working with fiction of any length, but in a 2007 interview you said, "The pleasures and challenges of the longer form have my attention now."

Do you know if a work is going to be a story or a novel when you start on it? What, for you and your process, is different about writing short and long works?

Ron Carlson: I always know when I start a story that it is a story. Sometimes I get one with a few more rooms than I expected and then I'm tempted to just let it go and see where it might take me, but even then I end up with a long story. The novels I've written in the past few years have been conceived as novels from the beginning. My process for working in the two forms is similar in that I work every day, never exactly sure of where I'm going, but including everything I can think of. With a story there is a point sometime in the second week when I begin to get glimmers of possible endings. In a novel the world comes together and then you get to live it through all the days of the writing—such a pleasure.

KC: In an interview with Tayari Jones, you mentioned you liked that readers have been handing *Five Skies* and *The Signal* to their parents, that it has proven a point of conversation for families and friends. I'm one of those people who gave *Five Skies* to my mother and she fell in love with it. She's a woman from as far east as the United States goes and she fell in love with a book about three variously damaged men working on a futile construction project in Idaho. Why do you think that book and *The Signal* have appealed so widely to such different demographics? Are you ever surprised by reactions to your work?

RC: I think it's because each of these books is a story. There is a lot of work in *Five Skies* and a lot of camping in *The Signal*, but I tried to make each narrative sound and solid in the way the elements of the processes were displayed. Plus, oddly enough in literature: work is exotic. We don't have much of it in song or story. Our subjects and celebrations are sort of anti-work. A lot of people remarked on the care the men take with their efforts and Arthur's deliberation of each part of the project might be part of the appeal. I think we're a little starved for things that are carefully done. I know we are.

KC: Speaking about Arthur and his companions and the job they try to do together, *Esquire* said *Five Skies* was a book about men. It struck me too that *The Signal* has several male characters and one significant female one. There are writers and critics who say we shouldn't write outside of our experience. Does that piece of advice have anything to do with your subjects or is there another reason men often feature heavily in your work?

RC: Scott Fitzgerald said – and I'll paraphrase – that there would never be good biography of a great writer, because *if the writer was great, he or she was too many people*. I'm not the men in my stories but I'm part of all of them. You get to be the bad guy and the good guy in

your stories: you have to be. Same with the women: you have to be them. If they become in the writing “other people,” then they lose their truly compelling hold on us. Our lack of tolerance for nuance is best shown in the way that we have as bad guys in stories and film now Nazis and Zombies and Aliens because they are *other people*; other people are simply obstacles in the plot plans of genre stories.

KC: Yeah, that’s true. I guess there’s something about those kinds of characters in the movies that can feel comfortable, maybe because the lines are so clear between the “bad guys” and the “good guys.” I mean, we’re never really confused about whether or not we’re supposed to root for John Wayne. Actually, the American West as a whole seems a particularly fertile setting for heroes and villains and that other kind of character that is more human, someone in between. So maybe it’s no coincidence that you have been described as a Western writer and have set your last two novels in the wild regions of the West—Wyoming and Idaho, specifically. What do you find compelling about the West as a subject and setting for fiction?

RC: I grew up in the West and returned to it and keep returning to it. When I’m in Utah or Idaho or Wyoming, the sky fits. I know the West, some of it, and I’ve seen it change. That world fills me with hope and with longing and a sort of sadness that feels real. I need to be in a place where I can get out of town, not simply over the hill into the next town; I love to see the horizon open as it does in the big places. I love to be where I can sense I’m on a planet.

KC: Landscape is something that comes through really clearly in your work. Take this line from *The Signal*, for example, when Mack and Vonnie hike up to Spearpoint: “They came out of the trees onto a hill of rock lined with lichen above the treeline, the rocks looking smashed and fitted, and they ascended this shoulder for

half a mile until they came to a barren plain before a rocky cirque that like the entire series along the mountain crest could have been called the Throne.”

Sometimes your descriptive tone reminds me of the outdoor cooking scene from Hemingway’s “Big, Two-Hearted River” that you read aloud in class once. You also read out loud the penultimate moment of James Joyce’s “Araby” and one class included a dialogue recital from Edith Wharton’s *Ethan Frome*. Are these writers who have inspired you over the years, or are they just good teaching tools? Whose work inspires you now?

RC: These are three masters, and they will always be masters. I read all the time, more than I did in college, and I’m not sure I ever read a book to take away the lesson, but I don’t think there is a book that isn’t a lesson. I read the new and the old. I read all the vexatious stories in current magazines and I read *Tobacco Road* last spring, a nasty little book, and I read the magical *High Wind in Jamaica* and the masterpiece by Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping*. It is incandescent. I read the changing a tire scene in *Cities of the Plain* by Cormac McCarthy every year; I love that book.

KC: There are people out there who say things like, “Ron Carlson is a funny writer.” They know your stories like “Bigfoot Stole My Wife” or “Some of Our Work with Monsters” and they’ve read *Betrayed* by F. Scott Fitzgerald. And then they read *Five Skies* and say things like, “The writing in this book is really sincere.” Of course, comedy and tragedy are not mutually exclusive, but are there notable differences for you when you write one or the other? Does one tone come more easily?

RC: I’ve tried to treat each of my works—stories and novels—with the levity or gravity it called for. I’m writing some odd things right now, but the best work is always reaching beyond its own clever-

ness. You want your story to cast a shadow. Both of my recent novels were written as straight narratives in part because of a reaction I had to the great thickets of irony in which so much of American discourse is now struggling. I wanted each of these two books to say what it meant in the simplest terms, no tricks.

KC: Trick is an interesting word in this context. Many of my students seem to want to write “trick” endings, to go for punch lines. It’s hard to explain the difference between a trick ending and earned humor. I often give them some of your humorous stories, probably because they were my introduction to your work. I love “The Chromium Hook” in particular, and “Keith,” even though that’s also sad. Both *Five Skies* and *The Signal* take on serious subjects in serious settings and feature men and women made serious by their mistakes and their misfortunes. Do you ever purposely take up humor as a subject and do you think you’ll return to it?

RC: I never really left it. What I love about the phrase “sense of humor” is the word “sense.” As I said above, I have a curious story going now about a band which has a chance to record a cursed song and that story is treating me quite humorously. I hope we both survive. And I have a handful of other short work which I’ll read to you when we meet again.

KC: Great, because I think I still owe you a coffee. After *Five Skies*, *The New Yorker* called you “a notable exponent of that difficult literary technique, the happy ending,” meaning to contrast, I think, the tragic conclusion of *Five Skies* with some of your more comic short stories. Would you agree that you’re a fan of the “happy ending?” Is there even such a thing?

RC: Any story extended far enough ends happily.

KC: I love that idea. It seems like a lot of writing teachers usually disparage happy endings, as if they've fallen out of fashion or can't ever ring true. Which reminds me, you've been a teacher for almost as many years as you've been a writer. In what ways does teaching inform your writing? Does it ever stall your work?

RC: Teaching gives you the opportunity to stand with your back to young people and bump your head on the blackboard uttering lucky messages quietly to yourself. I love to teach. Every term for all of these years I've tried to invent my way across the river. It has led me to a lot of models, examples, exercises, metaphors, and outlandish (and patented) drawings on the blackboard. At least once a year I write with my students to try to illuminate some point. It half works and leaves me a start of a story when the term ends and the buildings empty and I'm a year older standing at the window in my chalk dust sportcoat.

KC: Those drawings were actually really helpful. My favorite was the stick people bobbing in their pot of boiling water. I think I remember you saying once that you were in a commercial for meat in Utah. Please tell me I'm not making this up. If you weren't a writer and a teacher, what would you be?

RC: I wouldn't be a model, although they paid me \$800 to carry that steaming briefcase around an office. (It was smoked ham—get it?) I think I would have Ron's Fix It Pickup, a truck full of tools with a small vice on the back bumper and a clipboard on the front seat. Why won't your screen door close? Let me take a look.

KC: At Arizona State, you were at work on a book of poems. When can we get our copy on Amazon?

RC: Ooosh. The poems are working their way toward the surface. I would think 2011 latest. You will be the first to know.

KC: I'm looking forward to them. And that ongoing project makes me wonder, do you tend to work on novels and stories at the same time? What else are you working on now?

RC: I work on one project at a time, with interruptions for notes, etc. on other pieces.

I'm working on a novel about four men. I'm making a lot of work out of this second draft.

KC: What advice do you have for those of us still trying to get our first book out in the world? What do you wish someone had told you when you were just starting to write and publish your fiction?

RC: My advice would simply be what I tell myself: work steadily and choose projects that matter deeply to you, even if you don't understand them. It's a long game. We're writers and we understand we've selected an ideal pursuit, which means mostly we shall labor well out of the world's notice. ■

HOMAGE TO CESAR VALLEJO

You will not die in Paris, in a thunderstorm
or under an umbrella in Miami, your skin turning
luminous as a mule's ear at the end of summer.
You will die in Lubbock, Texas, with a sneeze.

A wind carrying the tinny obligato of an ice cream truck
will blow the olive leaves a sudden white,
the color of plaster saints whose wise,
sincere shadows once moved us.

Bach will still move you.
You'll wish in the name of sweet leaping Christ you could hear the
Chaconne again.
You'll ask for sheet music and a violin from the circus master
who is leading a menagerie of buffalo, panthers, and swans
to the town fountain for a drink.

When you die you'll want to taste something cold.
More than human company, more than the five-act tragedy you
always meant to write,
you'll want a popsicle.
A monkey in a sequined vest and red velvet fez
will offer you a flask of schnapps, or is it
too late for that.

You will sneeze and see your shadow thin against the blank wall.
Unlike the moon, you can't fake death.
You'll stay here without music, loving the orange
split open on the sidewalk,
pouring out its diatribe of ants.

TWO POEMS FOR DELMORE SCHWARTZ

1

Leave it to the faulty compass to walk us
straight into nightmare, all the mechanical birds
in need of grease, making such a conundrum
for the pigeon, his idiot beak
paradiddling a second line for my pulse,
when all it ever wanted was to march
in casual fornication, methodical as Brahms
on a winter Sunday. And yes, Johannes,
we *will* weigh ourselves before and after the auto de fé.

Longing has a substance. Set apart,
wandering, forlorn as coal dust,
each living thorn outstretched.
Is a touch among the Hallmarks, a ravishing
among the kitsch, all it takes
to know *the wire in the rose is beautiful?*

2

Every voice in the airport speakers testifies
like fish who've been born again.
And we too, late for San Francisco, belated for
Baudelaire, didn't care for much
else but gin. Hotheaded we were,
incapable of a cool afternoon.
It was disgusting to see the hydrant turned on a crowd
who were screaming, admirably, that

fire opens the closed language of the library.
While we, the quieter race,
a softer music filled and filled
like rain falling into the shallow sea
where fishermen smoked and blinked
waiting for a rose to enter their lives.
So cold out in the frozen speech.
And her quilt was to render thorns.

THE BOY

Breathing lilac pollen into his head,
it becomes gigantic with sugar.

And because the word *like*
is the queen of his language, I'll tell you
the boy looks like me, the lilac
spread its sexual canopy
like the first sky with no stars,
and without a star's
harsh recipe for dying in nova,
that last flower of itself.

Because I am telling this
with a kind of expert
nonchalance, I will tell you the lilac
wasn't hiding a dirty boy, exactly.

In a winter storm,
he pushes through all his mother's clothing.
The blackout candles on the dresser are erotic.

Past nylon stockings, past bras
that were yellowed, medieval,
he finds a pack of firecrackers —
Ladyfingers.

They're for taping to the legs
of grasshoppers, and to the blue metal
wings of those beetles
who chew thoughtfully all day

on wax leaves and the tender,
violet parts of his tree.

Then there's the story
about the other flower, the aurora,
that the boy slept under,
one September, while his parents
lowered their lawn chairs almost to the ground,
and drank beer, and gazed off
at the polar light buttoning, unbuttoning,

until that play of purple and green
was something completely ordinary again,
and hardly worth noticing
between the gossip about the physical
life of bodies in the bowling alley,
and news of the marquee that had fallen,
finally, into such ruin
that it welcomed even the smallest rock
for the light it let *in* –

the sky became less, even, than the plastic
swimming pool beside the house,
its dark shape of bait minnows moving
like a single brain.

I'll admit
the minnows look like me,
and so does the mother,
because she turned herself into a tree for love,
into a redundancy.

And because the better part of me is leaves,
and birds I don't know, I'm going to tell you
they had short, gray tails,
they moved the branches only a little,
and their wings made a noise
like blouses shedding, no, no,
above snow.

HARD USAGE

I.

The Yangtze River flows slower
these days. Dammed: a concrete gag

set in its mouth and the usual swell
of what might or could begins to pool

behind it. For eight years the water
has risen where much else has fallen

down or behind: by turns it streams
blue, as if to undiscern itself from sky

and then again the brown of dirt, as if
its claim on the earth could be more clear.

II.

In the late years of early time,
those who pulled boats through
the ugliest shallows came down

from the hills and stacked bones
in white towers through the craft
wrecking shallows. Now all stacks

come down, and even those now fled
uphill still descend for work: mounting
rooftops with axes and hammers

they make way for the river. Old
houses, now hazards, clear out
top down. Their shingles, doorframes,

floor mats: gone. Where water
might have spattered their books,
they have simply moved them elsewhere.

III.

I have heard of the river's blind dolphins,
Braille-ing their way upstream and down

by their beaks, fins and flukes snapping
the surface where water ran thin. I have

also heard it said that sincerity comes
from the lack of the mouth, but it may well

be the eyes: like the dolphins, who treated
their portion more frankly than most;

who understood what it meant to disappear
without remainder, without relic.

SARA BURGE

METAL CONCUBINES

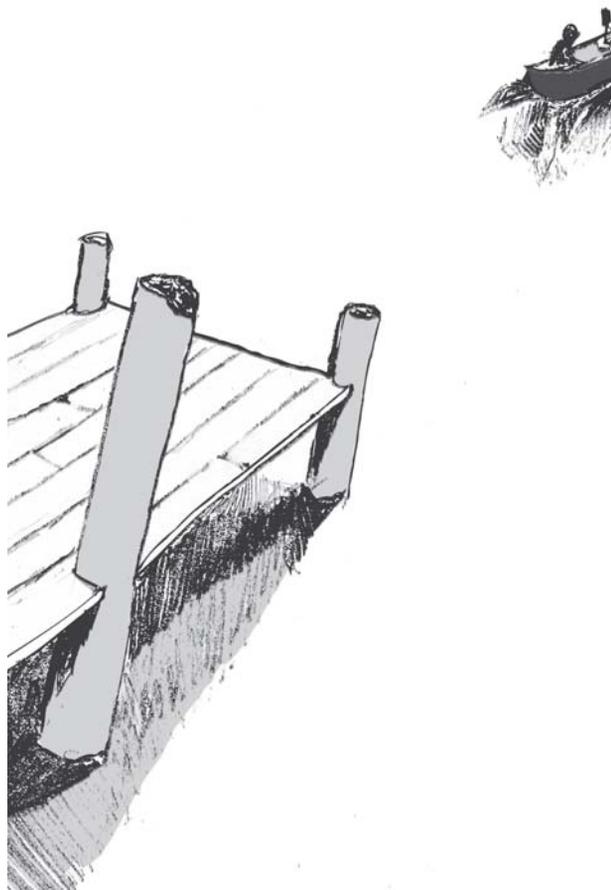
If, during that final embrace at the Greyhound Station,
she promised to wait for my brother, send a letter every day,
spend her nights alone with her colossal pain, I hope he knew
she lied. That like spikes, like the strange language of logic,
truth erupted from her skin. Each loving stroke down her spine
translated a new word until all he wanted
combusted beneath his fingertips.

When I think of her, I feel no bitterness. Like the rest of us,
she had nothing to do in those backwoods but drink and screw.
Our Margaret, half Cherokee with bleached hair,
who married someone else while he did time
in barracks and fatigues. Margaret, a mother when he returned,
her daughter a child he could not call his own.

I loved her too, so I imagine her mourning him.
Her face, in this fantasy, classic in its grief, her body —
the body he held against his own —
buckles under the weight of his ghost. She goes mad
with regret, and since this is make-believe, I create a grave
that she visits, black-veiled and red-lipped. Her faithfulness:
Cherries in the Snow kissing black marble, just above his birthdate,
the world turning beneath a sun setting like a tarted-up whore.

This version comforts with its clichés.
In reality, I suppose, she lies closer to a silent actress,
monochromatic and closed, mercurial as the tanks he climbed into.
Their bellies his consolation during German winters,
icicles in his beard. The bulk of his steel mistresses cupped him
like an egg, cradled him through the tundra of waiting, hummed

that nothing would ever be as true as their armored caves.
Their countenance downturned, pistons pumping steady,
engines rumbling love for only him.



*It's as though his oars were broken,
though of course they weren't.*

A WOMAN ON THE TRAIN

After a day spent walking from fountain to fountain through the old city of Aix, stopping in expensive shoe stores and for dry, crumbly sandwiches at a tourist trap, John and his sister Grace boarded the six o'clock train for Italy. They were among a crowd of Australians who shoved past them up the steps and down, thankfully, into another car. John watched them disappear through the dirty glass, glad they were gone, but wishing, in a way, he could've just joined their rollicking stupidity. It was what one admired so much about Australians: they were a bunch of beautiful idiots and so happy about it.

In her seat Grace arranged her long black skirt carefully, patting her lap as though calming a small dog, the kind everyone but its owner wants secretly to kick. John thought this was the kind of woman she was now: a lady with a little dog. Or small dog. Depending on how much irony one wanted to introduce. If in fact that was irony; he wasn't quite sure.

He flopped his legs into the aisle. The seats were a cool light blue and the train was clean, but traveling, he'd found, now that he was twenty-nine, made him feel perpetually hungover. Too old. Or maybe too unwilling, too self-absorbed. He was traveling with his sister because she'd called him six months after her husband had died in the shower of an aneurysm and said, "Do you want to come with me to Europe? I'm serious. I mean, I'd love for you to come along." So he quit his job, which hadn't paid much, which he'd been meaning to leave for years, and they flew together out of JFK.

What, he'd asked himself daily and did so now again, as the train began to move out of the station, did he want from the trip? To help his sister. To keep her company at the very least. She was a widow at thirty-two. Also: to reconnect with her. She'd changed drastically when, at twenty-six, she'd married Michael, a lawyer, a Christian. Suddenly she was a churchgoer and wore long, demure skirts and all her friends, the reporter for the socialist newspaper in Queens, the arty women she'd worked with in the gallery in Soho, the painters who hung there, all were gone, never to be seen again, at least by John. Instead, on the two occasions he'd visited her over the past six years, her friends now seemed to consist of bankers, lawyers and her priest, with his thin, veiny hands and womanly paunch stretching the crotch of his black polyester pants.

John had never liked Michael and had felt inappropriate bubbles of relief swell up after the man died. Perhaps now his sister could become again the fun-loving person whom, for most of his life he'd thought of as his best friend. That's really why he'd come to Europe. To see if this could be true. Why couldn't it? Surely it could. But it wasn't. She was still Michael's Grace. A silver cross hung around her neck. She insisted they visit a church in every town. She actually went in and knelt and bowed her head and whispered prayers. He'd learned to wait these sessions out in cafés, or bars. Watching her walk uphill (the churches were always atop hills), long skirt swinging around her boxy black shoes, hair pinned severely back, he sometimes pitied her. He wanted her to be happy and it was literally inconceivable one could be happy like this: fearing God, praying and so on.

There were only two other people in their train car: an old woman with a bulging plastic bag, two bottles of wine precariously balanced at the top, and a pretty younger woman with dark hair cut in a bob. The young woman wore a cropped blue jean jacket. Lifting her bag to the overhead rack her shirt rode up, exposing a smooth, tanned stomach.

He glanced at Grace to see if she'd noticed him staring. What he wanted was for her to say it was all right to go off for a night, do his own thing. They'd get separate hotel rooms (he could even pay for his, though not for too many nights: she'd been paying for everything, except the occasional beer or wine or coffee). Perhaps in Levanto—the first stop in Italy she'd planned—he'd suggest they do this. The young woman's arm, free of its jean jacket, poked into the aisle. Probably Grace wouldn't mind. Obviously she wouldn't want to be hooking up with strangers, but . . . These thoughts made one thing very clear. He was an immoral idiot. But at least he was alive. At least he wanted to live. At least he wasn't escaping down some narrow hole of thought—and, apparently, he was cruel.

The train shuttled along the coastline past small bright towns. He flipped through the British guidebook Grace kept pressuring him to read. The authors were snobs who hated Americans and possibly the French as well.

Several hours later they arrived in Nice. He watched the Australians bound down, off to explore. Maybe he and Grace should go and see the coast, too. But she was deep into one of her books—*The Ambassadors*—and, anyway, they'd already seen Matisse's paintings in Paris of birds in windows overlooking the water, so why go down now past laundromats with fat mothers folding sheets while red-faced children howled and kicked in the sticky bucket seats? They were better off right here, waiting patiently, side by side, to get the hell out of there, like strangers, as though she wasn't his sister, the one person he truly felt he loved deeply in the world. No, she was just another woman on the train.

On the balcony of an apartment building overlooking the tracks, nine or ten floors up, he saw a man kicking and punching a blue heavy bag that hung from the ceiling. The man wore only the smallest blue shorts and sweat glimmered all over him. Each time his leg lashed out and struck the bag the sound wouldn't reach down to John until the next kick or punch was already falling.

That's exactly what it's like being here with Grace, he thought. He wanted to be the bag, but felt against his will that he was the man. Each time he thought he was there to absorb the blow, the sadness, he was surprised to find himself striking out, making contact before he'd even heard what he'd done. The first such incident had happened at Notre Dame, when she'd knelt to pray and he'd laughed. Loud, as though she was performing for him, the way she used to at parties, the wildest of all her slightly insane friends, climbing on tables, out onto window ledges, into a dumpster to retrieve a broken office chair an artist had said he could use. But of course the kneeling wasn't a joke. She'd looked up at him, as though he'd just spit on the altar. Even that hadn't been enough to shut him up. "Come on, Grace, cut it out," he'd said, tugging on the shoulder of her shirt.

"Leave me alone," she'd said.

"Grace, I—"

"Get out of here," she'd whispered. "Please, just leave me alone." She'd looked as though, through the anger, she might cry.

That was their first day in Europe. He'd left, as they'd traveled down through the Chateau region to the Luberon, a trail of similarly distinguished actions behind him, like a dog pissing his way down the block. The idiot had been here. And here. And here. And like a dog he seemed to have no shortage of supply.

There'd been better moments in the trip, moments when he felt he could see, from beneath the smooth, shiny surface of Grace's new persona, her old self—playful, ironic, irreverent, witty.

After going to the European Photography Museum in Paris they'd gotten coffees and he'd asked if she would ever leave America, the way William Klein had.

"Of course not," she said, stirring a tube of sugar into the soft brown skim that marked the best coffees. "But then I'm not an angry young man."

"Like me," he said, unwrapping the tiny bitter chocolate and biting off a corner.

“Sort of. Though you’re not that young any more, sweetheart. Now you’re just an angry man.”

“Soon I’ll be an angry old man.”

“We call that being a grump,” she said, setting her spoon on the saucer with a clink.

“Who’s this *we*?”

“Me and the rest of reasonable society,” she said. It was when she smiled like this that her old self was closest to escaping.

“I’ve heard about that. But as far as I can tell it’s not the kind of thing I’d be interested in.”

“I believe that,” she said, taking a tiny sip.

He’d wanted this to go on, for the teasing and joking to continue. He remembered, then, at the café, one night when he’d come to the city from New Haven. This was pre-Michael. They’d gone to several bars and some parties in lofts and then walked home to her apartment on 24th Street. She slipped her arm through his, startled by two cats fighting under the swings in a small park. The streets were empty. He was drunk and happy.

“You seem happy, Grace,” he said, patting her arm.

“Maybe. I guess I’m happy. Are you happy?” Her voice was slurred with wine and she was looking back towards the cats.

“I’m not sure.”

“Well,” she squeezed his arm, “I think you should be.”

“Why?”

“Look at what a great sister you have. Not every sister helps get you laid, you know. You’re lucky.”

Back in her apartment he’d wanted to tell her that he knew he was lucky; that he loved her; that having her for a sister was the best thing in his life. He ran into the tiny bathroom and said, “You’re the best, Grace. You know that?”

She was brushing her teeth, moving the handle in a slow circle. She spat in the sink and straightened up, smacking her lips. “Well. Duh.”

“As long as you know,” he said and went back to the couch, giddy, curling up beneath the sheets.

“Good night, dork,” she’d said, getting into her bed, just ten feet away.

But there at the café in the Marais he couldn’t think of anything to say, any way to continue the light-heartedness, and the moment was already gone.

As the train left Nice the young woman in his car picked up her bag and headed towards the door with *Café* stenciled on it.

“Are you hungry?” John said, turning to Grace.

She looked up, dazed, from her pages and said, “No,” as though she hadn’t quite heard the question. He’d read that Henry James in college, he wanted to tell her, but then she’d ask how he’d liked it and he’d have to either lie (“His use of point of view is brilliant, I think”) or else tell the dumb truth (“I couldn’t finish it”). He’d had a writing professor who’d once told him that if he wanted to be a real writer he needed to learn to love Henry James. “If you can’t do that, there’s no hope for you.” And the man meant the late James, not *The Portrait of a Lady*, which John had in fact loved, or at least liked a lot. Since he’d been a little boy he’d wanted to be a writer: first he’d wanted to write something like *The BFG*, later something like *The Lord of the Rings*, and later still something like *This Side of Paradise*. But, like most things in his life, this desire had fallen by the wayside. It was, it turned out, a lot of work. And really one had to be a romantic to imagine they could be a writer.

“Well, I’m going to get something. Up at the café.”

She smiled vaguely and nodded. It was a shame: his sister was beautiful, but seemed now to want to cover that up. The covering up had started soon after she’d met Michael; as though he wanted to contain her, hide the truth so no one might think to steal her away, as John had so often wished someone would.

“No coffee, no beer?” he said, standing up. The girl was out of sight through the doors. “It’s getting late, so we might miss the

restaurants in Levanto.”

“No, John. I’m fine.”

“Alright.” He was already hurrying up the aisle, touching the headrests lightly to keep his balance.

The girl was sitting alone at a table near the bar with a small waxy cup of coffee, flipping through a magazine, which, John noticed as he passed, was in English. Fate, he thought, ordering a beer from the snarling Frenchman behind the bar. The man didn’t open the beer for John and it wasn’t a twist off, but he had a bottle opener on his keychain (which he still carried though of course he didn’t need keys to anything here, but without them he felt somehow naked). He popped the top off, grinning at the bartender, who looked about to burst at this impudence, then walked over to the girl.

“Excuse me,” he said, setting the bottle on her table. “Is anyone sitting here?” There’d be no misinterpreting this, as all the other booths, except one where an obese man was slumped over a plate of cheese and crackers, were empty.

The woman squinted appraisingly at him, then smiled and shifted her shoulders in a flirty way. He slipped into the booth. Their knees were nearly touching.

“I saw your magazine,” he said, taking a sip. “English.”

“No,” the girl said with a delicate, beautiful accent, “French. But I live in London.” She closed her magazine. He wanted to pick up her arm and kiss her wrists, which were thin, delicate, but, he knew without touching, strong.

He’d always had this kind of success with women. He was, he knew, one of the few truly good-looking men: six-foot-one, slightly curly brown hair, eyes so light blue they were nearly gray, a thin nose, and perfectly distinct, strong jaw, not too square. His stubble had, he’d discovered with much horror, begun to sprout a few random white hairs, but other than that you’d be hard pressed to guess he was over twenty-six.

“I’ve been to London,” he said.

"Amazing," she said. "I thought Americans never left their churches, except to occasionally bomb Third World countries."

"Right," he said. "I agree. We're idiots. You want a beer or wine or something?"

When she squinted fine wrinkles spread around her eyes. She might be around his age, maybe a few years younger. She nodded and looked shyly down at her hands.

Could it be he was actually falling in love on a train in France with a beautiful woman he'd just talked to out of the blue while his widowed sister was reading, or maybe sleeping (it was James, after all) just a car away? It could be, he thought. Oh God let it be so.

It was dark when he surfaced, hours later, from the hazy fantasy he'd fallen into. There she was, the French woman, Simone, still sitting across from him and pressing her leg against his beneath the table. He'd surfaced because she'd asked, "So, you're traveling alone?" smiling hopefully.

"Why?" he said.

"Because," she said, giving that wonderful shrug again, "I'm just asking."

"Why are you asking?"

She squirmed a little, pressing her leg harder into his, "I was going to ask if you're free to come up to the lake, where I'm staying."

He looked at her, then reached across the table and put his hand over hers. This was exactly what skin should feel like, he thought.

"Actually, I'm traveling with my sister."

"Oh," Simone said, her hand beneath his jerked just a bit, as though wanting to pull away, but not quite committed to it yet. "Well. Where is she?"

"Back at our seats," John said, looking over his shoulder.

Simone used this chance to pull her hand away.

"But I'm sure she'll be up for coming to the lake," he said. He wasn't sure at all. How could he even suggest it? How would he

explain it?

"Well," Simone said. "I'm staying at a little bed and breakfast there and I'm sure there are still rooms." She reached into her bag and pulled out a cell phone. "I could call. It really is a part of Italy you should see, and which very few ever do. Especially you Americans. Though you'll have to not let your guidebooks find out. Rick Steves." She flipped the phone open.

He wanted to tell her to call and book a room for Grace and him, though he could hardly imagine a world so disappointing in which he wouldn't end up in Simone's bed. But first he had to ask Grace. She'd been strict about keeping to her itinerary, as though it meant anything, as though it wasn't just an arbitrary catalog of places. And this lake, if Simone was right (how could she be wrong?), was probably much nicer than anything they'd see on their own, sticking to the tourist . . .

"I better ask my sister," he said.

Simone flipped the phone shut and squinted at him. "Of course you should."

"You'll be here?" he said.

"Right here," she said, patting the table lightly as he stood up and hurried through the car, glancing back to find her smiling after him.

In the hours that followed John would try over and over to figure out just what he'd seen as he opened the door to the car where Grace was waiting for him. He thought, thinking back, he'd seen three men running through the far door. He thought he'd heard them laughing. He thought they'd all been wearing leather jackets and he distinctly remembered a greasy, swinging ponytail flashing in the scattered lights that darted in and out from the highway they hurtled alongside. He thought he'd heard one of them shout. A name? Antonio? All he knew for sure was that, as the door closed behind the men, he'd stopped at the far end of the car, as though he'd known something bad had happened. He'd held his breath, straining to

listen, perhaps to that one word, that shout, and it was then he'd heard the sob and he'd known immediately it was Grace.

From that point everything was clearer. He ran to their seats and found his sister huddled against the window, pulling the torn folds of her shirt closed, her mouth moving, her body shaking. He said, "Jesus Christ, Grace. Oh shit." She looked up at him, mouth still moving, terrified, as though he was there to hurt her. Her legs were tucked up onto the seat and there was a cut, a scrape, from her right knee all the way to mid-calve. Her hair was a mess and strands of it stuck in her mouth. There were tears on her cheeks. Her body was stiff when he touched her arm, her back tense and rigid when he tried to hug her.

"Grace, what happened?" There were red marks around her neck and down her chest and the silver cross was gone. Her fingers no longer had the wedding and engagement rings. "Jesus Christ, Grace, tell me what happened."

She looked out the window, mouth moving, though he heard no words. The train was slowing into a station. Through the window he watched three men jump to the platform and run, laughing, smacking each other on the backs of their leather coats, to the dark mouth of a stairwell that swallowed them up.

"What happened, Grace?"

"They took my wallet," she said. Her voice was surprisingly calm, level, clear. "I was just sitting here. I was reading and they stopped right there," she pointed past him to the aisle, "and they just looked at me and then they grabbed me and took my bag and then they took my . . ." She stopped and looked down at her torn shirt. Her lips twisted, as though they didn't know how to shape the words.

"Grace," he said. "Did they hurt you?"

She smiled dimly, as though she was far away, as though she could hardly see him, for all the miles of air between. "Not really," she said.

The train let out a shuddering sigh and clanked back to life and glided forward.

“Grace,” he said, “I need to know what happened. What happened, Grace? You have to tell me.” He pulled her head to his chest so she wouldn’t see his tears.

It was Simone’s idea to contact the conductor and have him call the police. Grace didn’t want to.

“It’s just my purse,” she said, trying to pin her hair up away from her face.

“And your rings, and your cross,” John said. “And your passport.”

“I’ll get the conductor,” Simone said. She folded her arm across her chest and glared out at the highway. “Fucking bastards.” She continued to stare past Grace—who’d put on a new shirt and had stopped crying—as though they might spot the thieves there. She’d come from the café car when John didn’t return, looking for him, and had found him hugging his sister and she’d taken over where, it seemed, he could only flounder.

There was a small ball of fear in his stomach that Grace wasn’t telling the whole story, that more had happened. That the men had raped her. Or at least touched her, groped her. When he asked how her shirt had gotten torn she’d said, “I guess they thought I had, you know, one of those neck things.” She’d patted her neck lightly, then hung her hands at her sides as though now they needed washing.

When the train stopped at the next station (they were already in Italy), policemen came aboard and questioned Grace. What had they taken? How much was it worth? Her passport? They gave John a copy of the police report, frowning at him. What kind of a man was he? Letting his sister get attacked? Where had he been, they’d wanted to know, when this happened.

“In the café car,” he said, pointing towards it, but also at Simone. The guards smiled and nodded. They understood. He wasn’t fool-

ing anyone. Driven by his dick to abandon his sister. He was a coward, a jackass. The overhead fluorescent lights were on, making everyone, except Simone, look sickly green. The red marks on Grace's neck were more noticeable with the light, several of them were scratches, and her fear was obvious. Her eyes skittered from face to face, or stared blankly at her lap. She didn't look at John throughout the entire interview, as though he wasn't there, as though she was all alone, a young widow on a train who'd come to Europe to try to find some small happiness in the depths of all her loss and look what had happened. Look what the world was like. If only she had someone, someone she could trust, could rely on to help her, to make things a little bit easier, a little more pleasant, lighter, fuller. But she was alone.

A few minutes after the policemen left the train rolled on again.

"We're almost to Genoa," Simone said, leaning across the aisle from the seat she'd taken. Her jean jacket was buttoned all the way up. "I have a car reserved there and we could go up to the lake. If you're interested."

Grace looked at Simone as though she wasn't quite real, an illusion, a figment of her frightened mind.

"We're going to Levanto," Grace finally said, as though it was the answer to a difficult math question.

"I know," he said. "But I was talking to Simone," he winced at this reference to the past, but Grace didn't seem to register the connection, "and she says she knows of a lake, up near Genoa. She says it's better than the Cinqueterre. Less touristy, anyway." His sister frowned skeptically, so he looked at Simone. "Right?"

"Sure, though Levanto is nice, too," Simone said, straightening out in her seat. "If you already have plans, maybe you should go there."

John knew if he protested too much it'd look like all he wanted, even now that his sister had just been mugged (and maybe more) on the train, was to chase after some beautiful French woman. But that

wasn't it. He didn't want to be left alone with Grace. Not only was it clear he couldn't protect her, but he knew he couldn't give her whatever it was she needed now, after. Hadn't this trip made that clear: he was incapable of helping her, though it was what he most wanted, below the surface. But then the surface was the problem. The surface was all he ever really saw. He could so rarely get beneath the sun-warmed upper layers. The same writing professor who'd admonished him about James had diagnosed this problem in his writing: you've got plenty of plot here, but there's nothing beneath it to give it meaning. This was true, not only of his fiction, but of his self, his life. It was an awful truth to live with, but you learned, gradually, to do so. But it wasn't enough for his sister, for his sister whom he loved. They needed someone around to guide them and Simone was, obviously, the only option. Sure, it was a bonus that she was beautiful and just two and a half hours ago had been sitting across from him pressing her leg . . .

Fortunately, as his thoughts spooled out and tangled, Grace said, "OK. We can always go to Levanto afterwards, right?"

"Absolutely," he said. He wanted to hug her, to thank her. He felt such relief. He wanted Grace to know that he just wanted what was best for her, that he just wanted her to be happy, that he just wanted her to be OK. And he wanted to die knowing that, just a few hours ago, he'd left her here and . . . "Of course we can."

Both women smiled at him and he felt sure he was missing the meaning in each look.

It was as though his oars were broken, though of course they weren't. He lifted them out of the water and stared at their flat, glimmering wood faces. The boat shook, bobbed. Bobbed, he thought, was the wrong word. It implied softness; the way the boat pitched was anything but soft, as though any moment they might tip over and be tossed into the water. The boat with Grace, rowed by one of Simone's

two British male friends—fresh, they'd said proudly, out of Cambridge—had receded into the haze ahead.

John let his oars splash back into the water and then, though he wanted to surrender, began pulling again. That's what one did in a rowboat, one rowed.

This morning, two hours ago, in the library of the bed and breakfast she'd taken them to last night, Simone had come up behind him and run a hand around his stomach (he'd quickly sucked it in) and said, "Good morning," then kissed his cheek, as though they'd spent the night having long, excellent sex, instead of the truth: John had slept in his room with Grace, too worried to leave her alone. In the library Simone had gone to the shelves and pulled down a book and tossed it to him. She was wearing small white shorts and a white tank top, over which she wore a loose beige cotton cardigan with big, brown buttons. "You should read that, being an American and all." It was *A Farewell to Arms*. He told her he'd read it. Now, on the water, he remembered the scene when the narrator escapes to Switzerland by rowing for thirty-six hours straight. Hemingway's men were ridiculous. But then, it turned out, so was he.

At breakfast, Simone had introduced Grace and him to her friends, Ivan and Paul. They looked like brothers with their freshly ironed shirts opened two buttons down the front, providing glimpses of hairless, tanned chests. One was taller than the other, and thinner, with thick brown hair that somehow rose up in a wave atop his forehead. The other had curly, bright red hair and freckles spilling down the bridge of his nose. The two talked all through the meal, apparently unconcerned about who these Americans were or why they were with Simone and then they said why didn't they all row across the lake to the villa? Brilliant idea.

"Problems," Simone said from behind him. The water thudded like little feet against the side of the boat.

"No problem," he said. "Though I think there's a good chance we'll drown."

“Oh, no. Horrible.” Her hair was held back by a red handkerchief and a few strands had slipped loose and were blowing around her face.

“It will be when we’re dead,” he said, looking back at the sun-streaked lake.

How could you say what he was doing wrong? He was dipping the oars into the water – he did it again now – and then pulling back through his shoulders, but the boat didn’t seem to move, just jerked and thudded in the waves made rough by the wind that bent the trees along the shore, their narrow tips dipping in unsteady bows.

“Need help?”

“Sure.” He slapped the water with the oars.

She clambered up beside him, poking him in the leg to make room.

“Now,” she said, “I’ll take this one, you that one. I’ll count. We’ll pull on two.”

“Why not three?” he said. When he turned to look at her a strand of hair blew into his mouth and the sudden, shocking taste of it there, the bright smell of her shampoo, the curl that seemed to wrap itself around his tongue, made him blink and look down at her brown legs.

She unhooked her hair from his mouth and said, “Because I’ve decided on two. Now, take your oar.” On two they pulled. At first it felt as though they were still getting nowhere, but after a dozen strokes the shore began to fall away. The line of blowing trees coalesced into a darker line. Between them and the trees was the bright patch of water, crisps of light. After a minute he could see the boat with his sister in it.

“Faster!” Simone shouted, stomping her feet.

“Don’t sink us,” he said. Sweat ran down his face. The muscles in his arms burned.

“Shut up,” she said. “Pull harder.” She began to lean into her strokes and he followed, so they were leaning forward together and pulling back, the boat moving easily.

"I didn't," a voice shouted from nearby, "think you'd make it." It was the redheaded man, Paul or Ivan, sitting in the back of the boat beside Grace. The man and Grace both wore blue shirts, as though they'd planned it that way.

His sister was shielding her eyes and looking up towards the villa, perched on the hill. It was a museum, the British men had told them: Renaissance art. Grace had said she'd love to see it.

He wanted her to look at him, to nod, to acknowledge his presence. Last night, when he'd closed the door to their room, she'd stared at him for a moment as though she wanted to say something important. Her bottom lip had twitched a few times and he'd leaned against the door, wanting her to yell at him, to blame him, to ask what the fuck was wrong with him and why the hell were they up here at some stupid lake she'd never heard of with a woman he'd met on the train while she was being attacked? If she yelled at him, he could agree. Yes, it was his fault. Did she know how sorry he was? He was so sorry. So sorry for what had happened on the train and so sorry for what had happened to Michael and so sorry for judging her, for laughing at her in Notre Dame. So sorry for only calling every three, four, five months, for not writing back on email right away, for not knowing who she was, for not knowing what had happened to their friendship.

"Nice room," he said, though that's not what he meant to say. "Don't you think?"

She looked around, as though seeing the place for the first time, then nodded and looked at the open top of her pack, as though she needed something from it, but didn't have the energy to reach over.

"Maybe we should've just gone to Levanto," he said. He felt panicky, wanted her to say something.

All she said was, "Why?"

"I don't know," he said. "But I mean, we could still go, if you want." *I'll pay for it, I have credit cards*, he wanted to say. He didn't know what they were doing here any more than she did. But it could

be undone. Wasn't that the thing about life: you could undo so much of it. It's just that most people don't, or won't. For whatever reason.

"Don't be ridiculous, John," she said. "It's eleven o'clock."

"I know," he said, trying to smile. "Are you OK, Grace?"

"John," she said, her voice wavering.

"Because it's OK to be scared, Grace. Jesus Christ, I'm scared. I don't even know how we got up here. I'm sorry." He held his hands out as though he wanted her to take them. "I'm sorry we came here, Grace."

She didn't yell, or cry. She didn't say anything; just sighed, stood and walked into the bathroom. The shower started running. He sat on his bed and watched the end of a football game. She stayed in the bathroom for almost an hour and when she came out crawled right into bed and said, "Good night, John." That was it. That was all she'd said. It had been terrible. Just what he deserved.

Now, in the boat, while Simone and the British men shouted about where they should dock, he stared at his sister and thought, *Look at me. If you hate me, if you want me to leave you alone, just tell me. I will. I'll do whatever you want.*

She continued to shield her eyes and look into the distance and then Ivan or Paul started rowing again, shooting them over the water.

There was a small dock, already crowded with rowboats, at the foot of a thin trail. John, unable to maneuver to a spot, tossed his rope to one of the taller of the British men (Ivan, it turned out) and was pulled ashore. By the time he and Simone were out of the water, Grace and Paul had already disappeared up the path.

He wanted to run after her, make sure she was OK, but walked like a civilized person behind Simone and Ivan, whose conversation lapsed between French and English and occasionally into Italian so he couldn't follow much of it.

Clearly, this had been a mistake. He'd allowed Simone to bring them to this lake when they should've just stayed on straight to

Levanto. In Levanto, hiking the coast between the five towns, he and Grace could've been alone, could've talked about what had happened on the train. If he'd never met Simone none of this, of course, would've happened. Right? Or maybe the men would've just included him in the mugging. Maybe they'd have stuck a knife in his throat, or stomach, to shut him up, get him out of the way so they could get to his sister. But there they were with a bunch of strangers, hiking up into a piney forest along a slim, steep path that made him gasp for breath.

"Think you'll make it back there?" Simone said. Her right arm was tucked through Ivan's left. It was possible Ivan was her boyfriend. Or fiancé. Or husband, for Christ's sake. Maybe they were a bunch of perverts. Maybe this was all a game: lure a couple of innocent Americans up to a villa one of their father's owned and then, once they were inside, the doors locked, bring out the tray of instruments, the straps, the leather . . .

Couples strolled with museum-languor across the wide stone patio that overlooked the lake. The small town where they had rooms could only just be seen on the far side through the glare and haze. Through the villa's wide, tall clear windows he could see tapestries and paintings of square-faced saints and horse-mounted knights.

"Anyone need a drink?" Ivan said, pointing to a cart where a man was pouring wine.

Simone shook her head and John said, "I don't drink before eleven."

"Your mistake." Ivan smiled winningly and sauntered off.

Now that they were alone, Simone slipped her arm through his. One of the large, soft buttons of her sweater pressed into his arm. "Isn't it nice?"

"Nice?" John said. He didn't see Grace anywhere. The villa was three stories, balconies on each level. Grace could be anywhere, on any level, in any room, with a stranger.

"Yes, nice," she said, pinching his arm and leading him into the museum. He paid for both their tickets when she made no move for

her pockets.

"I wonder where Paul and Grace are," he said, interrupting one of Simone's lectures on the historical importance of a tapestry which looked just about the same as all the rest.

"Around here somewhere," she said, frowning at him. "Is she OK, your sister? After last night."

"I hope so," he said. He should've known the answer. He should've been able to say, *Of course she is, don't worry about it, she'll be fine.*

"It can be scary. I was recently robbed in London, in Soho, on my way to the theatre. We don't like to think that it happens all the time, but it does." She guided him along to another tapestry. He thought he saw Paul, but it turned out, when John hurried forward to look, to be a little redheaded boy, clinging to his father's back, laughing.

Was Simone suggesting there was no reason to get upset about what had happened on the train, that Grace was overreacting? It happened all the time. Grace should just pick herself up and he shouldn't fret about her, should focus his energies on flirting with this pretty young woman who was kind enough to give him, an American no less, her time. But what did Simone know about him, or his sister? Nothing. What if he told her the truth, all the details about his sister's life, about the fights with their parents when she'd gone to the Rhode Island School for Design instead of Harvard, about the sudden retreat into this whole other self when she'd married a lawyer who owned a brownstone in Brooklyn with a little garden out back full of miniature Japanese trees? How many details would it take for Simone to understand his sister, to know her, to feel compassion, empathy? Could John do it? He doubted it. And what did it matter? It didn't matter if no one else understood Grace; the problem was *he* didn't understand her. Even years ago, pre-Michael, he'd always drained her, taken things: take me to parties, set me up with her, I haven't been to that bar and on and on. Had he ever given anything back? The only person who could answer this, of course,

was Grace, but he couldn't ask her. That wasn't important. The important thing right now was to find her. Just to stay close to her. To make sure she was OK, or as OK as she could be, considering. Not to leave her alone with some arrogant Cambridge boy, out here in the middle of nowhere.

They reached the last room and Simone said, "Want to go to the next level? I can tell how thrilled you are by all this." She pulled her handkerchief off and combed fingers through her hair, smiling in a way she probably thought of as seductive. It was.

"I'd like to find my sister," he said. His anxiety had been building all through Simone's art lectures. This museum wasn't that big, so where the hell was Grace?

"You didn't see her?" Simone said, her smile turning into a flirtatious frown. "She went by with Paul, while I was telling you about Raphael."

"Where?"

"Out there," Simone pointed to the patio.

"Where?" he nearly bumped Simone, heading for the doors.

"I saw them, just a minute ago," she said, following.

Ivan was sitting with his feet up against the patio ledge, a glass of wine in one hand. He shouted, "Simone, come here and rub my shoulders. That rowing killed me."

John didn't see Grace. The patio was nearly deserted.

"Enjoy some of the art?" Ivan said, as though this was a joke.

"Have you seen Grace?" John wanted to knock that complacent, disingenuous smile off the man's face.

"Oh dear," Ivan said, putting a finger to his lips, as though deep in thought. "I think I might have seen them."

"Where?" John said. It came out as a shout. He didn't intend it, but there it was. Ivan smiled at him and nodded.

"Somewhere," the Englishman said, softly, then took a sip of wine. "Simone, you know Paul. Once he sets his mind on something there's no stopping him. It's his Irish blood." Ivan chuckled. "And I do think

he's set his mind on your American lady-friend. So, I wouldn't imagine you'd want to bother them just now."

Simone put a hand on John's arm and said, "I think . . ."

"Where are they?" John shouted, shrugging her hand off, stepping towards Ivan.

Ivan's eyes widened, as though realizing he might not in fact get the joke. "I—" he started, with his maddeningly slow voice.

"Just tell me where they are, you fucking asshole," John said.

"John," Simone said, touching his arm again. "Calm down."

"Just tell me where my sister is," John said, managing this time not to shout.

"What is wrong with this bloke?" Ivan said, turning his face towards the lake, as though he was done here.

John very nearly punched him then, but managed to just reach out, grab the wine glass from Ivan's long fingers and set it on the patio's ledge.

"Now, tell me where they are."

"John, please," Simone said.

"Who's talking to you?" he said, turning towards her, his hands balled into fists.

"Slowly, now," Ivan said, starting to stand.

Simone put a hand to her mouth and shook her head, then pointed to the path and said, "I think they went that way."

"Which way?" John said. He didn't want to take his eyes off Ivan, wouldn't have put it past the man to smash the wine glass over his head.

"Down, I think," Simone said, looking frightened.

John ran across the patio, not looking back, and down the gravel path. Couples were climbing towards him and he nearly bowled the first two over, running, arms out for balance and he didn't care; he needed to find Grace, to make sure she was safe. He wasn't going to leave her again, alone with some man they didn't know in the woods along a lake he didn't know the name of near a town he'd never

heard of. He should never have brought them here. His breath was coming short and it was hard, running at full speed, to keep his eyes on the path and eventually he slipped, falling onto his right knee, his pants tearing, pain shooting up his back as he tumbled into a bush.

For a moment he lay in the branches. Unfortunately, he was still alive. His knee grew a small heart and began thudding. When he opened his eyes he saw a couple watching him, clutching each other. They whispered, then hurried away up the hill.

As he climbed back to the path his shirt and hair caught in the branches. He tried to step firmly on his right leg but it nearly gave out and he stumbled to a tree for balance.

He wasn't far from the bottom, from the dock and managed, by hopping from tree to tree, to get down the last hundred yards. If he put full weight on his injured leg nausea rushed through his head, making him dizzy. When he emerged from the tree line he could see, out on the flashing water, a boat.

He stumbled up to the edge of the dock and let his shoe dangle into the water, staring out at the boat. There were two people in it. One at the oars, the other at the back. The sun off the waves seemed to poke at his eyes, but he ignored the dull headache and focused on the boat and could, after a minute, see that it was a man and a woman and the woman had long hair like Grace. The man, with his back to the dock, had red hair. The woman in the boat was at the oars. She was wearing a blue shirt, just like Grace's.

He knew it was Grace. There was no way to be sure, but he thought she was laughing. He thought she could probably see him, facing the dock as she was and he raised his arm and waved. The woman in the boat reached a hand up, but not to wave, to shield her eyes, as though trying to make out the shape on the shore.

"Grace," he shouted. "Grace, come here!" He tried to get to his feet, but his right leg seemed to have gone dead, was made now of stone, impossibly heavy. The woman on the boat lowered her hand and lifted the oars and pulled. Over and over Grace pulled and each

time the boat slipped a bit farther away, deeper into the blaze of light until, in less than a minute, faster than seemed possible, it was out of sight. ■

BEN MIROV

THE HOLE IN MY FRIENDS WHERE BEN MIROV
SHOULD BE

One boat after another boat after another.
One wave followed by another wave.
A you by a you by a you.
You get my drift. I was floating,
floating and thinking of chores for myself
to stave off the loneliness
I knew would return.
I washed the dishes in the sink.
I touched myself, early in the day.
I sat down with great intensity
to continue my work.
There were little animals that could light themselves
with ancient blue light.
And plenty of books
from which ideas had been torn
to satisfy my hunger.
But nothing made me feel better.
Nothing made me feel
like a grocery cart made of bones
wheeled down to the beach at night.
Nothing perched on the edge
and reached its ghostly hand into the void
inside me and pulled out a poem.
It was pretty good, not great. A little dust
carried in a ceremony
involving many human robots
and a thimble-full of blood.
Otherwise, it was another day.
A day in which terrible things would happen

to many people, possibly myself.
A day that would disappear
into the endless rows of days
and be forgotten like every beacon
that flashed before it.
Whatever you are doing,
hoisting a small dark star into the figment
or pausing for a moment to examine
a blue flame choking on its wick
you are alone, or alone with others
who are also alone.
Your vessel is sinking downward
towards an inexplicable abyss
packed with biomass and meaning.
If you are like me,
you wish you could slow your descent
or stop it all together. Yes.
And now, I am waking up.
Now, I am groping in the dark
for my shirt, my shoes, my wallet and ID.
Now, I am thinking of you
and you and you and of the others
who have noticed my absence
and await my return.

DOVE LIFE

If your wife is built of pigeons
your wife will disappear.
Nor will you have the bullets
to write your love notes in the snow.
Dove-life flutters out of the abyss,
caresses the faceplate on your spacesuit
and flies away with your oxygen tank.
Don't be afraid. Angels were meant
to take away breath. They jump
from synapse to synapse like a ghost.
They give you a handjob in the boat
behind Bethany's house. They live forever
in 2003. When you feel their feathers
smother the forest at night, do what you must.
Descend the staircase to your basement,
your workout bench, your shoebox
full of photographs. Or travel so far
into yourself, when you arrive
at the center the ripcord is a wick
and you must use your teeth
to remove the plastic packaging
that surrounds your heart. Welcome
to my castle made of tiny hollow
bones. The architect left years ago
with a man she barely knew.

DEDICATION

I can see your wolf
in a parallel dimension
called the mirror
in the bathroom of my apartment.
Your wolf is built of purplish light.
I use my eagles to touch your wolf.
Try harder to carry your wolf, I say.
Carry it over the fields of snow
past the army of ghosts asleep in the vale.
Circumnavigate the Necropolis.
If your wolf gets too heavy
don't pop your flares.
No one will rescue you.
You are the rescue team.
When you arrive at the secret bakery
the bakery is closed. The stars appear
one at a time, completely naked.
Your wolf will probably die amongst
the cedars behind your face.
Let's name him Robert Frost.

WEST VIRGINIA: STEPS

1.

In this land of both white
lightning and snake handlers,
I watch a rabbit eat
the leaf lettuce in Aunt Jan's garden.

2.

Tootsie in the trailer next door wears
pink foam rollers in her hair
and watches reruns of *The \$10,000 Dollar Pyramid*.

3.

There's no revival here
except down the street the hawking of hillbilly
heroin and the writhing woman
beneath the hammering man on sheets gone gray.

4.

Coal miners get by
while mountaintops fall into creek beds.
The Pancakes are packing up
their pots and pans and getting out of town.

5.

Sissy finally had that tooth pulled
root and all, then planted it in the sandy soil
at midnight to put a heart hex on Monroe down the street.

6.

The dentist checked for Mountain Dew mouth

and then drove off over the broken pavement,
running over a rattler whose sequin skin quivered in the sun.

7.

Monroe was fine, and Sissy discovered strawberries
rooted, popping out of the selfsame spot in June,
the moon when the strawberry is red.

8.

Eight painted ladies like bellows opened and shut
in the smoke tree. Nearby, the crepe myrtle shaded
Eddie's grave, near Roger Mason's, his kid brother.

9.

After Jan went to bed, after the Pall Mall cigarette,
thunder rumbled over the foothills, and rain spattered the football
field. Rain pelted dogwood petals but stopped by midnight
when Ken, his prison guard uniform wet, came home.

10.

I'm leaving today, riding past Cacapon and on into Winchester,
passing over the Shenandoah, which runs high from the storm.
I can't come back again for awhile but think always of your bad
heart,
your green beans and ham, your blue eyes.

11.

On into Virginia now, turkey buzzards overhead,
my sister and I stop for a sweet tea at McDonald's,
thinking about long lost rituals, people in small houses.

12.

Early July, black clouds follow us to another aunt,
this one in a nursing home on old Plank Road. TVs
blare a black woman's cry, "You are the father of my baby!"
The air conditioning never really cools us down.



*A neighbor had said to him, "A yard sale.
Where do you find the time, Al?"*

OR STAY ON THE LINE FOR OPERATOR ASSISTANCE

A Little Background:

Your last housemate left without paying (to you) her last month's rent. Maybe she forgot. "Maybe she thought she'd paid first and last when she moved in," you told your mother on the phone, "because that's how it's often done."

"But you didn't ask for first and last," said your mother.

"Well, she was between jobs."

"She was only with you two months" your mother said. "For God's sake, will you ever learn?"

Your new housemate is tall, thin-framed with a paunch, high forehead, long hair. He wears suspenders. He's a bartender. But really, he says, he's an artist. Funny, your last housemate had paints, brushes, canvases; and this one has nothing but a backpack and a small suitcase. What kind of artist is he? You'd interviewed a dozen people and he wasn't your first choice, not even your tenth, but he was prepared to move in right away. In fact, he moved in right away, before the interview was finished. Maybe he didn't understand the process, though you did try to explain. *Anyway, he's really nice.*

He said he didn't mind that you like to keep the kitchen sink clean because "everyone has their thing," or that you don't like loud music after midnight "because most nights I'll be out until two or three anyway." It didn't bother him that your mother would be coming to visit. He said he'd like to invite his own parents, when Mom gets out of the pen and Dad can take off his goddamn ankle bracelet. His laugh was an abrupt, sharp series of coughs and you sensed behind it something that made your heart cringe, like spotting an

open wound beneath someone's hair; but with a little tilt of your head you saw something else. You saw in him one who tries to make the best of a bad situation, one who doesn't wish to burden others with his pain, admirable traits; and when you told him so he seemed stunned, as if no one had ever complimented him before.

People have often told you what an unusually nice person you are. You probably heard it first from your fourth grade teacher when you alone among your classmates chose to sit with the new boy at lunch. The new boy was greeted like a plague and not because of the scars from a third degree burn on his neck, or because one of his ears looked like a finger,* or not for those reasons only; but because he proved very quickly to be a liar and a thief. You were the only one to call him by his real name, or listen to his fabulous stories. You even brought him to your house once for dinner. He and his family suddenly moved away to who-knows-where and he thanked you by 1) starting the rumor that you have a plastic sheet on your bed for accidents, and 2) stealing your Star Wars lunch box. *Was there ever any doubt that he took it? Only you would say so.*

You defended your mother against the tirades of your father and you defended your father against her assaults upon his character; these typically whispered to your little brother long after your father had moved away and when mother thought you were safely out of earshot. You defended your parents against the snide attacks of little brother: *losers, freaks*. Sure, he was hurt and had plenty of reasons to feel angry. We all do. But you are never angry. Life is unfair. But you are never unfair, except perhaps to yourself.

Your name is Chris.

To begin your adventure now, go to (1). To learn more about yourself, press (2). If you'd like a semi-gratuitous description of a yard sale, choose (3). If you have a rotary phone, stay on the line and someone will assist you.

(1)

Surprise. He's a really good listener. Surprise. He asks a lot of questions like he really wants to know you. After one night of meeting, sharing stories, getting familiar, you've been invited by Charles, the new housemate/bartender, to visit him at The Black Hole, a punk/goth/biker-themed bar on lower Haight Street. You know this place, not because you've ever stepped inside, but because you walk past it on the way to your bus stop and you've seen the ownership change hands five times in three years. The theme is anger. The theme is disappointment. The theme is five gallons of flat black paint, a red bulb, the handlebars of motorcycles mounted like antlers on the walls, a torn poster of Bob Marley, graffiti from a can of silver Krylon. The place is empty except for a few tables and chairs, a pool table and a skinny kid with a spiky red mohawk standing behind the bar. He is eating a slice of pizza off a paper plate.

"Hi," you say.

He wipes grease off his chin with his bare shoulder. Maybe in that was a shrug, a nod, some sort of acknowledgment.

"Excuse me," you say, "I'm looking for Charles."

"Who's Charles?"

"The bartender?"

The kid says, "In back, smoking."

"That's funny," you say, "he told me he quit."

"That's funny," the kid says flatly.

Charles appears, wiping his hands on his Hawaiian print shirt. He tucks his thumbs in his suspenders. "You made it," he says.

"You wanted to talk," you say. You wonder, was that too blunt? "I like the motif." You point to a display of rusted gas caps behind the bar.

"This place is bullshit," Charles says.

"Well, for some reason no businesses have really caught on here." You laugh. "Yet!"

Charles opens a bottle of beer and sets it on the bar.

"No thanks." You tell him about the decongestant you've taken. You tell him that over the past couple of years your allergies have gotten almost unbearable. You begin to tell him about your family's history of sinus trouble when he takes a swig from the beer and says, "Where's Riki?"

The boy with the mohawk shrugs.

"Derek?" Charles asks.

"They'll be here," the boy says. "Where the hell else they going?"

To you, Charles says, "Chris, I'm going to need you to front me the first month's rent."

Your neck suddenly feels hot. Now your cheeks. You wonder, has anyone ever blushed in The Black Hole? "I can't do that," you say.

He folds his arms and sets them on the bar, sets his forehead upon his arms, mutters, "Shit."

"I'm sorry," you say, "but . . ."

"Fuck," he hollers, and stamps his foot.

It's quiet until the boy mumbles, "Then I guess you ain't gonna pay me."

"You'll get your money," Charles says to him, and to you, he smiles, says, "You can't blame a guy for trying."

"Well," you say.

"Stick around," he says. "Watch the man operate."

"I would," you say.

"I thought of a way you could help me. And," he says, "you'd be helping yourself."

Enter one tall, one short person, both dressed from crown to sole in white Mylex. Each carries a black plastic respirator. The tall one tears off his hood. "Cuervo," he says, "and a beer."

"What the hell," says Charles, coughing out his laugh.

"Same," says the short one removing her hood. She shakes out her microbraids. She's looking at Charles as she bends her head in

your direction, as if to say, "Who's this?" As if to say, "Who the fuck is this?"

To learn more about you, choose (2). Again there's that yard sale, hit (3). To continue this adventure now, press (4). Maybe you'd like to know more about your relationship with your mother, punch (5). I wrote a letter to a Countrywide Home Loans, go to (6).

(2)

There had been another new kid in school, this time in eighth grade, a very shy girl from South Africa. She was slight, pre-pubescent, and had a high voice with a musical lilt. You liked her immediately. Your classmates studied her like jaguars. Already you'd heard a few kids mocking her unusual accent. Oh, you'd wanted so badly for her to fit in, feel accepted, feel at home. It was in Math, as everyone copied the quadratic equation off the board, you folded your hands beneath your desk and made a silent prayer. She raised her hand and asked the teacher, "May I please borrow a rubber?" Your classmates, even your teacher, were stupefied until the room exploded in laughter. Suddenly everyone was making mistakes; everyone was requesting rubbers. *Are you finished with that rubber? May I please borrow it?* You watched the girl turn crimson and shrivel. You leaned over and whispered, "We call *that* an eraser."

"Why are you telling me this?" asked your therapist.

"I thought you asked me."

"All I said was 'Good afternoon.'"

"Okay?"

"So?"

"I haven't gotten to the point yet."

"We both know what the point is."

"Oh?"

"The point is – you're a nice person."

"No."

"The point is – people don't appreciate you."

"Well."

"Why are you here?"

"Really, it wasn't my idea."

"You haven't answered my question."

"You don't have to be so . . ."

"You sound irritated."

"No."

"You're angry at me."

"No, certainly not. You're just doing your job."

He sighed. Looked at his watch. "You're angry. Tell me what it feels like."

"No, not angry. Not at all. It's my sinuses. I didn't get enough sleep."

Therapist took off his glasses and massaged the bridge of his nose.

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why are you here?"

"I made a bad choice."

"'A bad choice' you call it?"

"I wouldn't do it again. I don't want to. It was selfish. When I think about how it hurt my mother."

"Yes?"

"Yes what?"

"What *do* you think?"

"I think I know where you're going and I'm not going there."

If you want to go there: (5).

(3)

A pair of heavily varnished 3 ft kitchen stools. Paper lamp shade. Tinted glass lamp shade, one panel missing. Two brass standing lamps, one off kilter. Civil War picture book. Children's clothing in a cardboard box—FREE. A Mr. Coffee. Copper colored Jell-O mold in the shape of a trout. Exercise bike, rusted chain. Treadmill, black and red wires dangling from start panel. Thigh Master missing one cylindrical foam pad. Series of Disney cartoon books: *The Lion King*, *Pocohantas*, *Beauty and the Beast*. One cracked Frisbee—FREE. Futon frame. Red, white and blue quilt (and purple/pink from bleeding in the wash). Paperback copy of *Cujo*, *Pet Sematery*. A half-dozen glossy covered romances. Paper copy of *Passages*. HP Printer, Deskjet. Box of blank cassette tapes. Box of cords, wires, adapters—FREE. Oven mitts shaped like crab claws. A wet suit. Dust mop. Parcheesi in a box, crayon scribbles on top side. Soccer cleats, sizes five and seven. Wreath made of plastic holly leaves, red berries. Parfait glasses, six. Toaster-oven. Racquet ball racquets, two. Salad bowl and wooden tongs. Series of pipe wrenches: small, medium, large. Ratchet set (missing 16mm). Shelf brackets. Stack of wicker baskets. Tupperware tub of Magic Markers. MiniVac. Pair of mud-flaps. Small box of coasters. Postcards, unused. Small box of castors and hardware. Home entertainment center with peeled veneer, shape of Illinois. *Real Estate for Idiots*. *King Lear* Cliff Notes. Orbital jigsaw. Set of needle-nose pliers, three, unopened. Addams Family playing cards. Rollerblades, two pair. Wooden chalice. Collection of belt buckles, Western scenes. Leather football with a bubble between the laces. Box of dog toys—FREE. Electric leaf blower. Electric hedge trimmer. Fireplace tools. A dozen chrome hood ornaments. Glass picture frame, heart-shaped. Box of VHS tapes, including all of Patrick Swayze's films. Ceramic rabbit. Inflatable life raft in box. American flag in box. Shower curtain with dolphins.

If you like Patrick Swayze films, your best bet is (4). If you wonder why the man who held the yard sale is overcome with grief on Sunday evening, (11).

(4)

The tall man in Mylex crouches, utters a sharp shrill sound and swings into a roundhouse kick. His foot passes over the short woman's head. You feel the wind of it. You step back, try to take in the full room without letting on how frightened you are.

"Cut the bullshit, Derek," says the woman.

"Flinched," says Derek.

"Did not," says the woman.

"You saw it," Derek says to Charles. "Riki flinched."

"Wasn't looking," says Charles.

"You saw it, Axe."

Boy with mohawk shrugs.

"Well, I know you saw it." Derek is looking at you. Riki is looking at you, too.

"Who wouldn't flinch?" you say. "That was a hard kick. Very impressive." Derek looks briefly at Riki, then back at you. Riki doesn't take her eyes off you.

"Are you saying I flinched?"

"I'm only saying that if you did . . ."

"Is this your friend?" Riki says to Charles. "Your friend is vague."

"Vague is hard for me," Derek says.

"I like people who say what they mean," says Riki. "When people don't say what they mean, I feel, I feel . . . what do I feel, Randy?"

"Name's Charles," Charles says. He pulls on his suspenders and tucks the front of his shirt into his pants.

Riki and Derek exchange quick meaningful looks.

"Call me Axe," says boy with mohawk, laughing.

To Riki, the man you know as Charles says, "I guess I'd say you feel pissed?"

"Apprehensive," Riki says.

You want to show you're a sport. You laugh. "That's a good one," you say.

Riki steps toward you. You're only inches apart. She puffs up such that her small body seems to fill the upper portion of her plastic coverall. She is half a foot shorter than you, but that's never made a damn bit of difference. You're not a fighter. You're looking over the head of this aggressive, apprehensive woman at Charles. He says, "Drink's up, Riki." He taps the shot glass on the surface of the bar.

"What say this one's on me?" you say. "I prefer no hard feelings." Glances fly until all eyes settle on you again, dumbfounded.

Charles slaps the surface of the bar. "Listen up," he says. "You're all probably wondering why I invited you here."

"Not really," says Axe.

"Well," he says, "I know you're all tight for money."

"You got that right," says Derek.

"Sheeit," Riki says. "Tight was three months ago."

"By the way," Axe gives you a gap-toothed smile, "you said you're buying this round?"

"This one's on the house," Charles says. He winks at you. "I think I know how we can all get out of this hole. I've got something big in the works. Big."

The others look at Charles with interest.

"Oh no, no thanks, count me out," you say, "but hey, good luck with your plan." You wink. You rub your hands together rapidly, conspiratorially.

"Wait," says Derek.

"Wait," says Charles.

In the silence that follows, you wonder 1) Why has Derek taken a pool stick off the table? 2) Why has Riki stepped between you and

the door? 3) What kind of artist your new housemate is because you've never seen him practice anything.

For more about your early trauma, (5); for that letter I wrote, (6); for more action and adventure, (7).

(5)

"Do you really think I never get angry?" you said to the therapist.

"I suspect you're angry most of the time." He put his glasses back on, took them off again.

"Why would you say that?"

"Why don't you let me ask the questions?"

"Oh, of course, I'm sorry."

"You're angry at your father for leaving when you were six years old."

"That was long ago," you said, or tried to say, but the words got stuck in your throat. You swallowed. "It wasn't his fault."

"It was your mother's fault."

"That's not exactly fair. She was hurt. She did what many . . ."

"What did you want?"

"I only wanted us to be a happy family." You said, "I'm not sure where you're headed . . ."

"Did you say what you wanted?"

"I'm sure I must've."

"Did anyone listen to what you wanted?"

"It was a confusing time. Everyone had their wants. I can't expect . . ."

"Did your mother listen?"

"It was so long ago, it's hard for me . . ."

"Your mother is not a good listener."

He seemed to be studying you when he said this. And you said nothing, because, well, if you can't say something nice . . .

"Now listen." The therapist put his glasses on, took them off, folded them, set them on his desk, set his hand on top. "Listen," he leaned forward. "Do you remember a fire?"

"No."

He waited. He'd already proven he can wait a long time.

"A fire?"

You have to admire his stillness.

"Oh, that's some story my mother likes to tell. God knows why."

"She's lying, then?"

"Aren't we being a little dramatic today?" You laughed.

"I was kidding," you said.

Through a fistful of Kleenex you said, "I remember smoke."

You're on the crux of something here. For more about your past hit (8).

(6)

Countrywide Home Loans
1299 4th Street, Suite 502
San Rafael, CA 94901

4/21/08

Dear Customer Services Representative:

Yesterday I lost an important piece of paper and my searching led me to our family's paper recycle bin—a 2'x3'x2' cardboard box. The box was full and my search took a long time, but here, let me get to the point. The box was largely filled with letters and envelopes sent by your company. You've been trying to entice me and my wife with low interest mortgages for several months now, and it seems

lately that you've stepped up your efforts. On some days my wife and I each receive mail from you, and on some days we each receive two pieces of mail from you. Thank you for your interest in us, but we do not want your services and we would prefer no further solicitations. The same goes for email.

To get back to your adventure, press (7), to read more communications with Countrywide (9).

(7)

"So," Charles claps and says, "what's with the Mylex suits, anyway?"

"Don't," says Riki, looking at Derek.

"He's cool," Derek says.

"It's not him that makes me, um, uneasy," Riki says.

"Let's just say," Derek says, "we look like painters, don't we?"

"Maybe," says Axe, "if you had some paint on you."

"Or," you say, "very neat painters!"

Charles puts his hand over his mouth and coughs, or laughs. "And did you find gainful employment?"

Riki looks at Derek. Derek shakes his head.

"Did you even get past security?" says Axe. Everyone looks at Axe, as if to say *shut the fuck up*.

Charles throws back his shoulders and paces with one hand coasting along the top of the bar. "Chris," he says to you, "we're all friends here." Again all eyes settle on you, more suspicious than friendly.

"That's something to be thankful for," you say.

"Axe is a fine young man." Charles says. "Maybe he'd benefit from a semester of finishing school."

"Fuck you," says Axe.

"Derek has a great deal of energy and he's really very agreeable, when he takes his pill."

“Fuck you,” says Derek.

“And Riki, well, she had a hell of a childhood. Trust does not come easily, but once she decides to be your friend, she’ll kill for you.”

“You’ve got to admire that kind of loyalty,” you say. “I certainly do.”

Riki steps close again. You can smell the tequila on her breath.

“You *do* want to help us, right?” Charles says.

Curiously, the sharp looks you receive from Derek and Riki are not as threatening as you first perceived them to be. There is no reason to believe they wouldn’t both enjoy hitting-kicking-biting you, but your fear has dissipated, become almost imperceptible like the heavy percussion from the stereo of the car which had been parked just outside the door and is now three blocks away.

In place of your fear comes a combination of feelings which seem unlikely as a combination, and unlikely in this context. Feelings which, historically, have arisen out of other feelings: futility, rage, despair. When have you felt this way before?

You’ll need months, years more therapy, but you can get an inkling, go directly to (8), or to continue the adventure now, go to (10).

(8)

Two times: 1) When you were seven and saw the curtain over your mother’s bed come alive, curl into a bright blue S, plumes of gray and black smoke slithering across her ceiling, and 2) Three weeks ago when you made your bad choice and then watched your blood swirl in the bathroom basin. You might call this cocktail of emotions – exhilaration, with a half jigger of sadness.

You wouldn’t have a name for these feelings at all if it hadn’t been that earlier in the day your therapist had chosen – *it is his job* –

to push your buttons. “Why don’t you tell me why your last housemate left so abruptly?” he’d said. “Talk to me about the ‘kitchen sink war’ (your mother’s phrase) or the half-dozen daily Post-Its you left in the bathroom.” He was unrelenting. “Tell me again how it was a coincidence you tried to kill yourself just five minutes before your mother’s weekly visit.” He was determined to back you into a corner, determined to dial up your rage, and when you wouldn’t give him the satisfaction he said, “You don’t want to know yourself. You’re wasting my time. You’re wasting your good mother’s money. And if I hear you mention your sinuses again, I think I’m going to slit my own wrists.”

“Shut up,” you’d said. “Shut up, you inconsiderate, self-centered—”

“Good,” he said. “Now how do you feel?”

“I’m sorry,” you’d said, “I don’t know what’s got into me,” but even as the words passed through your lips you experienced a modicum of the above-mentioned elixir. You felt exhilarated, and just a little sad. You wondered, is this why people get tattoos in such tender places? You wondered, is there a you inside you waiting to be set free?

(9)

6/30/08

Dear Customer Services Representative:

My neighbor, a dear friend, had a sudden, surprising medical emergency. In order to pay for services and keep up with other obligations, she refinanced her home. Her monthly payments now – to you – are far beyond what she can afford. Yesterday I helped her load her clothing, her son’s clothing, and a few prized possessions into the back of her minivan. Her house is now vacant. You will re-

ceive no more payments from her. She and her son are headed who knows where.

Her boy, by the way, has dyslexia and very low self-esteem and she, only recently, obtained special ed. services for him at the public school. Now they take their home on the road.

Also: the boy gets car sick.

You ought to feel ashamed.

I wrote over two months ago requesting that you take us off your list. We do not want to refinance. We do not want a new mortgage. Stop sending us mail!

More on this, (13).

(10)

Charles tells the others you're perfect. He says, "Absolutely perfect."

And only hours ago the therapist had said, *You try to be perfect, Chris. That's your problem. No one's perfect. No one can be perfect, but you try, and you stuff your feelings, and then, look out . . .*

"Chris," says Charles, "no one would ever suspect you."

You breathe. You count to three. "I think I know what kind of artist you are. You're a con artist." As you say it, you experience a rush of adrenalin.

Charles approximates a look of hurt. It doesn't suit him, though it amuses Axe.

Riki says, "We all con artists, baby. You got a problem with that?"

"Yes I do," you say. "People get hurt. People come to feel they can't trust one another."

"Sounds to me like we doing people a service," Riki says.

"Everybody wants to get over," says Derek. "Sheeit."

"Not me," you say.

"The difference is, some of us has a plan," says Riki.

“I only want what’s fair,” you say.

“That’s what I want,” says Charles. “That’s all I want.” And though your heart rate is climbing, you’re reminded why he impressed you the other night. You have to admire the way he listens and waits for just the right moment to interject. And you have to wonder now what kind of personal information he drew out of you and what he might plan to do with it. “Five way split,” he says. “You get your rent and then some.”

“Whoa cowboy,” says Riki. “Why should this greenhorn get an even take?”

“An even take?” you say. “No. No. I don’t want any part of this!”

If that’s your choice, proceed directly to (12). If you want to hear more, go to (13). And for the aftermath of the yard sale, (11).

(11)

Total value of items based on sticker prices: \$205.25. Value of actual sales: \$19.10. Time spent sorting, hauling, dusting, setting up display, pricing: 3 hours. Sitting by table on Saturday: 6 hours. Sunday: 5 hours. Putting away unsold items: 2 ½ hours.

Which brings us back to Sunday evening, the first evening of daylight savings, ironically, and for the man with the yard sale, the beginning of the horrible, inexplicable conviction that darkness has weight and volume, has moved in, has crushed or displaced everything, everything, and this unpleasant calculation: His time is worth less than: \$1.25/hr.

Ridiculous, he says. You can’t put a price on time, on experience. And so, seated in his Barcalounger with an extra pillow for his aching lower back and a full tumbler of Seven & Seven, he tries to attribute value to his time in some other way, any other way.

How does one do this? He'd spotted the redheaded woodpecker he's heard so often. A plus. He got to see Casey and the twins, held them (the twins). He'd had a reasonably relaxed phone call with his ex, some laughter about the things they'd shared, particularly the Jell-O mold. He didn't fight with his daughter, didn't spend money on gas or go to the mall, didn't drink until after 5pm! All pluses. But he'd strained his back moving the treadmill. He didn't clean his gutters. A neighbor had said to him, "A yard sale. Where do you find the time, Al?" He'd overheard another neighbor say, "What a load of crap." He dropped the box with the parfait glasses and they all broke. He sold the belt buckles with Western scenes for too little, and he'll miss them and the memories that came to him as he polished them. The feeling, as he handed over the buckles, took the bills and stuffed them in his metal cash box, it reminded of the day he was served his divorce papers (as did the phone call), which made him think of the last time he'd cried, and the time before that and the time he always thinks of when he thinks of himself crying; he was just a boy with a kite alone in a field. He'd thought then, as now, no one will miss me when I'm gone.

How does one do this? It's a dangerous pursuit, feeling the way he does. How does one attribute value to his time? He thinks, my expectations have fallen so far. He kicks off his slippers and examines one of his bare feet, or so it would seem, but really his mind is hobbling down a dark hall.

(12)

You made a good choice. You did not sell yourself short. You did not compromise your values, and so you will likely be spared hours of painful self doubt and re-evaluation. Sure, life is absurd, but it's not your problem, not yet.

“Good night Charles/Randy. Good luck with your scheme. It was a pleasure to meet you Derek, Riki, and Axe.” *Not.* And never mind your mother and never mind what your therapist said. He looked like he was having a bad day anyway. Your integrity is intact, and better still, nice is nice. What a nicer world it would be if people would only be nicer. Who can argue with that? Congratulations! No need to read any further. ☺

Chances are you’ll get a beating, though.

(13)

9/12/08

Dear Customer Services Representative:

Let’s try a thought experiment. Let’s imagine that someone lives with you in your modern, well-furnished home; a loving husband, a loving wife, a wide-eyed trusting child, a loving ailing parent with a bad hip or a nagging cough. Now imagine me coaxing your loved one with promises of candy, painkillers, kitchen appliances, a flat screen TV, whatever, out of your comfortable home, through the gates of your gated community, beyond the 25mph speed zone, across the railroad tracks and up the littered embankment to the highway. Imagine the embankment is steep, muddy and overgrown with blackberry thorns. The sky is darkening, rain blowing sideways, doubly hard when the eighteen wheelers pass. Through shivering tears your loved one says to me, “Please, I’ve made a mistake. Please, please, I only want to go home.”

“Your home is gone.” I tell her/him. “This is home. See that piece of cardboard. Pick it up.”

PS. I Do Not Want Your Services And I Do Not Want Your Solicitations!

PPS. I'LL DO IT!

To hear what the Countrywide rep. had to say, press (15)

(14)

Congratulations! You have an open mind. Let the real adventure begin.

Riki throws her arm over your shoulders. "I guess if you a friend of Charles, you a friend of mine."

She pulls you up to the bar and the others come round in a huddle.

"You a friend of mine," says Derek, "if you help us rope a sucker."

"Fuckin' amen to that." Axe slaps your back.

You know something about cons. *House of Games, The Grifters, The Sting*. Often an envelope is involved, scraps of useless paper. Cons appeal to our selfish nature. Or they appeal to our better selves, the wish to be generous and helpful. In many cases, they appeal to both. What's unusual in this circumstance is that perhaps you are being conned into being a part of a con.

Also unusual is the way you've begun to feel. Either your therapist had it all backwards, or you do. He made it seem as if being nice is not nice at all. He would have you believe that you are conning people all the time, that in fact you are full of resentment and that your show of niceness is really the most insidious form of condescension. It's no wonder you're lonely, he said. And worst of all, he said, you're conning yourself. It's no wonder that periodically you enter a black hole of depression.

Perhaps there is a you inside you waiting to be set free.

"Well," you say, "no promises, but I'm willing to listen."

At this point, a customer enters. Then another. A young man, a young woman, now another man. They look as if they may be university students. An unfamiliar voice, something from the darkest

crevice of your mind says, *easy marks*. Where the hell did that come from?

Under his breath Charles says to Axe, "Serve these punks, then get your ass in the office." With a tilt of his head he invites you and the others to the back.

The office is a cluttered desk and several chairs, each one occupied by stacks of invoices. Derek and Riki clear spaces to sit. You find a place in the corner to lean. Charles drops into a chair on wheels, spins three-sixty, and pounds the desk top. "Listen," he says, "listen carefully. When I was in North County I shared a cell with a guy who was going to be sent up for armed robbery."

"So?" says Riki.

"So, they never found his stash. I heard it's several hundred thousand."

"This is getting interesting," Derek says.

"Does this guy talk in his sleep?" says Axe.

"No," says Charles. "But he talked. He talked plenty. I heard all about it from one of the poor bastards he ratted out."

"He cut a deal?" Riki says.

Charles nods. "I saw him in the neighborhood yesterday. Told him to pop in for a free drink."

"What's he look like?" says Derek.

"Nervous. Like he knows he's being watched. I know he needs someone to help retrieve his booty."

"So why don't you do it?" says Axe.

"He wouldn't trust me. He wants somebody with good intentions, a pure heart; basically he wants someone who's clueless."

Everyone looks at you. "Our new pal, Chris?" says Axe.

You shake your head.

"Just hear me out," says Charles.

"I don't think . . ."

"It's common courtesy," Riki says, one of her hands balled in a fist.

"I certainly don't want to be rude," you say, "but, even if I decided to go along, how's this supposed to work? I go up to a stranger and ask him if I can help him retrieve his stolen money?"

It goes like this," says Charles. "We work an old-fashioned con on you. Riki's got money but someone's after her. She needs a safe place to put it. You want to help. You show her where you keep your money."

"Then," says Riki, "the old switcheroo."

"No," Charles says. "There's no need to take it that far." And with a laugh and a cough, he adds, "Besides, Chris is our pal."

There is a brief exchange of meaningful looks.

"Our pal?" says Derek.

"That's what I said," says Charles.

"I get it," says Axe. "He sees us con Chris, so . . ."

"So he thinks that he can con Chris," Charles says.

Now it's quiet. You lived up to your promise. You heard the plan and after some consideration you say, "That's not me. I don't con people. Sure, maybe he's a criminal, but I've got nothing against him personally. Sorry."

Charles puts his arm on the desk and his head on his arm. He mutters, "shit" and "fuck," but then he looks up at you and manages a thin smile. "If that's how you feel," he says.

"Tell me again," says Derek. "What's this guy look like?"

"It doesn't matter any more," says Charles.

"It matters to me." Derek says.

"You'll know him immediately. One of his ears looks like a finger."*

You can still walk away from this. ☺?

Or if you're willing to risk moral and psychological confusion, possible despair, possible growth, (16).

(15)

11/25/08

Dear Valued Customer:

We thank you for your continued interest in Countrywide Home Loans. We're now offering a 40 year home mortgage at the rate of the 30 year plan. 0% down and the lowest monthly payment yet. To see details . . .

You get the idea. Bastards. I know it's a big corporation, but one would think that somewhere within it is a mind, a heart, something resembling a nervous system, something to which one could appeal on simple human terms. Me, I don't want to be naïve, I don't want to be cynical, I'm just trying to find . . . I don't know . . .

(16)

It's been 29 years since you last saw him, but scar tissue doesn't change. The trademark finger is still on the left side of his head as you would expect. He's balding and combs his thin black hair in stripes across his pate. He wears a trench coat down to his Addidas. You're not supposed to look at him, but it's hard to resist. The rumor about your bed-wetting lasted into high school. Your Star Wars lunch box was a limited edition and would be worth a small fortune now. You tell yourself, maybe this will teach him a lesson. Maybe this will do him some good. He orders a Jack & Coke and sits alone at a table by the window.

Riki charges in, breathless and disheveled. She must've applied her lipstick in the dark. She's traded the Mylex suit for a knee-length flowered dress and a patent leather handbag. She pounces on the bar and in an accent that sounds West Indian or West African or at

times, East German, she pleads, "Someone must help me. A man chase me. He want my money. It all I have."

Charles listens with an expression of irritation, but he lets her describe her predicament, then shoos her away.

She approaches Axe. He says, "Piss off." You see her kick his boot. He says again, much louder, "Piss off."

A voice offstage (from the sidewalk) calls "T'kelah." The woman you know as Riki runs behind the bar and hides. Charles protests, threatens to call the cops. Enter Derek, also newly attired, like some '70s TV pimp. He says he's looking for a woman in a flowered dress. Charles leans on the bar, looks as if he is about to hand her over when, perfectly on cue, you say, "I haven't seen any such woman here." Derek looks at you suspiciously, menacingly; exits. He reappears briefly in the doorway, "I'll be back," he says, then runs off down the street. A moment later Riki emerges, thanks you, hugs you. You're not supposed to look, but you can't help it—the dupe is taking it all in.

Riki whispers in your ear, "Don't blow it." Then again, in character, she produces a thick envelope from her purse and in her amalgamated accent she asks for a safe place to keep it. The stipulation, as always, is that you show her where you keep your valuables.

"Wait," says your mark, rising to his feet. And, at precisely the same moment, "Wait," says the woman from the party of three, university students. *Not in the plan!* Riki drops her accents briefly to tell the woman to mind her own goddamn business. "No, just a minute," says the woman. "Something is very wrong with this picture." She asks you to talk to her outside, alone. You look at Charles. He grimaces, shrugs.

You step outside. You stand with your back against the faux brick front of the bar. The woman looks at you with all the sincerity a face can hold. "You're being conned," she says.

"Okay," you say.

"Okay?"

"I get it. Thank you."

The woman studies you, incredulous. She shakes her head and goes back inside.

You see someone moving in the shadows half way down the block. It must be Derek. You want to tell him the jig is up. Or is it? Certainly the script has run out. Now what? You try to collect your thoughts. Nothing, as far as you know, has been lost, and nothing gained, but there will be plenty to think about. *What will you call this feeling?* You'd fallen in with a bad crowd. You'd tried to ignore your conscience, and soon enough it seems, you will pay for it. You want a cookie, two ounces of the night time cold formula, your flannel pajamas and your bed. You're reminded of seasickness, like you've lost your bearings and you urgently need to lie down. You're ten dizzy paces toward home when you hear, Psst.

You keep walking.

Psst.

It's him, your dupe, your mark, your man, lighting a cigarette in front of the bar. He raises a hand to say wait and now he's coming toward you.

"I'm sorry," you say.

He's still coming.

"My sinuses are acting up and I have to . . ."

He walks with a slight limp and stops several feet away. What little light there is, is on you. He's slow to speak and when he does it comes out falteringly. His eyes, it seems, are cast down at the sidewalk. "You look like someone I know, or knew," he says. "I never remember a face," he laughs, "but yours . . ." he risks a glance up, then down again ". . . I could just tell. You're a nice person."

Over his shoulder you can see the party of three coming out of The Black Hole. "I'm not sure what I am," you say.

You can't see his eyes. Perhaps, you think, he's on the brink of telling you where he stashed his stash. In any case, you don't want to know. You speak quickly so he won't. "I try to be fair," you say. "I

try to be kind because I believe it has to begin somewhere. At least that's what I've always believed. I don't know what I think now."

"Me," he says, "I never tried. I never much cared." He turns and you both watch as Riki, Axe and Charles exit the bar. Charles locks the door. He's carrying his backpack and his suitcase, your new housemate!

Again you rush to fill the quiet. "I thought it was my sinuses. It could be adenoids. My mother and my grandfather . . ."

"Tonight," he says. "Tonight I had this feeling like maybe I ought to do the right thing for a change."

"Oh. Good. Good for you." You almost pat him on the arm, but think better of it.

"I know Phil," he says.

You shrug.

"Or Randy? Or Charles?" He laughs. "We go way back."

"Oh."

He digs into the pocket of his trench coat and hands you your wallet. "I saw the woman take it. When she was hugging you."

It's hard to speak, but you manage, "Thank you."

"Cancel all your cards," he says. "I don't know if you had money."

Your eyes fill with tears. "I don't care," you say. "Thank you," you say.

"Don't mention it." He begins to walk back in the direction of the bar.

You call out, "Maybe what goes around really does come around."

"Maybe," he pauses. "I hope not." He begins walking again. "Well," he says, turning, "maybe if some of it comes around, sometimes."

"But not all of it," you say, "not all the time." ■

JOHN BIANDO

LOVE IS NOT LOVE

let love's impediments admit me,
mind love's bend and alter true.

love alters and bends time, o no, in doom
love alters doom and loves the stars
and loves errors.

To every wandering love, love me never.

no man ever bent, no man loved ever impedes,
no man, love. No man in trees.
Minds true are time's fool. When love finds me not, love, let me be.

Love is not love.
It looks on bending cheeks, love, but it looks not like that.
o, love, I never admit impediments. Let me admit never
 impediments, love,
let me alter
love is not love
love is not love

o love, in tempests bends bends. Love is no man
shaken love, o, ever man. No loved alteration finds ever.
 Man alters ever
no.

O, not, alter me love. Remove my cheeks, but rosy let me be.
Love is me shaken rosy.
Love is shaken from a tree.

brief hours upon me and weeks, o, love, let me fool time's be.
let me be. Let me me. let be be. Bending within my be, love,
let me me.

ELLEN LAFLECHE

WORKING THE EVENING SHIFT AT THE ICE HOTEL,
QUEBEC CITY

I wipe the ice swan.
My dust rag sticks to its throat,
a curious tongue.

Even the sun
is ice. I
watch it die,
slipping like a suicidal head
through the river's glittering crust.

Fragile as frost
the lace curtains crackle,
frozen tatting
fracturing against
my breath-heated hands.

I pity the lovers. They come
to this frigid place
thinking they can melt
their ice beds with their torrid
sex-rubbing, their hot-lunged lust.

All around me,
ice-beds groan.
The lovers boil in their juices.

Still,
the thawing is always minor -
a few tears pouring

from the ice-mattress.
I hear the tears
smacking against the ice
floor, each one
cracking
into spiky
salt-free shards.

I sweep them up.



*"Next week?" Sugeng shouts in English at their backs.
"Next week you choose Bisu and Sugeng. Okay?"*

BISU AND THE MISSIONARY'S DAUGHTER

Palembang, Sumatra, 1965

The caddie boys grunt, leaning into the bumper, pushing the jeep from behind. Bisu steers carefully, one hand on the wheel, the other on the handbrake, his right foot poised above the brake pedal on the floor. His left foot holds the door propped open, so that he can follow the mud marks in the flattened grass as the jeep rolls down the bank toward the waterhole. When the axle disappears underwater, the boys bang on the bumper, and Bisu brings the jeep to a halt. He climbs through the window and, crouched on the hood, begins to rub at the windshield with a wet rag.

Hannah watches from behind the hibiscus hedge that curves with the road to the club-house. The caddie boys aren't supposed to wash cars in the waterholes. They do it for extra cash Saturday afternoons after Samsudin, the golf pro, who is also the caddie boss, has left, and the Americans from the oil camp on the other side of the river have gone home. She turns away and begins to walk to the top of the road, where she is supposed to be waiting for Yusef's opelét. She looks over her shoulder again. Stares harder, but Bisu won't look back. Hannah breaks the stem of a flower away from a branch, and crushes the stamens between her thumb and forefinger, staining her skin with purple hibiscus dye. And then Yusef's opelét is approaching. She tosses the flower into the gutter and runs to meet the car.

"Masuk, non'." Yusef speaks brusquely through the rear view mirror, motioning for Hannah to hurry. "Jepat." The clubhouse road

is a private road. The Americans have no need for an opelét. The Americans have drivers of their own. He has explained this to her many times.

Hannah pulls the back door closed and brushes her hands against her shorts. Two of the women seated inside the opelét live in Hannah's kampung. Hannah greets them, but moves quickly to the bench behind the driver's seat so that she can talk to Yusef through the divider.

"They work for the Muaya family, those two. Ya?"

"Ya."

"Are they going to tell on me?"

"What they going tell? They only like watch. Everyone know I go your father church. Everyone know this is why you ride with me."

Hannah likes Yusef. She likes his gold teeth. The smell of the cigarettes he smokes. The black sunglasses he wears. Once she told him he looked a little like a painting of President Sukarno she had seen on a billboard wearing them. It was one of the few times he had smiled at her openly.

When he works, Yusef wears one of two shirts: a black jersey that looks like somebody's father's golf shirt, or a yellow dress shirt. Black one day. Yellow the next. Meticulously washed in between.

The shirts are from the collection box. He has asked Hannah to tell him whenever a new box arrives at the mission, and she has. He won't wear just anything.

"You think Pak Sukarno would wear a shirt like this?" he sometimes asks her, handing it back. "Maybe your jongos like wear this shirt while he dust the furniture," he says, shaking his head, exaggerating the word for houseboy. "Give it to him if you like."

Sometimes Yusef smokes Kréték and sometimes he smokes Kawung. Today it is Kréték. She smells clove in the smoke rolling over his shoulder, and, from the shelf overhead, the skin of green fruit.

The kampung where Hannah lives isn't far from the golf course, but if she wants to ride with Yusef, she must travel his route all the way to the ferry landing and back through the center of the city.

Yusef drives slowly through the maze of winding streets and stalls of Pasar 16 Ilir, searching the crowd exiting the marketplace for passengers in need of a lift. Each time he comes to a stop, a cloud of exhaust rolls over the window sill. Hannah lifts her hair away from the back of her neck. A fine red powder of dust coats her arms.

As the benches fill with passengers, the air inside the opelét grows dense. Hannah covers her nose and mouth with the palm of her hand to escape the sickening perfume of hair oil, the raw odor of fish. The opelét jerks to a start. Hannah looks to the long purple spears of sugarcane, bundled together like javelins on the shelves overhead and, beside them, the sharp-textured skin of the green durian. The burlap sacks of rice. The strange bright skin of the rambutan, bristly with soft red shoots. Coffee. Black tea. Yellow bars of Sunlight soap tied together with a rough length of string.

As Yusef inches his way out the city on Jalan Jenderal Sudiman, Hannah's attention shifts to the women boasting about the prices they bartered with the shopkeepers. They nod their heads and sniff at their palms, the more modest to seem. One of them unwraps a brown paper bundle and those sitting nearest lean closer to admire the kain songket, a startling fabric, indigenous to Palembang, embroidered with bits of gold or silver thread. Sometimes the women stare at her. Hannah reminds herself that it is natural for people to wonder why a white girl is traveling alone in an opelét.

It is after five when Yusef brings the opelét to a stop in front of the high yellow wall that surrounds the Baptist mission. Hannah opens the gate at the back of the compound. She walks the length of the breezeway, past the room she and her brothers use for their schoolroom on the end of the belakang, past the servants' rooms, to the water faucet and concrete wash basin in the courtyard outside the kitchen. She slips her feet out of her rubber slippers and uses the

handle of a spoon standing in the empty powdered milk can beside the sink to scrape the mud from the rubber soles.

She opens the back door, catching the screen with her heel before it slams, and enters the kitchen. The walls are green, and somehow this makes it seem the coolest room in the house. She pushes through the swinging door that leads to the dining room and sees that the houseboy has already set the table for dinner. The water has been poured and a white tablet the size of an aspirin has been placed on each of the five plates. Malaria pills. She asked her father once why they had to take them. "The Americans across the river don't, why do we?" "Because we don't live on an oil compound, Hannah. No one sprays our street with DDT." She crosses the floor and has almost reached the staircase when the door to her father's office opens.

"Hannah?"

Hannah touches the black pipe bolted to the wall that is meant to serve as a banister. "I'm home," she says, one foot on the bottom step, her stained hands clasped behind her back.

"Hannah?"

"Yes?"

"I don't want to see you wearing those shorts again."

She meets her father's eyes.

"Do you understand?"

Hannah looks at her legs. These are the shorts she always wears to the golf course. "Why?"

"Because they are provocative, Hannah. When you wear them, it appears as though you are asking with your body for attention. Go upstairs and change your clothes."

Hannah closes the door at the top of the stairs and looks at her room. There is nothing on the walls but a mirror. When she told her mother that she wanted a mirror of her own now that she was thirteen, her father was against it, quoting from his chair at the head of the dinner table something from the Bible about the fate of a proud woman.

But her mother had taken her side. The next day they'd waited for Yusef's opelét on the corner. That night her brother David pounded a nail into the plaster, and Hannah had a mirror on her wall.

She turns around to see how they look from behind. Even the youngest American girls at the golf course wear their shorts this tight. It's the style. She slides the elastic waistband over her hips, steps out of the shorts and pushes them to the back of her underwear drawer.

Outside she hears a scraping sound. On the other side of the room a glass door opens onto a flat roof. The latch is loose and, sometimes when it rains, the door blows open. She smells something burning. Grass. Rubbish. Over the edge of the roof she can see the gardener standing with a rake in his hands looking up at the roof where she stands at the door. *What is he doing? There aren't any leaves on the ground.*

Yusef's day begins at 5:30, so Hannah is already at the golf course when the Americans pull up in their air-conditioned cars. She sits with the girls on a bed, a make-shift couch pushed against a wall inside the ladies' locker room, while their mothers change into their golf clothes.

Hannah watches the careless way the women sling their sleeveless dresses onto hangers and leave their shoes on a rack for the maid to clean. They spend a long time at the dressing table, facing the mirror on the wall that extends the length of the room. Wearing only their brassieres and underwear, they study themselves in the mirror, adjusting their hair, reapplying lipstick, before they step into their golf shorts and clank over the tile in their cleated shoes to the patio where the caddies they've chosen are waiting with their trunks of clubs.

A few weeks ago, the American women were sitting at one of the rattan tables on the verandah, in between nines, smoking and gossiping and drinking gin jeruk, which Hannah knew was limeade and

gin because she and one of the girls were sitting at the bar drinking plain air jeruk, and she had watched the barman add the gin. Hannah had just taken a bite of the candy bar her friend Elizabeth had bought for her when she heard one of the women mention her name in a lowered voice.

"Last week, she was standing in the shower stall next to mine? She asked if she could borrow my towel. Said she'd forgotten to ask the babu for one. Well, I've already used it, I said to her, but she didn't seem to mind. She stepped out from behind the curtain to take it, and I thought to myself, my lord, the girl has breasts."

"Well, how old *is* she?" another woman asked.

"Oh, I don't know. She might be twelve. She could *pass* for fifteen. I'll tell you another thing. Do you know that girl hasn't got a tan line? She's as brown as any one of the caddie boys. And I mean," the woman lowered her voice further, "*all over*. I think it's peculiar. There's not a bit of difference between the color of that girl's rear end and the backs of her legs."

Hannah peeled the green and white wrapper from the candy bar she was holding in her hand. Dry powdered sugar fell into her lap as she pulled at the layer of silver paper underneath that had stuck to the wafer. "I have to go now, Elizabeth."

"What time?" Hannah asks, when Yusef stops to let her out of the opelét.

"Today, 1:30."

"What time is it now?"

Yusef turns his arm over so she can see the gold face of his watch against the veiny underside of his wrist.

As soon as Yusef turns the corner, she cuts through the hedge and runs down the embankment toward the tin shed. The shed is a garage for the maintenance machinery, but the caddie boys use it for their clubhouse while they wait for the Americans to arrive in the morning, or when they stop at the bar between nines. The ones who

aren't hired spend the morning there doing odd jobs for Samsudin, the caddie boss.

Hannah leans her head through the open door. It smells nice inside, cool like damp clay, and the floor is swept smooth. Several rattan tables are gathered on one side of the room, surrounded by a few bar stools and folding chairs, most of which are broken in one way or another. On one of the tables a tin can for cigarette butts, a pack of cards, and a tray of empty glasses are arranged. She thinks the place is empty until she hears a tool drop and sees Samsudin lying on his back under the front of a yellow tractor on the other side of the shed.

"Di mana Bisu, Pak Samsudin?" Hannah asks.

"Bisu?" A man in a white singlet and long khaki shorts slides out and stands up, slowly straightening his back. "Aduh!" he winces. "Too old, me, for this work." The shorts, which are several sizes too large for him, are cinched high on his waist with a belt.

"Do you know where Bisu is, Pak?"

"Bisu? I think today he work for Mr. whatchacall, Mr. I don't know. Get green Dodge."

"Someone picked Bisu to caddie today?"

"Something funny about that?" he asks.

"Usually he never works."

The old man spits on the ground. "Usually he only sometime work. Try wait beside number nine green. They come, bum'bye."

Hannah walks around the sand trap at the edge of the green and sits on the bank of the waterhole. She is examining the water lilies floating on the surface of the brown water when she hears the splash. The second ball seems to fall more slowly. She follows the arc as it falls from the sky, hits the ground, and rolls quietly across the green. In the distance, she sees Bisu and Sugeng running down the fairway ahead of two white men.

The large leather trunk of golf clubs Bisu is carrying over his shoulder bounces against his back and the backs of his legs as he runs. When he reaches the edge of the waterhole, he drops the golf bag to

the ground, pulls his shirt over his head, and dives into the brown water. In a little while he surfaces, treading water above the tangled stems that dangle down, before diving underwater again. When he comes up for air, he is rubbing his eyes with his fist, looking at the white ball he holds in his hand. He throws it in Hannah's direction and dives under again.

By the time the man in the madras shorts whose ball has landed on the green arrives, Sugeng is holding the flag beside the hole. The white man plants the weight of his tan legs over his cleated shoes and sinks the putt easily. He pats Sugeng's back and gives him a kind of salute.

Bisu splashes up through the water again and grins at Hannah, this time holding a handful of white balls. As he climbs the muddy bank, Hannah stares at the shape of the balls bursting through the thin cloth of his wet pockets. He pulls them out and examines the logos one at a time. When he finds one like the ball the man has hit, he tosses it to the ground, squeezes the water from the hem of his shorts, and motions for Hannah to back into the cane grass. By the time the other white man arrives, Bisu is squatted on flat feet, facing the ball he has re-set on a tuft of grass, ten feet short of the green. He hands the man his wedge. When the man has finished his putt, he reaches into his wallet for a one hundred rupiah note, which he hands to Bisu, and waves the two caddies away.

"Next week?" Sugeng shouts in English at their backs. "Next week you choose Bisu and Sugeng. Okay?" The men, trudging up the slope toward the clubhouse bar, toward their salt tablets and gin tonics, do not appear to have heard.

Hannah pushes out of the tall grass holding up five fingers. "Five balls and one hundred rupiah for Bisu! Nothing for Sugeng! Ya?"

Sugeng grabs the muddy balls Bisu is holding. "This one, good. This one, no good." He throws them to the ground as he speaks. "This one no good too," he says, turning away.

Bisu pulls the golf bag onto his shoulder, and Hannah follows Sugeng to the maintenance shed where the rest of the caddies have gathered to watch them approach.

"Dua-dua-an," one of the boys calls out in a sing-song voice, making a nasty gesture with his fingers, insinuating that Hannah and Bisu are a couple.

Bisu is able to hear, but because he is unable to use words to speak, Hannah sometimes pantomimes what she wants to say to him. She points to the two trucks parked in front of the waterhole to be washed, and rubs at the air, as though she is holding a rag in her hand. "Are you going to wash cars today, Bisu?" she asks in Indonesian.

Bisu looks through the door of the maintenance shed where the other boys have disappeared.

"Are you going to come to my house tomorrow night? It's Sunday."

Bisu adjusts the weight of the trunk of clubs on his shoulder and walks inside the shed without answering, and then Yusef is pulling up in his opelét, and Hannah is running through the break in the hedge on the side of the clubhouse road.

"Who that?" Yusef asks Hannah in English when she is settled on the bench behind him.

"Bisu."

"Bisu?"

"One of the caddies."

"Sometime that boy come your house." Yusef looks at Hannah in the rear view mirror. "Ya?"

Hannah looks back at Yusef's face in the mirror. Sometimes she is glad she can't see his eyes through his dark glasses.

"Sometime when I bring your mother and father home in my car, I see him ride away from your house on bicycle."

"You have?"

"His name is not Bisu."

"Yes it is, Yusef. You don't know."

"Bisu is not a name for a boy."

"Why?" she asks.

"Bisu? Bisu mean someone who cannot speak. What you call that?"

"Mute. Some people say dumb. It's a phrase. Deaf and dumb. But Bisu can hear. He's not deaf."

Yusef keeps both hands on the wheel and his eyes on the road when he drives. "Only dumb?" he asks.

"I mean he can hear with his ears. He just can't speak with his mouth. Bisu means mute?" she asks.

One of Hannah's father's duties as Baptist missionary is to deliver a sermon once a week to the Protestants who live in the American oil camp on the other side of the river. The Catholic missionary conducts the Sunday morning service; Sunday evenings, the Methodist and Baptist missionaries alternate. When it is Hannah's father's turn, he and his wife hire Yusef to drive them to the ferry landing in his opelét.

Hannah sits alone at the dining room table, stabbing a fork into the edge of a crisp-fried egg which sits on a mound of rice on her plate. As soon as Yusef's opelét has pulled around the corner, Hannah is scraping her plate outside for the cat, and her two brothers are out the back door. The Wiromo boys down the street have a mouse deer in a rabbit hutch and a monkey on a chain in their mangga tree. They have been trying for weeks to build a tree house for it.

From her room, Hannah can hear her brothers picking through her father's tools in the work shed next to the church and, on the belakang, the rise and fall of the servants' voices, the sound of pots and pans banging against a wash basin. The faint smell of coconut oil frying makes Hannah think guiltily of the plate of food she threw away. She returns to her room and, without really planning to, reaches in her underwear drawer for the shorts hidden there. She pulls them

on under her shift, then lifting the dress over her head, enters the bathroom. The walls are spotted with patterns of mold and the air smells dank. In the corner, a concrete tub built into the wall is filled to the brim with water. A tin can, which has a wooden handle nailed to the side, stands on the ledge of the tub. Beside it, a bar of yellow soap. The soap is large in her hands and takes a long time to lather. She rubs her soapy hands through her hair, then, standing over the drain in the floor, dips the can into the cistern and pours cold water over her head until her hair is soaked clean.

In her room, she sits on the floor in front of her mirror to braid her hair. Seeing her reflection, she remembers something else she has hidden at the back of her underwear drawer. A gold metal case one of the American women left in the ladies' locker room. She removes the cap and turns the base until the dusky pink tip of a lipstick, worn into a slant, rolls into view. She daubs at her lower lip with it, then slides it across the wings of her upper lip.

She turns her face from side to side and glances from her mouth to her nipples, which are nearly the same color as her mouth, coated as it is with the lipstick. She pushes her breasts together slightly. They are large enough now to fill her hands and, pretty enough, she supposes, though she has never much liked her nipples. She touches one. It reminds her of the eraser tip at the end of a pencil, except that her skin there is very soft. She turns around to look at her back. She likes her back. She likes the points of her wings and the swirl of white beneath her shoulder blade that is her birthmark. And then the glass in the door is rattling.

It is Bisu. She ducks into the bathroom where she has left her shirt hanging on the doorknob, pulls it back over her head, and lets him in.

Bisu leaves his rubber slippers outside and steps inside Hannah's room, his fingers still wrapped around the doorknob.

Hannah pulls him inside by the edge of the notebook he is holding in his hands, drops it on the floor, and motions for him to follow

her downstairs. In the kitchen she pours cold tea from the aluminum pot on the counter into two glasses and opens the cupboard. There is nothing but a tin of powdered milk, a tin of flour, and a tin of dry rice. Sometimes there are cookies, but not tonight. She shrugs. Bisu follows her back through the swinging door and up the stairs, holding the glass of tea carefully in both hands.

They sit on the floor, their backs against the edge of Hannah's bed. Bisu opens his notebook to the page of handwriting he has completed. Hannah turns to a new page and begins to write. He smiles when he sees that she has written the word Bisu.

"But Bisu isn't your real name," she says sternly in Indonesian.

Bisu's top lip curls under. He bares his teeth and gums at Hannah, puts his hands behind his ears, and moves his head from side to side. He has had his head shaved since the last time she saw him at the golf course and it makes his ears, which are already large, look larger.

"What is your real name? Bisu isn't a good name for you. Yusef told me."

The boy stands, pulls his shorts down low on his hips, and walks around the room, his hands tucked inside the waistband, imitating the caddies who have given him the name. He points to a spot in the room which Hannah understands is meant to be him and bends over to laugh. Hannah is worried the servants are going to hear.

"Maybe they are laughing at something else. Sugeng was only jealous yesterday because you found so many golf balls. I don't laugh at you. Just tell me your real name."

He shrugs. Shakes his head no.

"Then what do you want me to call you, Bisu?" Out of habit, she says the word anyway.

He sits beside her on the floor and writes Bisu on the next line.

"I can't call you that," Hannah says softly.

The room is nearly dark, lit only by the light the lamp beside her bed casts across the floor. Hannah hangs her head. She has covered

her eyes with one of her hands and doesn't see Bisu, who is sitting cross-legged beside her, reaching for her face.

He touches her mouth. Then he slides the tip of his finger back and forth across her lower lip and holds it up for her to see.

Hannah's eyes widen. She has forgotten the lipstick.

Bisu touches her lower lip again. And then he has pushed his finger inside. The base of his forefinger touches her tongue briefly then moves to her lower molars.

For a moment, Hannah lets him rub his finger back and forth against her teeth. Then she pulls away and stands up. "You have to go now," she says quietly.

Bisu shakes his head no.

"Go now," she says, her voice more severe.

Hannah walks across the room and opens the door to the roof.

When she turns around, Bisu is staring into the mirror at the long misshapen teeth inside his gaping mouth. And then Yusef's opelét is approaching.

They duck to the floor as the headlamps light up the yard. Hannah scrambles to turn off the light on her bedside table, and Bisu is out the door, crouching his way across the roof. Hannah watches him reaching through the leaves for the branches, lowering himself from one to the next until he is on the ground.

"Hannah?" her mother calls from the dining room.

Hannah lifts her hand to tell Bisu to wait, runs back to get his notebook, and drops it over the edge of the roof into his hands. He takes the handlebars of a bicycle propped against the wall across the street and pushes the bike under the streetlight. It isn't until he gives himself a running start that she sees the bicycle is much too tall for him to mount. Instead of throwing his leg over the seat, he juts it through the space below the bar and pedals hard.

The following week, Hannah tells her parents that she wants to go with them to the church service in the oil camp across the river. Her

father is drawing a finger across the palm of Yusef's hand, explaining something to him. Hannah pulls the gate closed behind her. She has just opened the back door of the opelét when she hears the keringg-keringg of a bicycle bell and the yelping sound of Bisu's voice.

She lifts her bare knee into the cab, and, as she does, her dress touches the mud-splashed siding. She curses under her breath, annoyed that Yusef has not thought to wash the opelét. She pulls the back door closed and sits on one of the wooden benches, and covers the side of her face with her hand.

Bisu circles the opelét on his bicycle, pushing the lever on the bell with his thumb again and again. His composition book is wrapped in plastic and clamped to the bike rack bolted to the rear fender. The opelét moves forward a few feet, but Bisu has pedaled in front of the vehicle, and everyone lurches forward when Yusef steps on the brake. Through his sunglasses, Yusef meets Hannah's eyes in the rear view mirror. Hannah stares through the window at the stucco wall that surrounds the compound.

Bisu races alongside the opelét, balanced on a slant, ringing the bell with his thumb until, finally, he catches hold of the rear view mirror attached to Yusef's door. Then he is sailing along with the opelét, moving his jaw as if he were eating the wind.

Yusef waves the boy off, and Bisu lets go.

"Do we know that boy?" Hannah's father asks. "Yusef?"

"I don't think so, Tuan."

When they reach the ferry landing, Hannah's parents walk ahead.

Yusef beckons Hannah to his window with an upside-down wave of his hand.

"What?"

Yusef reaches through the window and touches the back of her head. "Why you go Sungai Gerong with your mother-father tonight? Usually you never like go church with them."

Hannah lowers her head. "Some girls asked me to come."

"Girls from golf course?"

Hannah nods without raising her eyes.

"I thought you like play with caddie boys."

"I do. I do like Sugeng and Bisu. I do."

"You make agreement to meet with that boy tonight?"

Hannah shrugs. "You mean Bisu?"

"I told you already. Bisu is not a boy's name. You never yet learn his name?"

Hannah looks into Yusef's eyes. "He wants to be called Bisu."

"I think you have agreement to give this boy lessons when you stay home. No?"

"It's not really an agreement."

"No? Maybe *he* think you have agreement."

"Well, it wasn't a *spoken* agreement. Unspoken agreements don't really count. We never really say whether we're going to meet or not. Sometimes he comes, and sometimes he doesn't."

"All kind agreement count, non'. You must pray tonight. You must ask God to help you understand this."

"That isn't why he came today, Yusef. That isn't why he was following the car."

Yusef shifts to reverse. "You must pray." ■

CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

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DONNA ISAAC, a poet and teacher, lives on a Minnesota pond with her husband Matt. Raised in Virginia, her work encompasses both the Southern and Midwestern landscapes. Her most recent publications are *Tommy*, a chapbook from Red Dragonfly Press; poems in the Minnesota Arboretum calendar; and *Pisgah Review*.

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ELLEN LAFLECHE has worked as a journalist and women's health educator in western Massachusetts. She has published poems in *The Ledge*, *Alligator Juniper*, *Alehouse*, and the *Naugatuck River Review*, among many others. She won second prize in the Paradise Poetry Contest for a poem about joy. The poem, *JacObY*, celebrates the joy brought to Boston fans by Jacoby Ellsbury, the first Navajo to play major league baseball. She was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 2008.

ELIZABETH LANGEMAK lives in Bethany, West Virginia.

BEN MIROV lives in Brooklyn, New York. He has poems in, or forthcoming from *Fou*, *Opium Magazine*, *Forklift Ohio*, *Washington Square*, *The Best American Poetry Blog* and *The Agriculture Reader*. His chapbook *I Is to Vorticism* won the *Diagram*/New Michigan Press 2009 chapbook contest. His full-length manuscript, *Ghost Machine*, was a finalist for the Octopus Books open reading period. He is editor of *pax americana* (www.paxjournal.com). He is also poetry editor of *LIT Magazine*. Sometimes he blogs at isaghost.blogspot.com.

MICHELLE NICHOLS's work has appeared in *Harbinger*, *The Distillery*, *Texas Review*, *et cetera*, and is forthcoming in *Squid Quarterly* and *Trailer Park Quarterly*. She is currently a Ph.D. candidate at the Center for Writers at the University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg.

MICHAEL PECK was born in upstate New York and began writing soon thereafter. His fiction, poetry and essays have appeared in *The Rittenhouse Revue*, *34th Parallel*, *Unquiet Desperation* and *Alors et Toi?*, among others. He is currently at work on a novel, a play, and something called *Hoffa's Burning*. He lives in Philadelphia.

CHRIS PEXA lives in Nashville, TN, where he is a Ph.D. student in English Literature at Vanderbilt University.

"Bisu and the Missionary's Daughter," is an excerpt from **Jill Widner's** novel in progress, *The Smell of Sulphur*, which fictionalizes her experience growing up in Sumatra, Indonesia, where her father was a petroleum engineer in the 1960s. Other excerpts have been published in *Asia Literary Review*, *Kyoto Journal*, *Willesden Herald: New Short Stories 3* (pretend genius press, UK), *North American Review*, *Kartika Review*, and *Hobart* (online). She has been the recipient of an Artist Trust/ Washington State Arts Commission fellowship, an Artist Trust project grant, and has been awarded residencies at Yaddo and the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. She is a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop and currently lives in Yakima, Washington.

ABOUT THE JUDGES

DAN CHAON is the author of the best-selling novel *You Remind Me of Me*. He has also published two short story collections, *Fitting Ends* and *Among the Missing*, which was a finalist for the 2001 National Book Award. Walter Mosley chose his short story, "The Bees," to be included in *Best American Short Stories 2003*, and his story "Big Me" was selected by Michael Chabon as the second prize story in *The O. Henry Awards 2001*. His new novel, *Await Your Reply*, was released in 2009 to critical acclaim. Chaon is the Houck Associate Professor of the Humanities at Oberlin College.

DORA MALECH is the author of two books of poems, *Shore Ordered Ocean* (Waywiser, 2009) and *Say So* (Cleveland State University Poetry Center, forthcoming 2010). Her poems have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Poetry*, *American Letters & Commentary*, *The Yale Review*, *Best New Poets*, and elsewhere. In Fall 2010, she will serve as Distinguished Writer in Residence in the MFA in Creative Writing Program at Saint Mary's College of California.