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A Letter from the Editors

Dear Death—

Fuck you.

—Eds.

John Domini

Wrap Session, Story Seminar

Come on, get with the exercise. You see what it says on the greaseboard. Give me the thumbnail, anybody. Give me the version that'll fit on the back of a business card. What, you're tired? You've lost it? You had a story but now you've lost it, the ants have looted the picnic basket. Back when the seminar started, back Friday morning, you had a killer story, a lock for Best Screenplay. But now it's the wrap session, three o'clock Sunday. You poor things. You're wondering whether you even still speak the language.

Well, get with the *exercise*. Get in here and testify.

Okay, you. You're saying, smalltown America? Okay, we'll go with that. A small town and a teenager, kind of a sensitive boy. Hang on, let me get it on the board.

High-school boy, not the most popular. And this single mom moves in next door. Single mom, and black. Pretty though, uh huh. Hard to tell at first, in a rental like that, a three-room junker, a rust-garden lawn. The first time they talk our boy thinks they're talking about going to college. The neighbor says she's an MA from NYU, Koranic Studies, and he finds himself all hot in the face, he can't seem to complete a decent sentence. He doesn't even know... okay. Got it.

I've got it, hotshot. I do this for a living, remember. What you've given me here, it's more than enough, and let me say just one thing. Just two words. *You wish*.

You wish, you and your thirteen-year-old inner child sneaking around with a skin mag under his jacket. Now why don't you take your seat and get out that nice seminar notebook we gave you the first day. Write this down:

“Never confuse your movie with your fantasy.”

But, never. Write it down. I mean, here we are, the third day, and you still don't know a blunder like that when you tumble into it face first? I know you've had the Immersion Session on the Pitch. We don't let you get through the first lunch without that. I know we cut your story down from something the size of a legal pad, scribble-scribble on the old legal pad, might as well have been written with stars and smiley faces in the margins—we cut it right down to something snug and money. Fits on the back of a business card. And that was just by lunch the first day.

Are you forgetting the Intensive Drill in the Narrative Arc? Are you forgetting, we played Movie-Title Scrabble? Movie-Title Scrabble, you've got to learn the Z's no 10-point letter any more, not with *Biker Boyz*, *Venus Boyz*, *Boyz N the Hood*, not with *EZ Streets*. Got to be flexible with all those 2's, also. *2Fast 2Furious*, know what I mean?

I mean, you say to me, 1800 bucks for the weekend, and I have to say you got a bargain. You say to me, you're tired, and I have to remind you, you came to me. You signed up for this, the Founder. One session only, last session last day. The Rainmaker, right? After me, it's nothing but, what'll we call it, Fellowship Hour. Fellowship, ha ha, yeah, but settle down. It's nothing. It's a bit of free booze and a chance to try out your lines on the seminar cuties.

So, get with the exercise. Look at this mess here, a Hamlet in a hamlet. Hamlet, except he can't hold a two-minute conversation, and the person he's got his eye on, it's not his father's ghost.

Look at this mess. Where's the lollapalooza? Where's the cannon-blast? Where's the 76 trombones?

Let me get my wallet out here. Let me bet you whatever I'm carrying that anyone I pick at random knows exactly where your little Mayberry boyo and his Sophisticated Lady are headed. You, sure. You down to my right, spell it out. You say, there comes a day

when—no, that’s better, more likely it’s a night—a night when out there in Waves of Grain, Missouri, our central consciousness, him with the new neighbor, he—well, let’s say he gets his consciousness raised.

Didn’t take long, did it? Guess my money’s safe, isn’t it? Oldest play in the deck, red Opie on black Hottie.

So write it down, today’s your last, best chance: a concept gets you out of your weary head. You’re tired, you say. But if the narrative’s righteous, if the given is bankable, it rocks you right *out*. Most of the time you don’t even know until you’re talking in tongues. That’s your whole seminar right there—nothing ever happens so long as the movie stays in your head.

But... what’s that? Up there in the balcony, what? Uh huh. Balcony says we should take our lonely boy and his love object down to the back acreage. Says it’s a swamp down there. Piney-woods wetlands, fire-ants country.

I like it. Balcony—that’s good. That’s the prank in the acid trip.

People, what we’ve got to work with, here, it’s loss of innocence. Right? Look at it, a woman of mystery in Plain-n-Simpleton. A creature of the shadow, she’s got no visible means of support, other than the permanent erection she gives the hayseed next door—so doesn’t somebody need to wind up lost? Isn’t that the arc, innocence-experience-lost? That’s the concept. We can decide later whether we take it happy or tragic. Disney or a downer, we can fill that in later. Before we’re through we’re going fill up the whole board.

For now, we’ve got what we need. We’ve got that dank and choleric swamp. Then when one of our people gets lost, there’s a cost. Write that down. “Lost, cost.” Get out of your head and learn something. Out of your head, you know, that’s the only way you’ll get that guy you’re going for, that golden idol. Remember, he’s got no eyes or ears but he’s carrying a sword. He’s a creature of magic and he doesn’t come in a box.

So, next. Next, okay you, front and center, what's that you're saying? The woman's kid? Her love child and our cornpone teenager? I got it. Our boy may not have a clue when it comes to the Dark Lady herself, but when it comes to her kid he's buddy-big-brother, a natural. I got it: *u, r... l*. That's right, this particular girl next door, she's been someone else's Playmate.

So when you see our guy with her kid, you see the relationship. Right. Now what say we all use what we've learned, since Friday? What say we visualize?

Character moment. Visualize.

It's another hot day, spaghetti-strap weather. They're out in the back acreage again, out where the loam starts to get gushy. And he's playing with her little clitoris... whoa! How'd I make that mistake? How'd I tumble in face-first? Ha ha, okay. Settle down. *Cletus* is what I mean, her little boy Cletus. That's what our own boy's playing with, our original boy. We need a hick name, is what I'm saying. And can't you just hear it? *Good one, Cletus!*—can't you just hear it, carrying across the swamp? After you've whacked a frog with your daddy's old nine-iron?

We need names, that's what I'm trying to teach you. We've got to have names, and each one's got to have its culture proudly flying. A name should come with signifiers flapping and fluttering all over it, the same way that out in the boonies, out where you'll find swampfolk character like ours, they've got all their ribbons up. Pink ribbons, yellow ribbons, whatever, they've all got 'em tied to the tree out front. Tied to the mailbox, knotted up along the porch-rail. Before you knock on the door, you've got to deal with the ribbons. Got to try to read the code: are these people Choose Life or Kill Osama?

So write this down too, write what we need in a name. We need to snag that ramifying universe beyond and tie it to the pole, tie it so pretty that a person can't help but see. I mean, it's money. It's a breakout first weekend in all major markets.

So, Cletus for starters. And what, Balcony? What've you got? Two names, both for Our Lady of the Cutoffs.

Okay, I'll do a bracket. One. Down in Dixie among the mallrats, down outside the Kum-&-Go, Mama's got her ribbons tied right. They call her Sally, down there. American as Spring Break. But, two. Back in the noir, back where they speak in letters only, MA NYU, E train F train, up there they knew her as Salem Shellac'em—I get it—the anti-liposuctionist. She was a terrorist, I like it. She was wreaking havoc amid the calming beige and gray of the offices midtown, and at the same time, too, she was a genuinely nice person.

I hear you, Brother Balcony. Nice has got to be part of the angle. Salem has got to believe, or she's got to have believed, once upon a time, that she could confine the violence. She believed she could punish only the truly vain, the radical fringe of cosmetic surgery. Maybe we can have a scene about that. Maybe we can have some heartbreak kid, I mean a little blonde girl, pretty kid—pretty for someone with a cleft lip and a club foot. Oh yeah, that's our visual. This poor desperate eight- or nine-year-old freak comes hobbling into Dr. Yeshu's, and meantime our Salem, she's lurking down the hall, black full-body leotard. She cups a hand to her headset, frowning, hissing: *Abort, abort...*

I guess it's got to go on the board, doesn't it? I've got to put it up there even though it's a flashback.

You know what I think about flashbacks. It's all in my book (and I'll just mention here, we arranged a Barnes & Noble tie-in, a table next to the bar). But, flashback, voiceover, I don't like it. Nine times out of ten it's Dead Man's Curve. Lamest of all's the explanatory closing title. What's the movie for, if you have to tack on a title? *Young Benji grew up to be Benedict Arnold...*

But this afternoon, this is your last chance. This afternoon, I'll write it down, our motto: "2Late 2Fuss." You know what I'm saying?

And I bet one of you wants to go with the flashback. You, left of center there, you want to take the story up to New York, the swamplands of steel and concrete. You're saying, let's see our woman in action, her former action, Mama Break-n-Enter. Let's see her in a surgeon's suite, wearing a full-body leotard and a pig mask. Pig mask, that works. Can't have anything too subtle when it's already a flashback.

So it's tear gas for the reception area, chloroform for the doc. Lay out Nip-n-Tuck across his own desk. The ties of his smock dangling, there's your ribbons.

Then... God, how do I spell that? Do I have to go take a computer class now? Listen, I'll just draw a rectangle here. A rectangle, listen to me, that's all that maybe 97, 98 percent of your audience will understand. That's your computer, your technology. And the wires, the pods, the clamps, all that maybe 98 percent out in the stadium seating will understand is that these are the attachy-things. These are what hook up to the file cabinets and to the office mainframe. That's your whole, whatever. Your Whack-a-Mole. And then Mama makes a fist around some stiff red rod, and then she throws the switch.

What this does is, it scrambles both the hard-copy x-rays in the file cabinets and the graphics in the computers' hard drive. Yeah, I get it, down there, High-Tech, but what it really does is, it means we've got to *stay in flashback*. We've got to see what happens the next day when some Trump-worthy babe comes into the office. She's, I don't know, we'll bring in some Barbie from a lingerie catalogue, and we'll have her walk into the surgeon's expecting a touchup. And then the docs open her documents, and they discover that suddenly *she's* the cleft lip and the clubfoot. Hey, the hard drive doesn't lie. Suddenly she's gone from a sex kitten to something the cat dragged in. And the nurse looking at the monitor, the one that was livid with jealousy just a minute ago,

she's got to say: Is that your face or is Paolo's doing a new macaroni takeout?

Yeah, ha ha, but, okay. Settle down. Settle down and tell me how we're going to get back our narrative. I mean, you guys picked it, don't forget. You guys came to me, the founder. And you saw the assignment, and you gave me the concept. So we can't forget our doofus out in the back forty. Can't forget our lovesick Huckleberry, catching frogs and throwing them to the fire ants.

I'm saying we can't just channel surf, this afternoon. We were kind of visiting the Sci-Fi Channel, for a moment there, but that's not why I take the wrap session, just to let you people surf. Or think about it from your end. Counting gas money and the vending machines, you've shelled out something like two grand since Friday. Whereas any other weekend, you wouldn't have to spend a penny to sit with one hand on the remote and the other in your pants. Do the math, people. Today we've got to go for the pyrotechnics, the trombones and the sousaphones too, and that means we've got to hunker down over this arc of ours, and we've got to flip it into a second act.

I mean, if one of you wants to go sci-fi, o-kay, but then there's only one way you can go after the Alien. If you're going to extract that baby Alien, wriggling and snapping its jaws, out of somebody's navel, it matters *which* navel. It's got to be somebody who's already up on our board, here. It's got to be old Cletus or Sally or that poor dumb sucker next door. People, you've only got so many navels available.

You came to me, right? You came out of all the parking lots and sat through all the presentations. But you had no idea the work you had in store, coming to me. In my session it doesn't matter how etiolated and flimsy your moviola looked, when we first scrawled it up on the board. Now we're going to flip it and whip it till we achieve escape velocity. Whatever pulp you threw up there, by the time I'm

through, it'll fly by blinking overhead, it'll spell out O-S-C-A-R. Word. So, okay, next—I'll give you one. I'll ask you something.

Why does a woman break away from the most fearsome anti-liposuctionist cell in Gotham and go live among the simple fisherfolk of NASCAR-istan?

Think about it. It can't be just because she scrambled a few computer files. In New York they see a lot of strange files.

Yeah, there, you, far right. Yeah, we can go back to when she's got the surgeon knocked out. Actually, you know, we're still there, with the tear gas fogging the waiting room and the doc unconscious across his desktop. That was the flashback we had going, wasn't it? That was the goddamn flashback, and now do you see the problem? You see why I had to write the book? The language is already so overpopulated, every inch of the screen is cluttered with the intentions of a thousand others, every weekend there's another breakout. And if you're going to score in the megaplex, you've got to make them believe they're off on an arc they've never traveled before, going over an entirely new rainbow. That's what it takes if you're going to design the dream for all America, from Friday's first showtime right through the Sunday matinee. You see why I had to *write the book*? This is the night language of your homeland, deeply fuddled yet inveterately forward-looking, it's the noise you hear rising from the megaplex, and if you can't learn to pick up those significances and reply to them in kind... well I don't have to tell you how to find the remote. You can always find the remote, and down inside your pants there'll be the same flab as ever.

So, you in the corner, back to you and your damn flashback. The doctor's chloroform'd, yes. His smock comes off easy. And I do like that needle, the one you put in our girl's hand. Closeup as it starts to whir.

She tattoos him chin to toes: *The perception of beauty is a moral test.* —*Thoreau.*

O-kay, I can see that. The angel who looms outside the roadside diner, the bloody warning that appears on the scrublands church. I can see that in here, a touch of that. A touch goes a long way, but, given what we've got so far, we can visualize. We'll put a pot of dry ice in there, steaming. Make sure there's plenty of red goop dripping down from the machine-made stigmata, too. And every time our Salem Woman lifts away the needle, she grins. That's the cost again, isn't it? The infernal cost, when a dreamer gets lost?

But, enough. Flashback, backstory... enough, people! Everybody's looking for what happens next. Everybody's waiting for Fellowship Hour. Our folks on the board, our Mother and Child and the Village Idiot, they're just standing around, down there in cottonmouth country. Who's going to take that first big step?

Up in the balcony! You again, I can't wait. And, what? The father?

Get the father on the board. Word. He comes lumbering out of the swamplands. He's got a Cajun's weathered face, almost like he came out of the Middle East, and there's beard-stubble, pepper-and-salt. Still you can make out that tattoo on his throat. A single letter only, a Gothic U, nevertheless it suggests the end of a lengthy inscription, earned through pain and lived with a while. Daddy. He goes with Mama, doesn't he, with their inevitable straining for metamorphosis back when they lay face to face, when the air above them came to life with their addled whispering. It's out in the open at last. Along the lower legs of the man's surgical scrubs, their hospital aquamarine just recognizable under the muck, there's a riot going on, a long-range reconnaissance of warrior insects, at once venomous and bright as rubies.

Balcony, you're out of here. There's nothing more I can teach you. Good luck with the girl behind the bar, too. She's a dreamboat. As for the rest of you, we've got plenty of white space left. Plenty of room for chapter and verse. Let's fill 'er up, let's get back on the road.

Melissa Ginsburg

Anniversary Poem

Warehouse, factory. Picnic table,
planted maple. Swallows sunlight,
the continent. Beyond, a bright morning
a forest endangered. In a row,
yellow, building. Distant, sunlight,
hungry, swallows, caves. In the,
even in, shadowy. I, mosses, you.

Medicine

This medicine turns the sun to poison.
Skin I was. Transparent strips
and blood is nothing. I can use.
Into shop and place of lodging.
Five minutes pass in one direction.
The medicine turns my food into machines.
Leaves a lash mark where it works and a wood bench,
a dark varnish, a soil untended. Blindfold,
bind, bench and tunnel. Trail the birds
eat, mud, the wasps take. The medicine works.
Makes a trail of crumbs behind me. Trail
a stale cake. Bird a ploverbird, machine
an inclined plane.

One Year

Parallel cracks whisper the old paint.
Creak a silence absorbing the bricks.
Snow a high tremor without happening.
A person walked inside the house
window window other window.
The year curled upwards under the tree.
Late fall, leaves pardoning themselves
on the lawn. Letting the light in,
making the trees responsible.

P i n k B o o k

A factory makes maps and calendars
next to a field containing hay bales.
Inside it seasons. It summers.
The future rolls out of a machine.
In the yard, on the weekend
grapevines climb the tiger lilies.
A sunflower sprout grown too tall,
its top leaves resting in the blown wet soil.
And near, a chair. Tornado
a little west of here. And a book,
the typesetting crooked. In Florida
a poem by Elizabeth Bishop. The book
is a pink book. It winters over.
A year. Dormant sapling planted.
City died, baby grew.

Wild Birds

Who would refuse the crying tern
bring a bird to my door. Set inside
a gently closed. On Thursday
I taped a sign to the yard:

*I've spent most of my life helping birds.
The rest I've just wasted.*

More and more I am down for a nap
and awake to a cagefull. Magpie,
pheasant, owl. Decay through a window
entered as I slept, clawed around
the curtain rod.

Long bent stick with a foot on it
alone on the kitchen floor.
Decay, Dear broken-winged,
living room. You are moving at a rate.
Hallway. Birds die.
Even in my lungs wild particles.

instructions from the narwhal

How to harvest ice

Dear Greenland won't you take off your gloves and sit here by the belly of the stove. The thaw has hastened a river through the floorboards of the house, a folktale gesture, the sort of thing the women in this village embroider over aprons and coverlets in elaborate gatherings of floss. Horse-drawn plows score the frozen lakes as your alphabet of sealskin spells farther north the tundra. Once from a phone booth I pledged my allegiances and waited out the longest night. No trace of you in your waistcoat and woolens, all my quarters gone. You busy yourself unlacing your boots as if to subtract the heel prints from the glacier, the glacier from its drift. I left a message on your phone. I said

The tiny shipwreck in your voice invented me.

How to address the Ukrainian giant

Had I one unhaunted season.
Had I a mule to falter the path at your ankles.
I would carry both to your doorstep and beg your pardon
Forgive your grief its almanac size.
Mainly I picture you sleeping: the mattress a barge in a pantry.

Had I a proper blanket.
Let me cover your feet.

What habit, this sorrow?
A quiet agreement between your hands.

Had I an orchard.

A suitcase for the horses and their secrets.
Who so is privy to the horses' secrets: That is a lucky man.

Had I a crossbow. An alibi. A fortress.

Dear giant if such grand scale was easy.
For their unspent grace I would envy your hands.

How to ruin the ending

Pinecones and needles scattered like accoutrements of sap and limb.
When all the trees go missing. Yonder a power plant.
Forest will be shorthand for *isn't that a shame*.

Instead of branches thick cables strung between cities
will hold our smallest gestures together in the margins.

Every valentine to the water tower mumbled under the breath
will echo echo echo. Where will all the pencils go.

Used car lots and dollar stores and tanning salons abundantly.

Wilderness will be a legend, a fable for paper dolls to whisper
the beginnings of once they've put on their western costumes.

A sheet of paper painted green.

How to prepare the eulogy

Bygones be bygones. Let them redress.

Reforest. When he said *afternoon* and meant the smallest map.

Again your sympathies they bellwether, for example,
the manner in which your longing extracts that verb
from his throat. It is regrettable.

Consult the field notes drawn by the fisherman's wife
whose hand is a long scrawl of mussels scraped from
shell to pail. Yours are hands with no permanent gesture.
His mouth is a funeral. Lower your eyes.

How to make of your heart a souvenir

What you will give three dollars for, then pocket when your turn comes and the carny is gentle despite his meatpacking hands.

What you will carry to the pawnshop pronto, hitch up your skirt and place on the counter your prize. Thrush in a ditch, you leave it and all your loneliest costumes. An ill-fitting ring. A color TV set that keeps changing hands in a seaside town like this one, the broom factory closed and a bar the drought has filled for so many consecutive days. All of it swept under at the strand's edge.

Trust me: miles of souvenirs traipse the bottom of the sea, plastic songs.

What you will hand over in a dim room, your fingers working like a toy gun the hook and eye. The way you look in that dress called twilight. It is nothing you can say *come back here* to. How you caught him watching. The weight of his hand not touching.

What you will not write in the letter. Not consignment. Nothing to keep.

How your mouth will ache forever unmeasuring the sea. And how you will learn to widow your love. A hand stitched doily.

Hairs pulled from a brush.

A nickname which in another language is the word for *small*.

Dread

I'd read once, in what book I no longer recall, a phrase that for no apparent reason came to haunt me. I hardly ever thought about it during the day, only late at night when I was just slipping into sleep, and in early morning when I was not yet quite awake.

The phrase would toll once, briefly, a distant bell. I would fall asleep with a vague but growing sense of dread and would awake to a slowly fading sense of dread, as if the entirety of my sleep was the brief stretch it took for the dread to gather and then dissipate.

The phrase itself was simple:

He no longer resembled me.

Its original context, what I could recall of it, was nothing to incite any particular feeling whatsoever. There was no real textual significance to the phrase—its narrator uttered it merely in passing. And yet, there it came, again and again, at the moment of falling asleep and at the moment of awakening, marking the descent from and re-ascent to consciousness. I no longer was dreaming; sleep had become nothing but a movement from the first word of this phrase to its last.

I increasingly dreaded falling asleep. My wife, sleeping beside me, knew nothing. I swallowed so-called sleep aids, but the phrase still haunted me. I tried to train myself to jar myself awake, without result. When I consulted a doctor, he asked me if I felt rested. Well, yes, I felt rested during the day, but increasingly anxious with the approach of darkness. He shrugged, prescribed an antidepressant.

When I took it, I found it simply to muffle the phrase slightly, blunting it as though it were being voiced by a drunk through a bathroom door. This made it much worse.

Every morning I felt slightly foolish about the dread I had felt the night before; every night, I felt the dread inexorably rise again.

This continued until I awoke in a hospital, my shirt cut away, an oxygen mask strapped over my face, feeling incredible, intense, unlocatable pain. A doctor holding two gleaming metal paddles stood over me, and I thought I could smell the faint odor of burning hair. Other faces, muffled behind surgical masks, were gathered around me. When they realized I was awake the bodies they were attached to began to busy themselves. A hidden mouth asked my name; I offered up a slurred sound that was apparently close enough. A set of gloved hands began to wipe down my chest with something cool. A third hand injected a fluid into an i.v. bag whose tube, I realized, ran into the back of what must be my own hand.

The doctor holstered the paddles into a device strapped onto a wheeled cart. When he came closer, it was to shine a small penlight into first one of my eyes and then the other. I had, he explained, been, technically speaking, dead. He went on to explain to me, in great detail but through his surgical mask, the difference between *technically dead* and *actually dead*, thinking it might be of some interest.

“Well,” he asked, once he was finished speaking, “how are we feeling now?”

I was in such pain it was all I could do to breathe.

A little later, in another room, a fleshy nurse decked out in novelty scrubs asked me if I believed in God. Since I once had, I nodded my head yes, hoping to make her sympathetic to me.

I was told I could not possibly still be feeling the pain I was feeling. This would be insisted upon right up until the moment when, days later, after the pain had become so intense that I figured

the only way to stop it was to try to systematically dismantle my house with a sledgehammer, I awoke again, this time in another hospital. This earlier time, though, in this earlier hospital, I kept looking around for my wife. Most of the time she was in a chair beside me, seemingly sympathetic but equally immune to the demands which, admittedly, I was having difficulty voicing.

All I wanted was for her or the nurse or anyone at all to go fetch me a mirror, even though the way my mouth was trying to broker that request made me pretty certain this was a bad idea. Nobody paid any heed, but I kept wanting it, wanting it, despite a growing dread of what I actually would see.

And when I finally felt well enough to climb out of the bed by myself and make my way, swaying, toward a reflective surface, by then it was already far too late. What frightened me was not how the man thrown back so little resembled me, but how he so greatly did. There was no getting around him.

And here we still are, staring each other down, haggard and grim, bodies aching, each of us hoping the other will be the first to go.

Margaret Bashaar

My Summer with the Norsemen

The Viking and I
never spoke the same language.
He picked me up off the
shore of a sick green ocean,
took me to his mud-brick home and pushed
two straw pallets together,
smiled hopefully.

He believed that he had
saved me from wars and
storm foam, gray afternoons
spent fishing for skate egg sacs.

For ten weeks
I let him bring me salted
meat and white silk corsets,
speak to me in soft, guttural tones when I smiled.
On warm days, he would walk me
through his village and
gesture to the women
who were with child
by mates they couldn't understand,
make me presents of
wilted wild flowers held
out to me in his pale, meaty fist.

He had no horned helmet or longboat,
Only a silver ear-spoon and a
leather pouch full of smooth,
gray stones he cast
into a circle while I pretended to sleep.

As August ended and cold wind
blew in from the northern shore,
I ran down to the ocean,
snail shells and rocks cutting my feet.
I stood ankle-deep in the surf,
waited for the sea-gods to save me
and the Viking filled his hut
with dead flowers.

Twilight Greenaway

Of Your Lean, Long-Legged Life

I will say you made:
mine, your other daughter's,
a string of lanterns we can
stay awake under as the hours turn
over and the night blankets
sink southward, ask to be tugged.

Watercolors,
at least two handfuls of them. A house.
You planted almost fifty trees.
Mostly citrus, coffee, those
small tart bananas
they don't grow everywhere.

You also made us choose. Do we go on
losing people without warning?
Or this: building ourselves not in but out of
your image – blocking the stage.
Then, our ambition like a cliff-walk,
this side-stepping, some days, into rage.

Expectation

In the morning you think
you feel your uterus emptying out, like a clean wave,
or a windless swipe, as if someone could take

a squeegee through your private downtown,
those rain-slicked streets.

These days even lost items come calling.
All week you walk around with this small,
square home for less-loved things in your head,

its nylon wall of umbrella twists and keyring cubbyholes,
its fattened wallet columns playing numb.

What you find when you do see a professional
will disappoint – but only if you expect the
diagrams to be to scale. Instead, think fruit and its

sometimes hidden seeds, think mucous membrane.
Think maps unfolded, how you learned to fold them back.

Scoliosis

As water chases water
it also cuts at land,
carves beds on both sides

just as muscles build,
then condense
around the spine.

The spine that – like a compass –
adjusts its perpendiculars,
reconciles each footfall,

every arm sway.
Or like a thermometer:
breath dips and vertical tilts

uncover small buttons of air
that slug up towards the surface.
The thermometer, then, is a river

contained. A vein melted from
Susan Bs; a pull, impossible;
toward two oceans, a march.

Runner

You been here before? the man sitting beside me asked. He was old and gray and had on blue sweatpants. He tapped his long, black fingers on the table as we waited.

To the library, I said, not the readings.

Me either.

The library?

The readings.

Have to be on your toes at this place, I said. Lot of crazies.

And meanies.

How about the skinny one at the reference desk?

Tucked-in tie?

Beware of redheads.

The library's special events staff had set up a dozen tables for the reading with linen tablecloths, candles, vases of tulips. Posters around the library advertised it as a celebration of the 150th Anniversary of *Leaves of Grass*.

You really have to listen to this stuff to get into it, the man said. He wiped his forehead with a wristband. Then he picked up an evaluation form the staff had left on the table.

How do you mean?

I mean get up *into* it, like *you'd* written it.

You're a writer?

Reader.

Safer.

Not necessarily, said the man, pointing to the form.

“In my home,” the first poet began. He was a slight man with thin wrists and a hunched back. He bowed his head as he read. The poem searched for its legs, something about his mother, a 7-11, an arms dealer. The old man scribbled on the back of his form as the poet read, a diagram of words and arrows.

In the end, the piece came together. A slight lifting, then the closer: “While the past burns out of control, in a vacant lot, on the edge of town.”

Not bad, I said.

Too much I, not enough us, said the man.

I like the burning.

People do.

Who are you? I asked, looking at the form. And what are you going to do with that?

Not sit on it if that’s what you mean.

You have to be careful with poets, you know.

They should be careful with us.

You think anyone actually reads those forms?

Irrelevant.

The crowd applauded as the next poet took the stage. He was nervous. He looked down at the podium, pursed his lips, ran a hand through his hair. Pretty eyes, nice shirt. The old man frowned.

“Is it too late to call?” the poet began. *It is*, the old man whispered. But then the verse took off. Skeet shooting, nightwinds, crashing butterflies. The poetry came from far away, the words formed well before the poet recited them. I nodded in rhythm. The man put

down his pen, raised his brows.

Quel surprise, he said.

A siren screeched by, a boombox, a bus. Then the closer: "...I have concluded that it is/the painters' utter ineptitude/that has made their very subject weep./Such is the miraculous power of art."

Now that was something, I said, clapping.

The old man shook his head, wrote on the evaluation.

Don't you think? I asked.

He shouldn't bother us with his problems.

He scratched a few lines, wiped his forehead, crossed them out, scratched a few more, sipped his coffee. I couldn't make out what he was writing. I took a few notes, looked around the room, caught the second poet glancing nervously at our table.

Are you a critic? I finally asked.

Hardly, the man said, putting his pen down.

Editor?

Close.

Law enforcement?

Inventor, the man said.

Of what?

Products.

What do they do?

If you want to be faster, I can make you faster.

In your mind?

On your feet.

The poets sat down together. One laughed while the other read him the newspaper. The old man tapped me on the shoulder and handed me a card. There was a picture of a man running on it. He was on a treadmill with a strap tied around his waist.

Running? I asked.

People say you're born with speed, you can't learn it.

I've heard that.

There's no creativity in running these days. Or writing for that matter.

They're related?

Get from A to B as fast as you can.

How?

Progressive resistance, cadence, form.

This machine does that?

Push and pull, pneumatics, the harness.

You made it?

Put on my Visi-Glasses and you could run the streets of Istanbul in your living room.

How can the poets use it?

You think this crowd is tough, try reading to a machine.

A woman took the podium next, said she was the curator of the series. She asked us to look at the schedule of Whitman events in April. The man folded his evaluation in half and stood to leave.

How about him? I asked.

Who?

Whitman.

Crybaby.

Seer of the unseen, I said.

That's not it.

“I am he that walks with the tender and growing night;/I call to the earth and sea half-held by the night.”

Seer of the seen, the man said.

He sees what we can't.

That's not it.

What then?

He sees what's right in front of him.

Is that good? I asked.

The old man bent quickly and touched his toes. The curator walked past and he handed her his form. She scowled and turned away. Then he looked at me and said,

I could've made a Carl Lewis out of that man.

Michael Rerick

Hand Ends

Touch useful hair, you (st) *upid*, you
 cold feet, and all

through the street babble hum, throat string vertisements and grip, exit left,
behind the line, ticket.

 An eye reaches the corner where the corner meets
the corner, up,
 a cobweb, pushed
 by simulation of their breathing.
 Their breath going fast
 to a whistle
up, stepping through air, up,
 through rebar and further
 up, a vibration stratastophic
 with pressure notes that fall grease-gray
 on yellow hydrants, mixing
 with water that sings through
the walls. You *elbow*, you *upid*, you *so many mornings*
and *open the shades* across the red tile.

F o r t u n e F i s h

Spring was the season of the fortune fish. They arrived in plastic grab bags dispensed by a decrepit clown at the entrance of the annual carnival. The clown's thick makeup always failed to disguise his stubbled cheeks and sagging neck. His bright costume smelled like smoke. His fingernails as he handed out the bags had a yellowish tint that I thought was part of the costume.

We were given a bag apiece containing a handful of stale popcorn wrapped in wax paper, ten tickets for the carnival games, a miniature kaleidoscope, a fluorescent orange kazoo, and, always at the bottom, a fortune fish sheathed in a sleeve of white plastic.

The fortune fish couldn't really predict the future. This was just false advertising on the part of Dr. Aloysius Manning, whose bearded, bespectacled profile was printed on the rectangular outer sleeve. The doctor's picture was bordered by exhortatory capitals printed in turn-of-the-century type: DR. ALOYSIUS MANNING'S PATENTED FORTUNE FISH. A MARVEL OF PISCATORY PROGNOSTICATION.

Rubbing the sleeve between your thumb and index finger caused the seam at one edge to open and expose the fish inside. Extracted and placed in the palm—per Dr. Manning's printed instructions—it was slightly longer than a child's pinkie finger. As soon as the tissue-thin fish touched bare skin, it began curling and rolling as if caught in the flow of an unseen current. The sleeve contained an illustrated key for interpreting the fish's movements. A consistent warping of the head and tail indicated WORRY. A fish that seemed to fold itself in half suggested CONFUSION. An

upward curl of the head was a sign of SOCIABILITY, but if it seemed to burrow itself down into the meat of the palm, RETICENCE was to blame. ANGER was a series of twists that rendered the fish as stiff as a drill bit. LOVE was an ecstatic coiling of the body into a tight cylinder with the head trailing flat like a useless anchor. MELANCHOLY caused the fish to coil in reverse, around its head, leaving only the tail exposed, a blunted arrow.

I had only myself to test the accuracy of Dr. Manning's invention. The carnival tickets were considered the real prize. They were eagerly taken out and spent on beanbag throws, pony rides, and shots from plastic pistols. The kaleidoscopes and kazoos were handy projectiles that shattered easily underfoot. The popcorn scattered across the playground and stuck to the hooves of resentful Shetlands as they traced the same tired circle around a creaking pole. The fortune fish were ignored and discarded, some never even making it out of the now flattened grab bags that littered the bushes at the edge of school. In the days following the carnival, you could spot them everywhere if you looked hard enough. They floated in rain puddles and in the basins of drinking fountains. They trailed unseen from the soles of shoes. They caught on the chain link fence that surrounded school property, their heads and tails wagging in the wind.

I hoarded them like currency and stored them in my nightstand drawer. The nightstand was an old piece of furniture from the time before I was born, when my parents lived in an apartment instead of a house. The lacquered panels resembling wood had warped with age and wear, and through the growing gaps, fortune fish sifted from the bottom of the drawer, down the back of the nightstand, and onto the carpet. Whenever my mother cleaned, they inevitably clogged the vacuum, tangling with hair and carpet fibers into a thick mess that she had to extract by hand from the bristles. She mumbled to herself as she kneeled over the vacuum's exposed underside.

After watching her struggle with crumpled shreds of fish, I would kneel next to her, but she would push me away and tell me to do my homework.

One spring, I watched my mother as she pried the vacuum open and absent-mindedly ran a finger along the matted bristles. She seemed to be staring up at a corner of the ceiling where a cobweb waved loose from the wall. I asked her if something was wrong. She answered by getting up and shutting herself in the bathroom until the noise of my father's return from work prompted her to start dinner.

After his return, my father and I would leaf through the dictionary on top of the desk in my parents' room. It was bigger than the family Bible and propped up on a special stand that could swivel in any direction. Whenever I found a new word in a magazine or a newspaper, my father would help me lift the heavy cover and turn the pages. My father would finger the cracked binding and shake his head. Someday, he said, you're going to wear this thing out.

By that spring, he had taught me all of the words in Dr. Manning's instructions that I didn't understand. More often than not, my father was distracted while I practiced pronouncing a word and using it correctly in a sentence. His eyes went from the dictionary to the empty hallway. The silence of the house was broken only by the sounds of chopping and frying from the kitchen.

On one of the first warm nights, we sat on the steps of the front porch. The sidewalk, the parked cars, the shrubbery bordering our neighbors' houses, even the air itself seemed steeped in an eerie blue. Under the green porch light, we watched together as I placed a fortune fish on my palm. The fish rolled and dipped, turned and twisted itself, curled one way, then the other. Nothing it did resembled any of the possible results described by Dr. Manning. On the outside, I felt nothing wrong. But on the inside,

apparently, I was a tangle of emotions, so incorrigibly bound and conflicted that I was beyond the doctor's diagnosis.

What do you think it means? I asked. Before my father could answer, my mother called us in to eat.

All through dinner, I could barely taste my food. I was more preoccupied with the effort of breathing. What little was said at the table was drowned out by what I took for the sound of my own blood rushing back and forth from somewhere inside, unattached from everything else but still working of its own unexplained volition. When my mother asked for the salt, my hand was shaking so badly that I spilled some onto her salad.

What's wrong with you? she asked. I shrugged. Shrugging is not a response, she said. Answer me with words.

Nothing, I said.

She stabbed at a lettuce leaf with her fork and continued to look at me. Did you wash your hands?

Yes.

He's still playing with trash. This she said to my father. Every day, he brings more of those fish home with him. He came in today with three of them stuck in an old wad of chewing gum.

If you scrape the gum off, they're still good, I said.

I didn't know that, my mother said. She turned to my father. Did you know that?

My father wiped at his mouth with a napkin. Did you wash your hands? my father asked.

Yes, I said.

See. Nothing to worry about.

Nothing for *you* to worry about, said my mother.

My father paused in his chewing. He looked at my mother coldly, one cheek swollen at an angle to the rest of his face. He took a sip of water, and worked at the food in his mouth until he had swallowed all of it. He took another sip of water.

Maybe, he said, it's a good night for a drive to the harbor.
Enjoy yourselves, my mother said as she rose from the table.

I never liked the harbor. When my father said we were driving to the harbor, what he really meant was the airport. The two ran parallel to each other along the same highway exit. If you followed all the signs for the scenic route toward your left, you would eventually reach one of the parks that faced the harbor and the city skyline. But whenever we went, my father would always turn off of the exit even before the signs for the scenic route started. He would drive onto a side street instead, then onto another and another until we reached a stretch of chain link fence crowned with coils of barbed wire.

My father got out of the car and stood at the fence, his fingers woven tightly into the mesh of small, polygonal rungs. A cold breeze rippled his hair and the back of his shirt, but he didn't seem to notice. Shivering, I shut the passenger-side door and joined him.

We looked out onto the wide lanes that cut through the airfield beyond. Planes taxied back and forth in front of the distant terminal. To pass the time, I tried to guess what my father was staring at. I knew by now not to disrupt his reverie with questions. The only signs of human life were the ground crews that, from here, were only slightly bigger than the specks emitted by their conical flashlights. The terminal's exterior attempted to emulate the waves of the Pacific Ocean in concrete and glass, but at best it resembled the ragged blade of one of my father's power tools. Then there were the planes themselves. Their bodies and tails were painted with airline logos and the colors of foreign flags. A woman wearing a garland of hibiscus smiled from one passing plane. Another displayed the top of a mountain misted by clouds. One plane was painted over with the black and white body of a killer whale, the mascot for the local water park. The foremost windows were the whale's eyes and its mouth was skewed to one side in a toothy smirk. The plane was

cruising to a stop when I felt a familiar tremor begin behind me.

I covered my ears and fixed my eyes to the ground. The tremor increased until I could feel it in my ankles, legs, and chest. I forced myself to keep looking down, but after a few moments, I felt the urge to look up. I knew what to expect and how it would make me feel, but the urge became irresistible. Finally, hands still at my ears, I raised my head.

Above us, the sluggish body of a jumbo jet maneuvered the last stages of its descent. Even with my ears covered, the roar was overwhelming. The plane seemed close enough to touch. I dared myself to raise an arm into the heavy blue sky, but I could already feel my fingers being torn off by the suction of the immense engines. As the jet touched down, the ground seemed to shift under my feet and thin lines of light edged my vision. I looked over at my father. His hands had never left the fence. He watched the jet grow smaller and smaller until it disappeared into the narrow glare of the terminal lights.

On the ride back, my father turned on the radio, but I could barely make out what was on. The noise of my own body grew louder in my ears. I listened for every pulse of blood as the silence between heartbeats seemed to lengthen. Sinking lower into my seat, I forced air and words out of my tightening chest.

What? my father asked. He seemed to strain to make himself heard.

Why do you go to the airport? I asked.

He turned a knob on the radio. After a while, he said, you can't hear a damn thing.

My bed that night felt like a heavy sack of sickening warmth. Before long, I had exhausted every cool corner and begun tracing the angled shadows on the ceiling with restless eyes. I threw off the covers and listened to the sounds of the house. The noise from

the airfield had dissipated as soon as my father pulled into the driveway, but this only made it harder to ignore the silence that met our return.

Now, unable to sleep, I tried forcing my eyes shut. This only managed to strain my eyelids and give me the beginnings of a headache. But gradually, my eyes closed on their own for moments at a time. I must have finally drifted off because when I opened my eyes again, I was at school, sifting through the shrubs that bordered the playground. In the dirt visible beneath, I recognized familiar specks of red. They disappeared as soon as I reached for them, but the plants rustled pleasantly as I parted them with my fingers, and the dirt felt good and cold against my skin. While I couldn't see them, I could hear the crinkle of fortune fish in their plastic sleeves. And, from somewhere behind me, muted voices rose and fell, as if laughing and crying at the same time.

We went fishing that spring. We usually only went in the fall, when cooler water coaxed bigger fish to feed closer to shore. In the spring, you could expect perch or undersized bass or the occasional mackerel if you used the local pier. The day we went, my father hooked two sizeable perch during the first hour. The rest of the morning yielded nothing but seaweed clumps and a small stingray that I struggled to pull to shore. My father made me stand back as he stepped on the stingray's poison-bearing tail with the toe of his boot. He extracted the hook with a pair of pliers and kicked the fluttering ray back out to sea.

The sun was climbing higher over the beach. We could see motorboats cruising along the other side of the bay. By late morning, we would be crowded out by beach towels, portable coolers and sun-starved tourists. It would be too noisy to fish. My mother had made me dress for the morning cold in a flannel shirt and stiff new jeans. As my father baited our hooks, I felt my back

itch in the growing warmth. I reached behind to scratch.

My father looked up from the anchovy bucket. It's not as cold as your mother thought, he said.

I shook my head and continued to scratch.

He smiled as he watched a hooked anchovy struggle on the edge of his tackle box. She's only worried about you, he said. I said nothing as I watched him cast his line far into the deep blue bay.

When both our lines were out, we returned to the car to wait. My father sipped coffee from a large thermos. He always saved me a cup to go with the cereal my mother packed for me in a white Tupperware container. As I poured milk from the small carton tucked into a corner of the food cooler, my father turned to look at me.

She's right to worry, he said. Your mother and I both worry.

What about? I said.

We don't think a boy your age should spend so much time alone.

I shrugged.

Don't you think so? my father asked. Don't you ever wish there was someone else around to have fun with?

You're here, I said.

My father laughed. Grown-ups are no fun, he said. I mean other kids.

Other kids are stupid, I said.

How do you know?

They just are.

He shook his head. It's not healthy, he said. Something has to change. Don't you think something has to change? My father's expression was edged with a sudden concern that shocked me. I couldn't look at him until his silence made me realize that he was waiting for me to speak.

Maybe, I said. I guess.

It doesn't mean that things at school have to be any different, he said. What if, instead, the change happened for us?

Us? I asked. How?

Just then, the tip of one of the poles whipped sharply through the air. We ran to the edge of the beach. My father was stooping to reel in when I told him to wait.

What? he said. He looked at me with an annoyed expression.

I pointed at the tip that continued to quiver, but now not as sharply. The line he had cast only minutes earlier had grown slack and dipped in a leisurely curve toward the water. A second line was pulling at the pole from above. My father grabbed at the second line and unraveled it from around the tip. He followed the line down to a piece of driftwood that rolled back and forth in the tide. He handed the driftwood to me and told me to start winding the line around it.

I tried to see what was at the other end, but it was lost in the sun's growing glare. I began to wonder if the line itself was real. It was thin, transparent, and practically invisible as it arced into the sky.

I don't see anything, I said.

Keep going, said my father. He adjusted his fishing line and then turned to watch. I continued pulling the line in. Occasionally, I felt something tug at the thickening spool. It was several minutes before the air around the line solidified into a distant, diamond-shaped kite.

When my hands grew tired, my father took over. Soon, a tail materialized, then a pair of eyes, then the red and blue mosaic of its wings. I could hear the soft ripple of paper overhead. My father slowly pulled in the last of the line until the kite was hovering just above our heads, shading us both in a patch of purpled sand.

The following Monday, my father had to work late. There would be no dictionary study tonight. While my mother made dinner in the kitchen, I went alone to my parents' room and browsed at random through the musty pages. When this got boring, I continued work

on the movie I was making in the margins of the dictionary.

By studying the way that page numbers occasionally shifted in the upper corners while my father searched for words, I had discovered how flipping pages could simulate movement. I had begun testing my discovery with a small discreet circle drawn in the bottom margin of one of the middle pages (MILLEPORE to MILTONIA). On each successive page, I drew a new circle, slightly to the right of where the previous one had been. When the circle had reached the bottom right of the page, I began drawing along the right margin. Flipping the fifty or so pages of my work thus far caused the circle to shoot from left to right and then upwards around the bottom of the text. To emphasize the sense of movement, I had added curled wisps to the left of each circle like the ones I had seen in cartoons.

In the midst of my work that day, my pencil slipped out of my fingers and under my parents' bed. When I reached down to retrieve it, my hand felt the edge of a book among the shoehorns and forgotten socks.

The book was the size of a record album and its cover had been removed. The title page was printed in squat, rounded letters: RECOVERING EROS. A GUIDE TO PASSIONATE MARRIAGE.

The book claimed to be illustrated, but when I turned to the listed page numbers, I found nothing but ragged edges torn close to the spine. I flipped through the remaining pages. Some of the words I had never seen before. Many of the others were familiar, but they didn't make sense. From the kitchen came the sound of running water. I set the book on my father's desk and began turning the pages of the dictionary.

I was foraging in the plants at recess when something landed with a slap next to me. A woman smiled from the wrinkled pages of a magazine. She could have been a younger version of Mrs. Cooper,

my fifth-grade teacher. Her smile was the same as Mrs. Cooper's whenever she goaded us through grammar exercises. But this woman was naked and she held her legs apart to form a V. At the place where her legs met, the skin was as rosy as the lunchmeat my mother used for sandwiches.

I looked up from the magazine and saw a boy from my class standing in front of me. I knew his name only because Mrs. Cooper had made us memorize everybody's name at the beginning of the school year. At lunch, he liked to drink his milk through the bottom of the carton. When he was finished, he would return to the lunch line and place his apparently unopened container alongside the fresh milk.

He indicated the magazine with a quick nod. I know where you can see more, he said. When I didn't answer, he shoved me to the ground and pinned me there with his foot. What's wrong with you? he asked. Are you a fucking queer?

I thought I knew what queer meant. And that's how I felt as I stared at the spread-open woman. But I knew that I was supposed to say no.

No, I said.

He told me not to return to class after lunch. Instead, I was to meet him near the entrance of the school auditorium.

I spent lunch staring at my food. I took apart the sandwich my mother had wrapped in cellophane, removing the top slice of bread and the folded lettuce leaf. I dabbed at the ham with a finger. The salt of the meat and the sour smell of the mayonnaise entered my nostrils. When the bell rang, I threw everything away, uneaten, and headed to the lower courtyard.

A group of boys stood around the corner from the auditorium, hidden behind a high hedge. I could see their scuffed and dirty sneakers form a row along the base of the shrubs. One of them seemed to be the lookout. He peered out from the shelter of the

hedge and watched the entrance intently as the sixth-grade boys filed in through the double doors. I felt a hand clap sharply against the back of my head. It was the boy with the magazine. Hurry up, dipshit, he said. We're gonna be late.

We waited together through the tardy bell and then another five minutes just to be sure. The boy next to me checked his watch. They must have started by now, he said. The lights are probably out. We looked at each other and stepped out from behind the shrubs.

A sign was taped to one of the closed doors: DO NOT DISTURB. HEALTH INSTRUCTION IN PROGRESS. The doors opened onto a darkened room illuminated at the front by a movie screen. The audience of sixth-graders looked up at what appeared to be a cannon on wheels. The shaft was transparent and revealed a network of blood vessels. The film's narrator spoke soberly over the clacking reels: . . . basic components for the miracle of life, transmitting successful genetic traits to a new generation . . . The cannon moved aside to make room for a new image, a furred beetle that garnered scattered laughter and applause. From the darkness, an adult voice called for silence.

We waited at the back, I wasn't sure for what. I heard a gasp next to me as the diagrams faded into a flesh-and-blood man and woman who stood like guards before a multi-colored strand that twisted between them. The man and woman were both naked. Their faces were arranged with the same blank concentration that my mother and father gave to paying bills. My face went hot and even hotter when a flashlight shone directly at my cheek. A firm hand guided me out by the neck.

Mr. Halstrom, the vice-principal, fussed at the diagonal pattern of his tie and addressed my parents. I would like to tell you differently, he said. But it's still unclear how much your son knows and how he knows it. He has not been very cooperative.

My mother grabbed me by the ear and pulled. Tell the man what you saw, she commanded.

Ma'am, Mr. Halstrom said, we don't advocate corporal punishment of any kind.

Well maybe if you did, children wouldn't be exposed to the filth they get at this school. My mother released me and tucked the hair she had disturbed back behind my ear.

Mr. Halstrom cleared his throat. With all due respect, ma'am, the Health Instruction Curriculum has been approved by the entire school district. It has even won a national award for its thoroughness and sensitivity to young adult issues.

My son is not a young adult.

Yes, ma'am, we know and we share your dismay that curiosity led him to this. We would like to offer our sincerest apologies. But I'm not sure what we would be apologizing for. Your son willfully violated our strict protocol along with several other boys whom he has refused to identify.

When my mother looked at me, I moved quickly to cover my ears. But her hands remained fixed in her lap.

Looking at his record, Mr. Halstrom continued, I can tell that your son is a good boy. His reading scores are through the roof. He may qualify for the advanced track at the junior high. But certain aspects of his file bother us. Both his current and former teachers have noticed a reluctance to socialize and behavior patterns that appear consistent with an obsessive personality. Have you had your son evaluated by a professional?

I don't know if it's come to that, my father said. But we have noticed things. Right? He turned to my mother.

My mother flipped calmly through the contents of her purse, but as soon as she found her folded tissues, she began to sob into both hands. When she could speak again, she seemed to be addressing Mr. Halstrom, but she was looking at my father. I've

tried everything I can, she said. And it's still not good enough? The rising tone of her question gave way to more sobs.

Curiosity isn't a bad thing, my father said. He's a smart kid. Smart kids are naturally curious.

TUMESCENT. The word escaped my mouth so quickly that at first I thought I had only said it in my head.

Mr. Halstrom turned to me briefly before answering my father. I agree, he said. But I also agree with your wife that there is a proper time and place—

PRIAPIC, I said, picking at a clod of dirt at the side of my shoe.

The vice-principal looked at me again through lowered eyeglasses. As I was saying, a proper time and place for everything. We can't take complete responsibility for what happened, but you have my word that we will consider all that we can do on our end to prevent any similar incidents in the future.

CONCUPISCENCE. The consonants showered out in a spray of saliva.

My father ignored Mr. Halstrom. Where did you learn that word? he asked. I continued to study the plush beige carpet.

Mr. Halstrom took a small card from the brass holder on his desk. If you have any further questions or concerns, please feel free to call. And do let me know if you decide to pursue additional counseling. He handed the card to my mother. She dried her eyes, wiped her nose, and wadded the card together with the soggy tissues she returned to her purse.

I don't remember what I dreamed that night. But the noise in my dream, the laughing and crying together, continued even after I opened my eyes. It was coming through the wall behind me, from the direction of my parents' room.

The house was quiet as I made my way down the hall. At my parents' door, I heard nothing but the hum of the refrigerator behind

me. I grabbed the doorknob.

In the low light from the window, I saw sheets billow and then suddenly flatten out against the bed. They stretched so tautly over my mother and father that my parents looked like mummies. The only parts that weren't covered were their heads and bare shoulders.

I spoke to the darkness that obscured their eyes. I thought you were asleep, I said.

Turn around, said my mother.

Once they were dressed, my mother made me take a seat in the living room. She set one of the floor lamps right above my head and she and my father took turns pacing around me.

There are certain things you're too young to understand, my father said. You are a very smart boy, but this isn't about being book smart.

But I didn't see anything, I said.

That's right, my mother said. You *didn't* see anything. Her face was hidden by the light above me, so I watched her slippers trace half-circles on the floor.

My father's slippers stopped next to hers. Is that, he said, really the best—

My mother interrupted him. He didn't see anything. If he didn't see anything, there's nothing to talk about. Right? My father didn't answer. His feet disappeared into the shadows on the carpet.

There's nothing to talk about, my mother repeated. It's too soon. It's too goddam soon. Her throat caught around the curse. Her slippers left the room. I heard the bathroom door shut down the hall, followed by the rush of water from opened faucets.

The counselor showed me real pictures and asked me about them. Then he showed me ink blots and asked me to make them into real pictures. He seemed to scribble continuously onto a yellow legal pad. Before each new exercise, he made a point of asking my permission.

I'd like to try something, he would say. Would you mind?

During one session, he arranged a row of empty chairs in front of me. One was for my father, one was for my mother, one was for anything in particular that was bothering me. You can say whatever you want to them, the counselor said. I'm not here to judge. This is your chance to express sadness, annoyance, or anger about anything.

Where's the chair for you? I asked. At the next session, mine was the only other seat in the room.

We talked about the fortune fish. He asked to see one and I pulled one from my pocket. It was still in its white sleeve. I watched as he carefully withdrew the fish. In the meat of his palm, it looked tiny. Its movements were feeble and sluggish.

The counselor watched for a few moments and then turned his attention back to me. So why do you like these things so much?

You wouldn't understand, I said.

You're right, he said. I probably wouldn't. If I were your age, I'd prefer riding my bike or playing football with my friends. This, he said, indicating the fish with a slight jerk of his chin, this isn't a toy I imagine being much fun after a while.

They're not toys, I said. They tell me things.

You mean they speak to you? With actual voices? He watched me carefully and poised his pen over the legal pad.

They tell me things, I said, getting up. I took the fish back and returned to my seat.

My father came to pick me up after school. My mother usually drove and I asked where she was. She had to go to the doctor, he said.

Is she okay?

She's fine, my father said. Everything is going to be fine.

When we got home, my mother was waiting on the couch. Have you told him yet? she asked.

No, said my father. He took a seat next to her. I wanted to wait

until we were all home. He slid a hand over her belly and held it there. I watched from across the living room.

Things are going to be different from now on, he said. For all of us.

My mother took my father's hand in hers without looking at him. I guess it's what we all want, she said. Her eyes looked out one of the front windows. From where she was sitting, her view was obscured by the unkempt leaves of the bordering rose bushes.

My father winked at me. He jerked his head back slightly, a signal for me to join them. I stayed where I was. In the dwindling light from the street, I watched my parents' hands, fingers cupped around palms that were smooth and unyielding.

Viola Lee

conversation with the color of salt

O, the white. O, the white stone piece. O, grains of glass, you do not know the color of salt. Or do you? In your eyes it is deadly as anything else like gunfire or fire storm. I believe today someone found the crucifix on the tree. They found it while walking up to the tree house that no one talks about. And then someone else found the quiet in the basement along with the plastic white lambs and stethoscopes. There are so many things that the weatherman would rather not talk about. I look out the window today, and notice a bunch of squirrels on the block. We hope for colder days because we are running out of electricity. Outside we hear the garbage cans slam and trucks roll by with their many different reasons. Today the color of salt is the color of you and it is also the color of something so clean that it hurts to even look at it. Tomorrow, and maybe even the day after, all of this will change actually we know it will. The salt is white like light. The color of salt is the color of you.

conversation with the water in the pond

There, over there, I can see the little beings in the water. Each movement is like some kind of massive fluid wave. It is as if thousands of ants are feasting on a dead animal of some kind: quietly, violently, running away. I understand this movement now. The movement reminds me of the way you used to open the shades, opening the dark to others. I can see the little green slivers of decayed matter, and something is moving some other life form. I can see pieces of dead earth and trash being carried by the wind and the wave of the pond. It quiets me. I know the movement, this strange and forbidden movement. It is as if we were watching burials, and the coffins are without bodies. For some reason it haunts our minutes. Each tick is like some slow movement or someone carrying someone else away.

Marie Potoczny

The Moscow Subway in December

There are wild dogs in the Moscow subway. I bought a pastry at one of the kiosks in the station; the choices were apricot, plum, liver, or chicken. I chose chicken. The woman who sold it to me was toothless, her face decomposing inwards. She wore a scarf around her head, and had whiskers on her chin. My chicken pastry had a bone left in it as big as my finger, and I almost broke my tooth on it. I gave the bone to a wild dog and the toothless woman screamed at me, "Don't feed the dog, you stupid cunt! They keep the rats down." I was afraid people were staring so I ran away.

Fixture

Changes of place
and turning of the eyes away:
ah, the gesture;

(or)

in a ward
at the other end of the house
resting beneath the chandelier
on a dry spiky nap of cloth;

(or)

the confines of the kitchen;
backsliding, blessed;
no one can heal us,
we are full of stuffing,
a couch and a wingback, we:
we are felt or pith or wadding.

Lessons in shame
conveyed, sunk
through cesspools
understood and covered;
confusions are now clear;
which of my five wits, then,

went halting off?
I will heal you
with a pin,
poke your arms with holes,
seal the drip
of water
with music,
a finger,
a hold.

G a z i n g

Boys freeze in the air as they leap from the jungle gym, hair lifting from their heads as if streaming underwater, mouths wide open, nearly hysterical on faces reddened by the long afternoon. And the girls. When I was a kid I dreamed of having the power to still the earth. It was because of the girls and their lengthening legs from skirts and their soft swinging hair that I lay in bed at night or cast my eyes head-down in church, and dreamed of stopping the earth's rotation. In the surreal stillness of a lifeless playground I approach any girl—in the feverish roar of hormones it's usually Jenny, Wendy, or Jackie—and she doesn't see, doesn't raise delicate and scented eyebrows, doesn't spin on her heel and rush toward girlfriends, leaving me in her wake of morning soap and confusion. I walk toward the perfume of her damp forehead, touch a shoulder soft and exotic under gradeschool white, run my thumb over a bra strap that from my normal vantage point might have been medicinal. To reach my hands toward nascent breasts and to lose myself in their give and take. To lift plaid skirts and to thrill at the rise of snowy thigh, the otherworldly cotton underwear, the startle of the other side of the moon.... Above me the sun shines forgivingly, behind me the nuns and teachers stand in rooms, frozen in poses of authority, looking the other way.

Sitting in a coffee house in town, my books and notebook open, what I want to do most is look up. And *at*. At a couple next to me, at a woman walking through the door, at an intense conversation among three people by the front bay window. Recently, a woman I

know who's friendly with the owner walked up to me wide-eyed.

"We just had Jessica Lange in here," she whispered.

I knew that Lange was in town filming a movie for HBO. "Oh, when'd she leave...?"

"Just a second ago. She was standing right there—" She pointed to a pastry case no more than ten feet away from where we were sitting. "She had her hair pulled back. Had on a pink top?"

I had been sitting at the coffee house for ten minutes already, and I'd missed her. *Oh, well*, I thought. But I spent the next few minutes reconstructing my entrance, recasting the scene in my mind, trying in vain to see a woman in a pink top among dozens of people already there. But I couldn't will her back: I'd missed her right there in front of me. I know what might happen: the memory of struggling to see her in my mind's eye will tattoo itself in me, and years later I'll indeed remember *seeing Jessica Lange at the coffee house, right there, bent over elegantly, perusing macaroons...*

Had I seen her, would I have stared? Respect for her privacy, and my own distaste for public fawning, would likely have prevailed, but the desire would be immense and powerful: to stare and stare at an ordinary, attractive woman cast by her skill and fancy into dozens of women artfully invoked. Had I been allowed, by a god of stasis willing to freeze the moment, to simply stare...

I dream of living life in an erotics of observation. I don't want to merely watch, but to indulge myself libidinally—and, of course, to indulge who I'm watching. I want to luxuriate in the carnal act of close observation. Trees allow this of us, and ornate furniture, and paintings, and birds, before they skittishly fly off, aware of my staring presence humid on their envied plumage. A Canada lily allows me to approach it wantonly, to clutch surely but with reverence, to peel away scented folds, to plunge my nose deep into its neck, to inhale the life breath of the hidden world. But I'm not a plant, an unwilling subject might protest. Oh, but we're all plants, I cry. My

writing students, plagued to inertia by a long darkening afternoon and the electric haze of fluorescence, come to life slowly, instinctively, when I raise the blinds and the remaining natural light streams in to bathe the room in a glow their blank faces lean into.

If my mouth parts slightly, if my lips moisten when I stare....

When I've visited New York City to live and work in the summers recently, I've been surrounded by subjects and objects worthy of close, erotic scrutiny. On a block on Fourth Street in the East Village I come across a building that stops me in my tracks. Researching a book, I'm on the prowl for the long-lost Wonderhorse Theater when I notice an odd bulge—there's no other word for it—on the facade of an abandoned building across the street. I am not an architectural *connoisseur*, so what strikes me isn't technical mastery of form and space as much as a kind of visible music, an other-century drifting melody with vague Mediterranean accents, a threnody for beauty boarded-up. I cross the street to get a better look, and find to my amazement that the bulge I notice is in fact a spiral staircase built onto the outside of the building starting a third of the way up from the street, covered entirely by columnar steel mesh. It's a kind of vaulted column housing steps, and it protrudes from the front of the building in a manner I can only describe as *nervy*. At the top of the column the year "1889" is etched in stone; from the bottom a long flag pole protrudes, drooping and nearly parallel with the grimy street. A pathetic and tattered blue curtain hangs from the pole, forlorn, half-wrapped around itself and tethered to the building in a hopeless gesture of gusty optimism. The building looks ancient, is anciently filthy.

My impulse happily granted me this June late morning is to simply stare. Hands on hips, I secure myself a good spot at the curb, crane my head upward, and watch and watch this building's decay of romance and fortitude. I'm obsessed with abandoned buildings, and

search for them in any city or town that I visit. One of my favorite emptied buildings stood for years on the corner of Ninth and F Streets in northwest Washington D.C. Years before the city gentrified and spruced up the area, many boarded-up department stores and warehouses described the blocks, and Landsburgh's store stood immense at the corner, a giant weather pattern in decaying brick, countless windows shuttered with particle board. One or two windows remained unsealed, becoming errant homes for large black birds that drifted ominously in and out at dusk. Leaving work from a nearby office, or waiting across the street to see a band at the 9:30 Club, I'd stand on that corner and stare and stare at the abandonment, and the fulfillment, of space.

On Fourth Street, the spiral staircase doesn't really start until the second floor: it hovers almost magically above a spindly, paint-faded pole that connects the column to the landing on the first floor. The building stands five stories tall, but the top floor seems to be cramped attic space with five small, arched windows, while the fourth floor gives way to an open deck in the center, flanked by two large windows, and the third and second floors look from my vantage point to be immense rooms—ballroom-size, maybe?—with enormous, arched French windows on the third floor and equally large, though less ornately designed, windows on the second floor. What I return to again and again in my staring indulgence is that vaulted column attached to the facade. What whimsical design impulse created this? It was certainly not a practical urge, as the steel mesh cage protecting the staircase allowed in the weather. If it was purely for aesthetic appeal, a vagary on an anonymous block, then I can say for certain that I've never seen another building like it. I lost the bulk of a morning standing and staring up at a building turned inside out to the elements, and to the watcher.

Once in Manhattan, walking, I followed a woman west along Ninth

Street toward Greenwich Village. She was wearing a low-slung, sheer skirt, underneath which her black panties clung to and rode her buttocks high above long, pumping legs. I was hungover, missing my wife, and had recently emerged from a porno video booth on the Bowery, desperately horny. I wanted to reach this woman and ask her to stop, *just so I can....* The same indulgence Amy allows me when she knows I'm watching her walk to the bathroom naked early in the morning, or when during sex I'm speechless behind her, the top of my head coming off at her submissive curves and undoing.

I didn't follow the girl far, a block or two maybe. *You know, women can so easily tell when a guy's looking,* an old girlfriend told me once. This I remember always and employ wisely. At the First Avenue and Fourteenth Street subway station a woman comes dashing into the car just as the doors are closing. It's raining, and the sudden storm has followed an oppressively hot and humid afternoon. She stands in the center of the car breathing hard, her thin dress-shirt soaked, her nipples brazenly defying her wish for modesty. I look away, but not before registering her damp chest and its rhythms, not before registering the look on her face of dismay.

An overheard conversation:

"The absolute object slightly turned is a metaphor of the object,"
Wallace Stevens says.

OK, but how will you know unless you circle the object you desire?

"I have always loved backs," Phillip Lopate offers. "To walk behind a pretty woman in a backless dress and savor how a good pair of shoulder blades, heightened by a shadow, has the same power to pierce the heart as chiseled cheekbones!... I wonder what it says about me that I worship a part of the body that signals a turning away."

::

In the far southeast corner of our large yard, in an untended spot, I'm drinking coffee, two cats at my feet. My gaze happens to fall on two high weeds that, as an unnoticed breeze lifts, part from each other.

In a gorgeous moment, an ordinary weed pulls back from its mate, but two of its curled leaves are wrapped gingerly around the other's leaves. Softly, the breeze tugs at the weed until it's forced to let go, and falls—not far, a foot or so—away from the other in a momentary glimpse of complete, utter sadness. Absurd, what a staring body will bring to the natural world. I walk closer and am lucky that on this late-May morning the wind is barely moving, enough to enact this tiny drama in front of me. Looking closely, I see that it's only the smallest leaf on the one weed that is curled around an even smaller leaf—a sprout, really—on the other, but there is just enough membranous curl in both green hands to hook. A breeze lifts, and the womanly weed—she's tall, nearly my height, and verdant hangings from her strong stem suggest hair—is tugged back (by desire? regret? obligation? No—) until they part, and they both move forlornly in this transparent drama. Just as softly a breeze lifts and they join together again, leaves curling, stems urging along their lengths, and if I'm lucky—I've been staring at this for nearly half an hour—the breeze will indulge the weeds, and they'll move into each other wetly, rub along their stems and leaves until what's happening before me is nothing short of erotic. They might stop moving together for a moment, and a breeze will lift and begin the long tug toward separation again, two tiny leaves among dozens fastening to each other in green desire. An utterly ordinary moment made wild.

These are two stems from the same plant, and a ripening imagination blooms: brother and sister forced to part by Aeolus, their cruel foster parent...lovers having to part...a Union Pacific

train roars by at the end of our yard and there, there's the culprit! two lovers at a train station at the ungodly moment of leaving....

The skeptic knows that the natural world doesn't tell stories, that what happens before me isn't narrative, but random chaos. In my sentimental indulgence I stage a theatrical erotics, the extras of the world cast together in plotted drama.

A man stares, aroused, at two weeds blowing in a breeze. Brazenly bored, two cats spread out among the bushes. He leans in to stare at two commonplace stems moving randomly under a high sun. He wants to reach out, but not to disturb, to caress, but not to interfere. The perspective widens. The large yard comes into view. An acre of jade, the trees dotting and shading, the circular drive. In the house the bed remains unmade this late morning, only one side disturbed.

I had a lot of creaturely fears growing up, one being that school friends were peeping into my bedroom window at night, those guys who bothered me in certain ways—like Andy, who'd stare at me all morning in homeroom, never taking his eyes from me because he knew that it tormented me beyond the edges of the history book I struggled to keep perched. This wasn't a fear of something actual, though, as much as imagined. I pictured Andy, Rob, Mike, etc., lifting a ladder up to my second-floor window and peering in and laughing and pointing at me during my private, after-dinner hours, when I'd close my door away from my parents and five siblings and indulge in homework curdled in fantasy: here my slack-jawed fantasies of prep-school sex with a bathrobe-clad Wendy fermented or, darkly, the irrational dread that my family was trying to kill me by poisoning the Crest toothpaste.... In the midst of a fantasy or nightmare I'd whip my head around at my desk and try and peer through a dark window pane lit by the single desk lamp. The

imagined presence of guys on the opposite side of the window—boys who I didn't know after three o'clock, whose homes might've been recklessly different from mine—was as prickly and lousy as if they had actually been there, lurking. I'd self-consciously stuff my Charles Atlas advertisement under my *1978 Washington Redskins Yearbook*, pretend to study, the back of my neck damp with fantastic fingerprints. At some point during middle grades I devised an imaginary, elaborate boxing-glove-on-a-spring that I could deploy from my desk drawer and that would promptly fly through the window and knock whoever was staring at me down to the ground and the indignity of Amherst Avenue.

Invisible on the subway. Invisible in the grocery store. Invisible at the mall. Invisible at church. Invisible at work. Invisible in the car. Stare. Vanish. Remain. Flee without fleeing. Love without loving.

Gazing, I allow myself the dream I've long held: to become invisible. How I wanted to be able to float in and out of high school parties, a specter in an Ocean Pacific shirt, acne, and bad hair. One of the reasons that I identified with Elvis Costello's songs in high school was that his edgy, staring persona was often alone in a fuming corner, so ignored as to be transparent (*they say you're nothing but a party girl...maybe someday we can go hiding from this world*). I wasn't ignored at parties, I wasn't a social outcast, but I was never truly happy unless truly drunk, or otherwise lost with my eyes shut to the music—basic requirements now at the rare party that I'll attend. When Brendan came skulking out of the bathroom, trailing a giggling girl, and came up to me and asked me to smell his fingers.... I guffawed with the rest of the guys but really wanted to disappear, to float translucent above the party, not out of some other-century modesty or embarrassment, but as a way to get myself alone and to make some sense of the moment,

all the while staring at hormonal confusion and ecstasy below me, kids scattering toward and away from each other to the sound of Depeche Mode and English Beat, lousy champagne, and the bewilderment of unclasped straps and unzipped jeans.

Douglas S. Jones

Passing Through

Cars dissipate in a wind
that pushes time to Reno:

a hotel we can't afford,
tacos by the train yard.

Midway gas stations
crowd with sweat,

bathroom keys tied to empty gallons
pass from nameless hand to nameless hand.

There, roads split like starfish—
a growth of arms to Vegas, Los Angeles.

Heat draws a teaspoon of breath from the body.

In Lovelock, a mosquito hatches,
its wings the tremor of a new season.

Notes on Rising Sherman Hill Summit

Again, the flatness of land has brought us
Talking for miles about drowning.

I don't like my mouth that full.

And you're right. Tractors picnic the median: their scoops,
Their heavy tread glinting in wind.

The greasy shine of hydraulic joints
Stretched between yellow metal and yellow metal.

In this air, the carburetor wheezes lean, its mixture of gas and breath
Trolling through the dashboard. Climbing 8,600 feet, we think

We'll coast the rest of the way like water. Like water,
There's no turning east.

On the Morning of the Last Funeral of
the Year

The kettle chokes on its water, boils
out onto the range.

Steam catches the wrist.
I swear through inexplicables:

toothed duck bones,
run the faucet cold.

::

In their nest, the nuthatches—their red mouths
toward the sky, wait for anything to fall.
Down-wrinkled necks, their eyes black and dumb.
Even the birds know how to make a wreath,
how to keep eggs thirty feet off the ground
and warm.

At the frozen lakeshores of Canada, turtles
begin their thaw, stacked like tables,
their blood begins again. First one, then another,
and a foot working out of shell—
back from the annual death.

My sweater has holes—screwdrivers and cigars.
The cuff is a mangle of loose thread
trailing my wrist.
I named it “Lucky,” after the dog
whose gray ticks we grew thick.

::

While steam burns my wrist, whalers
on television slit open their kill,
cooling the body with arctic water.
The heat of a slow heart
can cook its casing to rib-marrow—

::

My uncle lives in the desert, hates wind. He hates
the false sense of movement, the thin monsoon grasses,
their quiet slapping about at the shores of the arroyo.
He hates the tug at his clothes, how his chest feels under cotton,
walking into wind. *It always makes a mess of things.*
He has come for the casting of ashes.

You are finding, reader, my problems with balance.
Place your hand at the back of my knee—
here, there is no warmth. Here,
the ache of winter gathers and slams
its thin limbs against each other.
Listen to them below the kneecap, gnawing.
I wear my sweater, wrap my leg in blankets

and dream it into a dying whale's heart.
Place your hand here,
sew me up against oceans. Let me feel
the drawing tight the threads of tendon.
First one, then the other.

Jason Fraley

In Order, A Broken Prayer

Say enchantment.

Say you're my pincushion of desire, my erotic filament.

Say that this is too abstract.

There is an equation involving a skeleton
key, rosary beads, and a requirement for
castration. There can be no residue. This is
a zero sum scenario.

Say acid.

Say the floor is marble and you sell rugs.

Say this is a family room and you're a widow.

Cough hard. The womb is far from secure.
Keep your heart but cordon off two
chambers. [Permissible binary: beat and
deflation.]

Say you follow this process.

Say you are not sterile, that you blush beneath the makeup.

Say *in spite of*.

Flu s h

Someone would be along to unlock the mausoleum shortly. Surely. Stacy knew this. Mattias had said this and Stacy had believed him, because what was the other option? That she'd spend the rest of her time in Berlin—the rest of her life?—underground in Treptower Park with 5,000 dead Soviet soldiers? Not likely.

She watched Mattias, the tour guide, recheck the door that had slammed shut, locking them in. Like a bad movie, this, or maybe a good one, because other than the self-locking door, there were plenty of unique elements: there was the location itself, the Sowjetische Ehrenmal, an immense memorial-mausoleum in southeastern Berlin where the Russians had buried their dead after battling through the city in World War II.

There was Mattias, their tour guide, who had confessed to Stacy early on that he was a cellist, that he'd taken this job because a promised gig with a new opera company hadn't panned out. Then the third member of the tour—a dad—had called over with a question about the new American embassy, and Stacy had gotten a good look at the back of Mattias's neck and the starting-to-be-long brown hair that was attempting obscure it. Mattias was handsome.

And there was Mike, her boyfriend, who'd parked her on this tour while he spent the day in Potsdam researching German hyperinflation of the 1930s. If the door to the mausoleum had clicked shut, she was locked in, but it was equally true that Mike was locked out. She'd asked Mike about his research and he said she couldn't understand, her German wasn't good enough. But she did understand: she'd seen the photographs of 1930s Germans

pushing around wheelbarrows full of almost-worthless paper money. Hyperinflation.

It's not that simple, Mike had said, and then tried to run his tongue between her breasts one more time. Maybe she shouldn't have asked when they were naked. Maybe she shouldn't have been thinking about hyperinflation during lovemaking. But what else was there? There was Mike, licking away, leaving her feeling like a giant glazed doughnut.

"I have a cell phone," the father said, going into his fanny pack—which, though this was the tenth time she'd seen him rustle through the thing, still made her think, for a split second, that he was undoing his fly. She looked away. He'd find the phone soon enough; everything was in there. They'd be rescued soon.

It was just the three of them on the tour, she, Mattias and the dad. The dad had wanted to have had his family along, but said his wife and daughters had rebelled. Stacy figured they didn't share the dad's delight in all things technological—this was a Segway Urban Adventure, and so each of them got to use this little two-wheeled stand-up electric scooter, a Segway, for the duration of the tour. "Cover twice the Berlin in half the time!" said the flyer Mike had shoved at her.

Stacy had a cell phone, too, but Mike had told her not to use it, especially not to call him on his cell phone, since international roaming was expensive. She didn't argue. Mike was in charge of their telecommunications; he'd acquired and managed both their phones. Stacy didn't even know how her voice mail worked. She'd put off asking, though, since she wanted to spare herself another lecture on finances.

Mattias shook his head.

"Just tell me who to call," the father said. It was odd not to know the man's name, but then, Stacy hadn't told him hers. Now

that they were trapped underground, would they exchange names? She'd make up a new one. *I'm Chloe.*

"It is not easy," said Mattias.

The father held out the phone. "Then you do it." Stacy half-liked the dad, even his stub of a ponytail. He was amenable to anything, not your usual American in Europe. Canadian, she thought, but for that fanny pack.

"No," said Mattias. "The problem is—the problem is, we are not supposed to be here."

"Ah," the father said, and looked at Stacy. "What do you make of this?" he asked her.

Stacy looked around. They were in a kind of vestibule, just inside the locked doorway. The tour's theme had been "hidden Berlin." They had seen a lot of blank-front apartment blocks that Mattias said contained former safe houses. Then they'd come to this park.

"We must wait," said Mattias.

That made no sense; Stacy now assumed Mattias was just trying to get back at her. She'd been the one who'd tried the door, peeked inside. It had been hot and oppressive in the middle of the vast, sunken memorial court the Soviets had built, marbled quotes from Stalin (in Russian and German) pressing in from all sides. But at one end, there had been a door, and it had opened for her, and they had followed her, and the door had closed behind them. She'd only wanted to escape for a moment.

The father reached again into his fanny pack and brought out a tiny deck of cards. "Just the thing," he said, waving them.

Stacy looked at Mattias, but he merely closed his eyes and nodded, as though the father had produced a gun, that it had come to this, that they would die, one by one.

Mattias looked so woebegone, in fact, that Stacy looked again at the father's hands: nope, just a deck of cards.

"I think we should keep going," Stacy said quickly. The cards

were creepy. “What’s in there?” She pointed to a door opposite the one that had shut on them.

“Dead soldiers,” the father said, and turned back to Mattias.

“I will call my girlfriend,” Mattias said.

“Not the police?” said the dad.

“As I said,” began Mattias.

“Your boss?” asked the dad.

“It is not simple,” Mattias said.

Do I remind him of her, Stacy wondered? No, I’m an improvement on her. And no matter. The girlfriend: she is outside, with Mike, roaming Germany. Maybe the two of them would meet up, fall in love, get married.

Mike had been her RA in school. He was on their floor all the time; her neighbors included several members of the football team who were always getting drunk, getting in trouble. At their school, football was only a club sport. Mike said that was why they “acted out.” Stacy had liked that, the explanation and the childcare terminology. And she’d liked Mike, too. It hadn’t been head-over-heels, but she’d thought that a good sign. Here was a boy she could be rational about, who was responsible and looked after her, who was attractive, in his way. He was tall and thin and—they’d never talked about it, but she could tell—bad at sports. The football guys would have flattened him on the field.

Mike was older than the other RAs. He was a grad student, in history, and that had appealed to her, too. A grown-up, for a change. She’d actually dated one of the football guys for awhile. Dated: like they’d ever gone on a date. Still, “fooled around with” seemed too temporary a term for something that had lasted an entire semester. He got drunk every Thursday and Saturday—the boy actually had a schedule—and Stacy had liked that Mike almost never got drunk, and if he did, it was completely unplanned.

She didn't think he'd planned, for example, to get drunk that last night in the dorms—everyone gone, just Stacy and Mike and three of the football players, all set to leave for summer. Everyone had to be out by seven the next morning.

The label said they were drinking bourbon; it was a bottle someone had found in an empty room. No one had money left to go buy anything else. Stacy took little sips or passed on the bottle altogether, but Mike drank deeply, and eventually suggested the game switch from penny stakes to clothing. *Strip poker*, which made Stacy smile, a smile the boys all misinterpreted. Because it was just a private joke with her; in high school, she'd thought—she'd feared—that college would be one, long, nonstop session of strip poker. She'd gleaned this from books and movies that she knew were exaggerated comedies, but they'd had to start from a grain of truth, right? Or so she'd thought; she'd taught herself to play poker, online. She'd gotten good. Then she got to college and never played again. Because in college, the boys all played Nintendo. Occasionally shirtless and in boxers, but that wasn't stripping.

That last night in the dorm, though, the TVs were packed away, the video games gone. Alcohol had somehow produced both the deck of cards and the notion of playing. Almost before she realized it, they were playing. Poker. Strip poker. Stacy tried to hide her nervousness, but she knew she was starting the game at a deficit. Unlike the boys, she wasn't wearing socks and shoes. Then she surreptitiously fingered an earlobe and realized: no earrings. She hoped they didn't notice their absence, or that she'd checked.

It hardly took half an hour for her to have all the boys in their underwear. The football guys, who weren't nearly as fit as they apparently thought, all pressed to go on. Stacy would have. It wasn't about the sex—sorry guys—it was so very much about the beautiful cards, about making them do just what she wanted them to, about knowing what was going to appear before someone

displayed a hand. It was about winning.

But she'd called it quits for Mike. The loss of his clothes had laid bare a pale, white stripling of a man. He'd run out of clean laundry, he said—he didn't normally wear briefs, honest, he usually wore boxers. It didn't matter; swaddled in Jockey shorts, he'd looked like an infant and they had laughed, all of them. He had both too little hair and too much, so black against his skin. Two a.m., he'd knocked on her door—"to apologize"—and she'd kissed him and they'd been going out ever since.

Stacy watched now as Mattias called his girlfriend, not his boss. The girlfriend wasn't there. He left a voice mail. The father looked at his watch. The air was cool, but strangely, not damp.

Mattias called again five minutes later, left another voice mail.

"She is in class," he told Stacy.

He wasn't that handsome, Stacy decided.

"I'm going to call my boyfriend," Stacy said, but Mattias only shrugged. Stacy had asked Mike last week if there were a better word in German for *boyfriend*; she didn't like the English language term at all. Both halves—*boy*, *friend*—smacked of playground, elementary school.

Mike had said he'd ask around.

After a series of rapid rings, intelligible even to someone who had never heard them before as a sign of trouble, a recorded voice, female, German, came on and said something. Stacy hung up and wondered how much it had cost.

The dad did his fanny pack thing again and fished out his phone, checked it. "I'm not getting a signal," he said. Stacy got ready to tell him that he couldn't use hers.

But he didn't ask. He refolded, redeposited his phone and glanced around. "Let's look around then," the dad said. "What the hell."

The door that led deeper within was secured with a rusty padlock, but the dad shook the handle anyway. Amazingly, the entire latch came away in his hand, and the door swung open after it.

“Happy birthday,” said the dad. He opened the door farther, and a deep cold came around all of them. The vestibule where they’d been standing had been lit, dimly, by sunlight that leaked around the door to the outside. This new space, though, was perfectly dark.

“Do you have a flashlight?” the dad asked.

Mattias shook his head.

The dad reached into the pack. “I do, but it’s small.”

It was about the size of his pinky, and when he shone it inside, it did nothing to disperse the dark. But after a moment, he said, *aba*, and with a grinding crunch, must have thrown a switch.

Suddenly a series of lights bloomed, illuminating a vast underground cavern. After a second or two, several of the lights started popping—one, two, three, four—each turning a brief, bright blue before zapping into darkness.

It made for a spectacular display; it was as if the room shook with light. When the explosions stopped, it took them some time to adjust to the yellowy twilight that remained, along with a loud, electric humming.

“Wow,” Stacy said, or tried to say, but her mind didn’t seem set on the word, and so she simply mouthed it.

“I think we’re in bigger trouble now,” the dad said.

“Or Mattias is,” said Stacy, and eased past him, through the door.

She stood at the top of a metal spiral staircase and looked out over the room below them. It was hard to say for sure, but the space appeared as long and as broad as a football field. The ceiling was supported by a series of cement arches, leaving the center free of pillars—and a good thing, since a massive cement building, barracks

or (Stacy finally realized) communal coffin ran down the length of the space. The soldiers' tomb. Mattias had said the Soviets had lost 20,000 troops in the battle for Berlin. Five thousand were buried at the memorial.

Mattias and the dad joined her, and then all three stood and surveyed the room until Stacy broke the silence.

"What's with the desks, Mattias?" she asked.

"What?" Mattias said, moving forward, shyly brushing past her.

"Where?" said the dad, unnecessarily—there were desks everywhere. One set ran along the outside walls of the room, and another set, grouped in pairs of two, formed an interior circle, between the cavern's walls and the tomb's.

Stacy started down the stairs.

"Rats," Mattias said quickly.

She stopped.

"I don't see any rats," the dad said, though he didn't move, either.

"*Rats*," Mattias said. "Is that the word?"

Stacy kept going down.

"And guns?" the dad said. "Those are rifles? Machine guns?"

It took a minute to realize that they had to adjust how they walked—the dust, or dirt, lay almost an inch thick on the floor, and kicking through it created clouds that hung solidly in place, in no hurry to dissipate. Stacy was the one who came up with the best method, a kind of slow, balletic step, each foot carefully raised and placed.

The dad's theory was that the tomb, the memorial above, was a grand con: this was actually an underground bunker—the word soon became his favorite, *bunker*, and he worked it into almost everything he ever said after—a place where the East Germans could wait out nuclear annihilation above and then reemerge to take over the world.

Stacy's theory, unvoiced, was that this was a tomb of the ancient civilization variety, the East Germans or their Soviet minders taking a page from Tutankhamen, and burying themselves with all that they might need for the next world: soldiers, guns. Desks.

"We should stop here," Mattias said. He put a hand out toward Stacy, she watched it, and then watched it fall.

"What if there's another way out?" the dad said.

"Does your phone work down here?" Stacy asked.

"Mine didn't work up there," the dad said. "I'm sure it wouldn't work down here in the bunker, either."

Mattias checked his phone. Stacy could tell by his face that it worked.

"No," Mattias said. "No signal," he said, snapping it shut.

"And you," the dad asked. "What about yours?"

She looked at it, stared at it, in fact, because it was showing she had an incoming call. Somehow, the phone had toggled itself to silent ring—the screen flashed, nothing more. She answered it; her dad.

Carefully stepping away, Stacy explained to him, once more, that Mike had asked that the phone be used only for emergencies. It was Mike's phone, technically, and roaming—and her dad cut her off, once more, and asked her to tell Mike to fuck off. Technically. He also promised to cover the cost of the call.

"When are you coming home?" he asked.

"Mike's getting good work done," she said, looking at Mattias and the dad, and then drawing a finger along the surface of a desk. Not as dirty as she'd thought. She wanted to sit on it and did. This desk had a phone. It was a pale, wan green, and had nothing on its face, no dial, no buttons. She wanted to pick it up and did not.

"But you're not getting work done. It's September 30, Stace," he said. "School started four weeks ago."

"I—"

"I know, because they sent a bill. And I paid it."

"This isn't a good time to talk, Dad," Stacy said, looking around at Mattias. It was going to be just as awkward, she realized, telling her Dad that she was breaking things off with Mike, even more difficult than the conversation she'd previously been practicing, that they'd eloped.

She slid open a desk drawer. It was stuffed with cash. Not neatly bound and piled, as in a ransomers' briefcase, but crammed solid, like a sock drawer.

"It's a great time," her dad said.

"My battery is dying."

"Come home. Now."

"Dad," Stacy said.

"You're not unreachable. Mike—Mike has a family, too, right? I'll call them."

"Tomorrow, Dad." She looked to see if Mattias and the dad had witnessed her discovery. Not yet. There was a bearded guy on each of them. *HUNDERT MARK*, they all said. *DER DEUTSCHEN DEMOKRATISCHEN REPUBLIC*.

The bearded guy also had a mustache. That was black, the rest of his hair was white. *KARL MARX*, said the tiny label below his collar.

"Tomorrow," her dad said. "We'll talk, same time, and I'll give you the address of the American Express office. I talked to them today. They'll have money and a ticket for you. Thank God."

"Dad."

"Mike can figure out his own goddamned way home."

"Okay."

"Or he can stay."

"Stacy?"

"Okay," she said, and hung up.

Mattias looked away.

The dad stared straight at her.

“It’s only because he loves you,” he said, and smiled. “Even with you buried in a bunker, he loves you.” He held on to the smile.

“Uh-huh,” she said to him. And then, to Mattias: “So, is this, like, real money?”

It was very easy to get an abortion in Germany, Mike had explained. Easy and cheap. He corrected himself: “inexpensive.” And the health care was “top notch.” Stacy wondered if that was a phrase Mattias knew in English, *top notch*. She also wondered if Mattias would, at some point, kiss her, or she him, or she the dad, or maybe even the dad and Mattias would kiss. It would be nice for someone to kiss someone here in the tomb. The abortion had been scheduled for last Friday, then Monday, then today, until Mike finally said, *I think you need time to think*.

Either the dad really did know more about East German marks than Mattias, or Mattias was being coy. The dad talked about what had happened after the wall fell, the conversion rates, the schemes that ensued. It became a long story, and Stacy was grateful when she heard him mention the euro, because she knew he’d have to be near the end of his lecture.

“Worthless,” the dad said. He opened another desk drawer. More cash. He grabbed a fistful and threw it up in the air. He plucked at a banknote as it fluttered down and missed it. He picked it up off the floor and put it in his pack. Then he unbuckled his pack, put it atop the desk and placed a few more bills from the floor inside. “Good souvenirs, though.” He looked up. “So, kiddos, it’s been fun. But, time to leave?”

Mattias nodded. “But no one has called.”

“I noticed,” the dad said. “But is anyone going to, really? You don’t want to get in trouble.” Then he did an odd thing: he licked his lips. “You didn’t call anyone is my guess?”

Mattias said nothing.

The dad looked at Stacy. "It's like he only speaks, understands, English when he wants to."

"The door is locked," Mattias said, evenly. "We tried to open it. You can try again if you like."

Stacy waited to see if they would fight. She wanted them to, but no one moved. "I say, wait for the call," she tried.

"I say, try the fucking door again," the dad replied.

"Go ahead," said Mattias. The dad looked at Stacy and she nodded.

"I'll wait here," she said.

"Why?" the dad said.

"I'll wait with her," Mattias said.

The dad looked at them, frowned, and then picked his way back to the stairs. Naïve, determined, the little cloud at his feet: he looked very much like the Charlie Brown character. Who was it. She wanted to ask Mattias. But he wouldn't know. Idiot.

Still, Mattias had opted to stay with her.

Once she thought of the name, *Pigpen*, she wanted to brush away a bit of Mattias's hair, whisper it in his ear.

"Where is he?" Mattias asked after the dad had been gone five minutes.

For a moment, Stacy didn't say anything. She felt like she'd been sleeping for days, and looking at Mattias, realized that was what had drawn her to him, that he looked the way she felt: exhausted, excited.

"I don't know," Stacy said, looking at the tracks the dad had left in the dust. "I haven't heard anything. Maybe he got out?"

She thought of the dad speeding away on one of Segways. They were very much alive, the scooters. If you stepped off them, they quivered for a bit, as if wondering where the weight had gone. They were probably frantic by now, come to think of it.

"I'm so sorry," Mattias said, looking miserable.

"It's okay," she said, and put out a hand to his forearm, lightly, not so much to be tender, but more out of habit, as if afraid that he, like everything else in the cavern, was liable to kick up dust if disturbed too much.

"No one will know?" he asked, and Stacy shook her head, and then nodded, not sure which was the best way to agree: *no, no one will find out what a lousy tour guide you are*. You'll keep your job until your next cellist gig comes through.

Instead, he kissed her. Very lightly, on her hand, as lightly as she'd touched him. She watched quietly and did not pull her hand away.

He kissed her forearm next, and that was too much. She raised her arm a bit to rid herself of him, and he looked up, more resigned than stricken.

"You're not a musician," she said. "The cello?"

He looked at her blankly. Then he leaned in to kiss her again.

"This is your real job," she said, working it out. "Tour guide."

"No," he said, and tried kissing her hand again. She let him. His lips were very soft. He might be much younger than she'd thought; not her age, maybe a mere teenager.

She adjusted herself on the desk and Mattias leaned closer. But something fell as she moved and they broke off. It was the fanny pack, left behind. Mattias picked it up off the floor and handed it to Stacy. She smiled and unzipped it. The money. Plus cigarettes, the phone, the cards, no wallet, gum, a prescription. A condom. A laminated photo of a woman, dark-haired, not smiling, in a blue bikini against a sunny cinder block wall. No pictures of kids.

Mattias wasn't a tour guide, the dad wasn't a dad, Mike wasn't her boyfriend, and someone had turned a memorial to the dead into Cold War office space. She was pregnant and would remain so, she would kiss Mattias and never see him again, they would be rescued

soon. She would go to the American Express office, take the money, cash in the ticket, and retreat, with the Soviets, farther east. Tomorrow.

Now? The dad was returning, looking at her unevenly as she held his fanny pack in her hands. Mattias looked at him as though he were Stacy's dad and blushed. Stacy smiled and took out the cards. She'd never had to shuffle online and did it clumsily.

"I can't get the door open," the father said in a very unfatherly voice, watching her.

"That's okay," Stacy said, still shuffling.

The dad took the cue, sketched out how it would work: they'd each start with their own stake of Karl Marx marks. Everyone would get a fistful, whatever that equaled: 1000, 10,000? It was better than chips, because it was real money. Worthless real money, but still. They'd feel like real high rollers, the dad said.

"Now, do you know how to play poker?" he asked, and looked at Stacy. Stacy looked at Mattias. Then she smiled and swept a hand across the desktop where they'd kissed. The table was clear. She dealt the cards. The dad rustled about a drawer for cash and began piling it on the desk.

Stacy found a chair, sat cross-legged, and smiled. "Better idea," she said. She slipped off her shoes, her earrings, and then reached for her cards.

Sarah Goldstein

Untitled (Saxon)

Worm-eaters, sloe-leaf
dart tip whiskers the doe's head
brisk dun by window juggles the cover
ankles spread clean as roots pulled

spade shows her sparrow's speed
cup clutched winter hoards trench
stiff grass

polishing his trowel
squalling: come, come, starlings mealing what
will pierce the soft section visible spectrum
pillow and adder pecking like a bobwhite
bones bade turning in bad soil

U n t i t l e d (P i l o t)

Lockstep to leaded water, we meet
moist sand, feet raised ripples
dragging wine-wool
hides, pellet skins, cote lamps.

*And you by Danger failed gold
rewards, the arguments past
path, the fullest granted
gifts split apart*

in siege of brother's hands, mist
of sister's boredom *desire to dig*
and cover and soak
the capes, wrapping sheets.

Soon points of wind may
run graceful Crissa,
relief in huge riches if bound fast or sinking

fully, does realization sense

Secrecy? Say it has room for
constancy, direction of
character equally comatose
in education, beauty of dog's heads,
hair covers her round
cavity, orb eyes go to want—

 making meat of this, the shore
prevalent, a mutt swims ship-sides.
We reach out, pleasant
and picturesque. Hauled by
her collar, halter top of
wine and weeds.

U n t i t l e d (A n t i g o n e)

Mayhem ice clicks in lichen
beds, taught god's tongue, in crooked lines "cutting the nick off"

quicken the foot's rush, wretched
stepping to doused dirt

"I wagered and we went wrong,"

arms swinging, bees pitch 'round

in arctic currents wafting from

wet stones, winking with fever: whiskey-jack
as winsome bagman lets her walk

again in whole frames, bulbs
breaking behind silk
whiskered woke eye –

"one part is pass, next is pound"

–bale earth and spaded grass: be shrewd, sweet digger.

Claire Donato

I have some things to tell you

“Entwined” says the same thing as “enveloped,” only the word spirals a bit in its phonetics, follows the tongue down a staircase to a room that is empty. The room is white, its floor is dark, its splints are tiny pieces, a voice would echo. Its walls are sheets: take solace in the notion of a pair. I would be surprised if there is oxygen here. Have I told you you remind me of a sheet? Have I told you how I feel about your core? I want to look at you & see myself: I want to look at you & see a sheet. Sheets are mirrors, put a finger to the mirror, point out how the background casts a shadow of rain in the cranny. It is in this room you wear me

The Unviolence of Strangers

Today's Pavement Piece lies crumpled against a bus stop, staring into the white sky while she dies like a freshly-pinned dragonfly. Her mouth is speckled with broken teeth and waves of dust. I never keep my mouth open in the daytime—the heat makes it difficult to swallow.

“Are you hungry?” I ask and wait for a bloodstained finger to crawl out from under her jaw. Perhaps there are moths hanging in silver clusters from the roof of her mouth.

Perhaps she will say something.

::

My grandmother died without saying a word, when nobody was looking. A dog howled and her paper gods fluttered with sorrow inside their makeshift frames. When we lifted her out of her corner, her bones snapped and crumbled like exhausted twigs. Her sari fell away revealing breasts that had collected in sagging puddles of discontent inside her blouse. There was nothing to do, nothing to watch except the wailing women who passed the time by beating their chests.

::

Today's Pavement Piece lies crumpled, staring into visions of purgatory like a freshly-pinned dragonfly. I slip a coin between her broken lips, careful not to touch her.

Perhaps now, she will say something.

Robert Lopez

Your Epidermis Is Showing

They kiss.

I am disappointed in you, she says.

I am a disappointment, he says.

You should know better, she says.

I am trying, he says.

She likes the way he walks, like an ape with his arms barely moving, his shoulders alternately rising and falling and his knuckles dragging on the floor behind him. He lumbers. He has a bucket head and wears black boots.

He likes how she isn't scared of him.

His hands are resting on the lower part of the steering wheel. He is breathing evenly. The day is brilliant and blue and he is looking at it through the windshield. She is next to him.

Perhaps I should employ the Watkins method, he says.

Spare me the Watkins method, she says.

The Watkins method is proven, reliable like a Volkswagen, he says.

Lovely, she says. A Volkswagen, she says. Do you ever listen to yourself? she says.

That is something I'm working on, he says.

That is something you are failing to improve upon, she says. I just don't see improvement here, she says.

The results of the work are not necessarily tangible but they're there, he says. He runs his hands through his hair then places them on the lower part of the steering wheel, like they were before.

You sound like you work for the government, she says. Or Gertrude Stein, she says.

I sound like I work for Gertrude Stein?

You sound like Gertrude Stein, not like you work for Gertrude Stein, she says. Jesus, who would say such a thing? she asks.

How is it I resemble a dead lesbian? he asks.

You are the missing link, she says.

And what does that make you? he says.

The day before:

He is watching a baseball game with the sound turned down because sports announcers should be neither seen nor heard. He is reading a jaundiced copy of *Das Kapital* borrowed from the library and chilling the last two beers left in the refrigerator in the freezer and telling himself to remember to take them out before they freeze solid. The trouble with motel refrigerators is they are always too small. The empties are all lined up on the dresser except for the one he is using as an ashtray. He rolls his own because he likes to say he rolls his own and he likes when people watch him roll. He rolls his own, also, because it is less expensive. He is wearing a pair of cut off sweatpants with no underwear underneath. He is not wearing a shirt. He sticks his left hand inside his cutoffs and leaves it there, cupping his belly.

She is in the bathroom. She has been in the bathroom for nearly an hour. On the door one towel hangs for her hair and another for her body. She likes the water hot enough to turn her skin pink. She presses fingers to flesh to see the pale mark it leaves. She applies an array of lotions and creams to various parts of her body. When she washes her hair she tears knotted clumps from her head and sticks them on the wall. The clumps look like spiders. Once he tried to kill one with a sandal.

The two people here met at a bookstore. She was the assistant manager and he was ripping the clear plastic cover of a men's magazine. She was the one to catch him.

She said, I can't tell if this is childish or perverted behavior.

He said, Probably both.

She grew up an only child but always thought the phrase was *lonely child*. She said it out loud once, to a guidance counselor and was laughed at. She would go to playgrounds by herself and climb the monkey bars and slide down the sliding pond and swing on the swings, always looking at the un-lonely children as if they were aliens.

His own childhood was uneventful. Most of the other children were afraid of him so he rarely socialized. There was the time he and his cousin played naked war upstairs at his cousin's house. Running from room to room and hurling balled up sock grenades he sported a gorilla's erection. Whenever he disrobed he would spring to life, like it was a reflex. He worried this was a permanent condition that would prevent him from a normal life. Clearly, that was something one had control over, or one should have control over. He was sure there was a meeting he missed in school where this information was covered.

Other than that he learned to shave against the grain and sign as many as twenty words.

She eats microwaveable *lean cuisine* meals standing up, usually while doing something else, talking on the phone, straightening things in the kitchen. She likes living alone in her own apartment without the hassle of a roommate constantly under foot. She holds her independence close to her, wears it like a vest.

She opens the car door and sticks her right leg out of it.

Would you stop it please, he says.

I'll walk, just remember that, she says.

How is it I sound like Gertrude Stein? he asks.

Fuck Gertrude Stein, this has nothing to do with Gertrude Stein, she says.

I'm confused, he says.

You are a grown man, she says.

Grown men get confused, he says.

That is not what I mean, she says.

He reaches across her to retrieve the black notebook. The black notebook is kept in the glove box and he will reach across her to retrieve it from time to time. He will never let her see what he's writing. The way he holds the pen between his middle and ring fingers reminds her of an illiterate making his mark.

Will you close the door, it's cold, he says.

You are a child, she says.

He continues to write. She tries not to look at him. She fidgets with the buttons on her blouse. She takes her left foot out of its shoe and stretches her toes. There are no other cars in the parking lot. She slams the door shut. He is angry when she slams the door but says nothing. Her floor length coat gets caught so that part of it is hanging outside the car, but she doesn't realize it and neither does he.

The day before:

He can't remember if he's taken his allergy medication. Sometimes he loses track. The prescription says *take once a day* on the bottle but he takes it every other day for two reasons. One is he cannot afford to spend money on allergy medication. The other reason he got from an underground newspaper article concerning the Food and Drug Administration. When he doesn't take his allergy medication he can feel his throat closing. He thinks he might quit smoking.

She comes out of the shower with one towel wrapped round her body and another around her head. She smells clean, a mixture of fruits and oils. She looks over to him reclining on the bed closest to the door. He is reading a newspaper, which is spread out over an ugly floral bedspread. She considers asking him a question and then reconsiders.

He does not look up when she comes out of the bathroom. He knows she wants him to look up so he keeps on reading. One story has a teacher sexually abusing students and another has three kids being killed by a drunk driver. The story about the teacher has him thinking about high school. He can hardly recall the names of any teachers, although he wants to think of one that could be a sexual abuser. He can think of several candidates. The trouble is nothing like that ever happened in his high school. It was like the statistics they'd always recite: this percentage of people are gay, this many teenagers get pregnant, etc. There weren't any gays in his high school and no one ever got pregnant.

The two people here drive used cars and don't vote in any election. His, a vintage Volkswagen Karmann-Ghia he spent thousands of dollars on restoring, hers is a rusted Nissan Sentra, reliable and utilitarian. She has an antique settee and odd-looking thumbs. They are half the size of normal thumbs and are dwarfed by her other fingers. Sometimes she wears pants or skirts with pockets so she can hide her thumbs. He has a beer gut and only two pairs of pants. She called it a leaky gut once and he cursed her. She is a staunch believer in the American way of government. He once vomited bile after a four day binge during a pilgrimage to Mexico in an attempt to find the exact place where they killed Trotsky.

This is the first relationship she's had with a stranger, something she has always wanted to try. His ideal mate is someone who is smart but not smarter than him, attractive, but not someone who would illicit remarks from strange men in bars.

As she settles into the seat her floor length coat swings open revealing her legs. She leaves herself like that. He has finished writing. The black notebook is resting on the dash. His hands return to the lower part of the steering wheel. He drums his fingers like he is typing. There is no music playing. The car is not running.

Your epidermis is showing, he says.

Does it bother you? she asks.

You have sexy legs, he says.

Everyone says that, she says.

Everyone, he says.

You said it, she says.

Who says that about your legs? he asks.

You don't want to know, believe me, she says.

Perhaps not, he says.

What is it about my legs that make them sexy? she asks.

Under the floor length coat she is wearing a skirt that stops several inches before her knees. She rubs her thighs.

This isn't a good idea, he says.

It's worked before, she says. She hikes her skirt up almost to the hip.

I can't do this, I'm sorry, he says. He reaches over and pulls her skirt down as far as it will go. When he feels her body start to slide down the seat he stops.

I don't understand, she says.

Are you working tomorrow? he asks.

What is wrong with you, she says.

The day before:

Now it is his turn to shower. He always lets her shower first as he thinks it gentlemanly. He hangs a mirror around the showerhead and shaves his face. He is careful to leave his goatee even. One of the first things she said to him was about his goatee, that it was crooked. Before finishing the shave he cuts the skin between his goatee and lip. He waits for the bleeding to stop but it doesn't. He tears the complimentary soap out of its package. He is careful to keep the lip away from the water stream while soaping his upper torso. After scrubbing his legs he drops the soap and while bending to retrieve it the stream strikes his lip. He curses. He shuts the water off and snatches the towel from the rack. He dries himself

inside the shower stall because it is steamy and it facilitates decongestion. Sometimes he will masturbate to ease congestion but he doesn't this time. He is always congested and will do anything to decongest. He presses the towel to his face leaving a drop of blood in its center.

She gets into the bed furthest from the door and pulls the blankets over her. She still has on the towels. Damp bedding doesn't bother her. She is tired. She is often tired, but rarely sick. She doesn't know why this is. She presumes sleeping boosts her already impenetrable immune system but she's never seen data. Sleeping is one of her best things. She can sleep for ten hours without stirring. She can sleep anywhere; in her own bed, other's beds, couches, backseats, waiting rooms. She considers this her greatest talent.

What do you remember about high school? he asks.

Not much, she says.

Did anyone ever get pregnant? he asks.

What a thing to ask, she says.

I think there were two such souls, she says.

What about abuse? Did any of the teachers sexually abuse the students? he asks.

What do you have in mind? she says.

He can go days without sleeping or eating and blames his job as a bartender for this. Drinking five nights a week and eating only deep fried food has his system in upheaval. Amongst his health problems are tinnitus, a duodenal ulcer, the chronic nasal congestion, atavism, and an overactive bladder.

She will never discuss his ailments.

She is on her way to graduate school to study psychology. When asked why psychology she answers because she wants to help people, specifically women who've suffered debilitating trauma. Past that she admits nothing.

What are we doing here? she asks.

I was hoping you would know, he says.

Do you remember what we talked about yesterday? she says.

What was yesterday? he says.

The two people here spent the previous day driving through upstate mountain roadways. They both took turns driving and spent the night in a motor lodge. They were to use this time to get a few things straight. There would be after all an understanding. Today they are sitting in a parked car in the middle of a parking lot where no other cars are parked. His hands are resting on the steering wheel and he is breathing evenly. She is sitting with her legs crossed and covered up by a floor length coat, part of which is hanging out the passenger side door.

Matt Bell

A Certain Number of Bedrooms, a Certain Number of Baths

The boy carries the blueprint catalogs everywhere he goes, mostly keeping them in his backpack and occasionally looking inside to spy on their colorful covers. He feels comforted knowing they are nearby. After school, he locks himself in the empty house and sits at the kitchen table, where he fans the catalogs out in front of him as he eats his snack. He compares the artist's renditions on the left page with the floor plans on the right, then moves to the living room floor where he turns the thin catalog pages and ignores his cartoons. During *Transformers* or *G.I. Joe* he turns the volume all the way down so he can hear himself enunciating the names of the homes he hopes his father will build.

Ranches: Crestwood, Echo Hills, Nova.

Split Levels: Timber Ridge, Elk Ridge.

The Capes: Cod, Vincent, and Chelsey.

Two story houses, like the one they have now, in ascending order by size: Walden, Westgate, Somerset, Carbondale.

The boy has not been reading long and he wants to be sure that when the time comes that he can spell the house's name, that he can say it. He pronounces slowly, then more confidentially. He is dreaming of a new home, of one where he and his father will live together, where no one will have died in the garage. He wonders if they would be better off without a garage at all. Better is not the word he is thinking of. Safer is.

The catalogs are six months old now, from when the father had looked through them every night himself, explaining that he wanted

to build a new house, a house that did not have anyone's history attached to it. Only after his father's obsession with the catalogs had passed did the boy take them to his own room. He thought he'd get in trouble for claiming them but never did, not even later when he started sneaking them to school in his backpack. The boy is still years away from the time he steals his first porno magazine from beneath his father's mattress, but when he does he will remember the catalogs, remember the feel of their thin, crinkly pages and find himself a child again, too young to understand what he's looking at or why he wants it. The magazines will be too vivid of a reminder of this time in his life, when so much hope was invested in so little paper.

At dinner, the boy tells his father about the houses he likes best this week, about how he is having trouble deciding between the Crestwood and the Cape Cod. The father glances at the pages as the boy presents them. A month ago he smiled at the boy's enthusiasm, even joined in with comments of his own, but now he is less demonstrative with his opinions.

Dinner: A meal consisting of hot dogs and Kraft macaroni and cheese. The father is not frugal with his shopping like the mother was. He buys what he recognizes, assured by television that he is making a good choice.

The boy has been in so few other houses that actually picturing the interior of any other home means simply reconfiguring the rooms of their own house into his conception of the new one. The floor plans he likes best are the ones that he can most easily shoehorn his own into, using the homes of his grandmother and of the neighbor boy his mother had forced him to play with to fill in the rest of the bigger houses. The father does not say much but the boy has become used to this. He talks more and more now, more than he is comfortable with, not because he wants to but because he does not like the silence at the table. It is the silence that bothers him the most, that is the most vivid reminder

that they are alone even when they are with each other.

Suicide: Car running, windows closed, parked in the garage. No one would ever drive it again and two months after her death it would be sold at a loss. The boy was not supposed to find her. She did not know that school had become a half day, that everyone had been sent home early because of the impending snowfall. The note taped to the outside of the driver's window was addressed to his father, not to him. The boy could barely read then but decided to try anyway. He pulled the note off the window, leaving the scotch tape behind.

Mother: Hidden underneath. Pressed against the window with her mouth open, the steam from her breath slowly disappearing from the cloudy glass. The last time he saw her.

911: The boy had learned the number in school, but he had not been taught that it was not failsafe, that it did not save everyone. For months he thought about raising his hand and telling his teacher about her error, but they had moved on from health and safety and would not speak of it again for another year.

Extolling the virtues of the houses, the boy lists the numbers of bedrooms and bathrooms. He wonders what half a bathroom is but does not ask. He explains that all of the houses from American Homes have R-19 insulation, which he has been assured by the catalog is the very best kind. He shows his father the cross section of a wall and repeats from memory the phrase Oriented Strand Board. The boy pronounces many of the words wrong. He does not realize that learning words by sounding them out without ever having heard them spoken has left him with false pronunciations that as an adult he will be constantly corrected for. He will not speak the same language others speak.

Father: Quiet. Sluggish now. Often watches the news from his easy chair with his eyes closed. A tumbler filled with melting ice slowly turning brown dangles from his fingertips at all times. Has

apparently forgotten how to play catch or even how to get to the park.

Father (previous): Fun. Loud. Told jokes that mother disapproved of but the boy loved. Often rustled the boy's hair, which the boy pretended to hate but secretly didn't. Missing in action.

Father (future): Alcoholic. Out of work. Defined by the loss of his partner in a way he was never defined by her presence. Fading, fading, fading.

The boy reads the catalogs in the evening while his father naps in his recliner. His father rarely makes it to the bedroom anymore and sometimes the boy sleeps on the couch just to be near him. More often he goes to his own room so that he can leave the light on, reading his catalogs until he is too tired to keep his eyes open. He makes his choices for the home he thinks they need, his decisions changing daily or even hourly, like moods or Michigan weather. Sometimes he falls asleep with the light still on, and those nights are the ones he stays in his bed.

On other nights, the boy wakes up shaking, his bed or the couch soaked with sweat and sometimes, embarrassingly, urine. Then he walks into the living room where his father sleeps. Standing beside the recliner, the boy tries to will his father to wake up before starting to shake him. Neither tactic works. The father snores on, even when the boy begins to talk, begins to insist that his father talk back, that he take them away from this home which is no longer any such thing. When he exhausts himself he goes back to his room but not back to sleep.

Eventually his teacher notices the black rings below his eyes and keeps him inside at recess. She asks him if there's anything he wants to talk about, if maybe something is happening at home. He says no and means it. Nothing ever happens at home. The boy does not show her the catalogs. Curiosity is not caring. He hides the catalogs and what the catalogs mean from anyone who might ask.

The new house will end up being an apartment, a word the boy doesn't even know yet, and then later the new house will be his grandma's basement. The boy will lose the catalogs on one moving day or another but by then he won't need them, or at least not their physical presence. He will have memorized them completely. They will be part of who he is. As he grows, he will make friends and then lose friends, realizing a year or two later that he is unable to remember their names or faces but can still recount the number of bedrooms in their houses, how many bathrooms and a half they had. When he thinks of his old house, the one he had been born in and his mother had died in, he will picture it as a spread in one of his catalogs, imaginary fingers tracing the picture of the finished home, the hard blue lines of the floor plans.

Home: Where the heart is. Three bedrooms. One bath. Storm windows and a thirty-five year guarantee on the shingles.

Family: Two parents. One child. One dead with two survivors.

This is a home. This is a family. This is what happens in a home when a family breaks down a fault line, like when a foundation suddenly shifts because once it got wet when it should have stayed dry, because that wet spot was sealed beneath the floorboards, because it hid there for years and years before cracks began showing around doorways and windows, until one day whole chunks of plaster fall from ceilings and walls as something fundamental within finally gives way to ruin.

Fistulas

The latest of entropy's spamming: my dentist says my body is making fistulas, tiny fists that swell inward from gums. He wants to pop them in a surgical strike, clean out and then build bridges over voids. He's the man to girder a mouth. When I show up, he's in combat green. They strap me in upside down, a landing site, a gape from where the future widens. From here it's going to be all fizzle and stick, suck, suture, slash and dwindle. Churning in self-soup. Eggs to freeze, my pickled manna. Mishap hair. Sulks of breast and winnow of the days. Dodge of old traps. Spritzed in a sweat I wit the way, haggle the decade, stay unswindled as Donatello's desert Magdalene, frazzled champ pumped by her own dint.

Wild Ranunculas

This is how you mend, ounce by floating ounce. Each petal lights on the eye, and the five-fingered yellow flowers nod. A moving cloud scars the field in March wind's bitter tea. Walking through fields is an undoing. Eyes take off memories and stand where sun has fallen and sprouted into a thousand green nubs, each within a yellow cup, hosting a tiny black and barely moving fly. How have you come this far? To know the sun's uncritical caress as the wild ranunculas' graze on your trampling ankles. Go back! You tell the flowers. The world is not ready for your news of stars. But the meadow's ancient bulletins are thick with unearned grace and you return beelike, carrying.

Stephen Frech

Rachmaninoff Through the Wall

“. . . you came to me and in your most cajoling way asked if you could play the beautiful piano that was never to be touched without supervision. . . . And how astonished I was to hear your small hands play chords that may not have been complete, but were certainly without a single wrong note. . . . and I had to promise not to tell your mother how we spent the afternoon. Unfortunately—or rather, fortunately, I did not keep my word and told your mother that evening.”

Mme. Defert to Rachmaninoff 1934
remembering his first playing at the age of 8

As if he had a surprise, a secret in his pocket, Rachmaninoff convinced the young, Swiss nurse assigned to care for his sisters to sing for him as he accompanied her on the piano, an instrument he'd never played or studied. And he played without error, his body next to hers, trembling I suspect like the piano itself, like hers singing, his body charged with the whisper of secret love, wanting the pink of her skin, the heat of it when she pulled off their clothes for baths and then bed. The piano in those first notes for Rachmaninoff sounded arousal and betrayal, his talent found out, exposed, and became the instrument of love accompanied by love's denial.

Young love, first love—the rest of them are only efforts at re-creating it.

Bed-ridden at the end of his life with a cancer so advanced surgeons sewed him up and sent him home to die, Rachmaninoff could hear a piano playing. “Who is it who keeps playing? Why do they keep on playing?” he asked. When he was told no one was

playing, Rachmaninoff replied, “A-a-h . . . that means it’s playing in my head.” Rachmaninoff’s playing through my wall now and with nothing to drown it, no TV, no radio, I listen.

Susan left two weeks ago. She took everything, stripped our apartment, the kitchen, the living room, everything in the bedroom except the bed. She replaced all of my crappy furniture when we married, so with the exception of my clothes thrown in a pile as she emptied our dresser and a few odd, garage-sale utensils and plates that had disappeared to the back of the kitchen cabinets, Susan took everything. She has every right: the stuff is hers really. She can have it. I bought a coffeemaker—I keep it running all day, but for the few hours of sleep I can wrench out each night. Beyond that, the place is nearly vacant.

Susan left and I asked for my vacation so I wouldn’t have to pretend or tell everyone the pathetic story of coming home and finding the place stripped clean. So I haven’t been to work in almost two weeks. Truth is, I’ve hardly left the apartment.

So I’ve been listening to Rachmaninoff playing over and over in the apartment next door. A pianist lives alone and listens to piano music all day. Or plays. Susan and I used to turn the TV off during dinner to hear the music from his apartment. We felt a thrill from something like eavesdropping, and the music had a simple, easy sound. We didn’t say much and when one spoke the other quietly “shushed,” as if a secret or an overheard embarrassment were about to be spoken next door. We wanted every detail.

My wife’s identical twin was the one I should have married, or wish I had. You can hardly tell them apart and without them in front of me now I’d have a hard time describing the differences, except that my wife was the plain one, her sister the exotic.

Toward the end, Susan just about slept through sex. A better husband might have asked “What’s wrong, honey. You seem so . . . so distant.” But quietly I was relieved. When we first married and I’d

come home from the bar late, I'd wake her on the couch and we'd make love there in front of the television. It felt spontaneous, felt like some fantasy of sexual visitation. But it became a familiar scene, familiar sex. Soon, I'd have to wake her in bed and my breath heavy with beer and cigarettes, she wouldn't kiss me. "Like sex in the morning," we consoled ourselves: irresistible, panting, stale breathed. After a couple years, she'd barely wake, drowsily drawing a knee to her chest, just enough for me to enter, and she'd dose off. She used the suspicion of pregnancy as an excuse to stop. When weeks later, it was plain the pregnancy was a false alarm, she cried for days. And when the sex resumed, with vigor for me, she shook a little, wet faced. I admit I imagined she was her sister, teary-eyed with gratitude underneath me.

Rachmaninoff dedicated his Second Piano Concerto to Dr. Dahl, the Moscow psychiatrist who treated him in 1900 for a deep depression. The critical failure of his First Symphony had so deflated Rachmaninoff's spirits, he could no longer compose; he couldn't sleep or eat with any regularity. Dahl used hypnosis and suggested a change of form, a piano concerto. The result: one of his most recognizable and the universally loved Second.

Susan finally identified the concerto as the one playing over and over next door. I have no idea how she knew. Classical music was only a sound for her, as it was for me, playing through the wall.

Because they're short, I've been reading the liner notes on Rachmaninoff LP's and CD's I've been checking out from the library. I can't listen to them—I don't have the equipment. The freak at the library thinks I'm a Rachmaninoff fan. He smells bad and he talks too loud, but my wife left, I feel pathetic sometimes and probably look it, so chatting with the freak's no stretch. But I have nothing to say, and I'm not listening to the records and CD's I'm checking out, only the same concerto the neighbor plays. So I decided to try out the liner notes on the freak.

“He hears silence so well.” The observation, partly altered in my version, was Gorky’s.

And another time: “Rachmaninoff’s hands were huge. He could cover the keys like nothing. Some people don’t know that, but anyone with small hands does.”

He said “Oh” and rubbed his palms on his thighs.

But today I really spoke to him, said something true: “That Second Piano Concerto makes me cry,” I said and just about started blubbing. “. . . Forgive me . . .” I covered.

“That’s okay,” he said in a whisper. “I cry too when I listen to that one.”

Freak.

The man next door stopped playing the recordings and plays the concerto unaccompanied now on the piano. After weeks of hearing the full concerto over and over, you would think the piano would sound naked, lonely or sad perhaps. But it doesn’t. He’s trying to get it right, starting over, pacing through a line, a measure or two, several times, then surrounding it, embedding it in the longer movement. And I feel that we’re trying, the neighbor and I: his concert, the end of my vacation, the end of my marriage.

When Rachmaninoff was a boy, the family lost all of their estate and moved to a crowded apartment in St Petersburg. He was sent alone to live with an aunt while the family settled. There, he would accept no help and insisted on doing everything for himself, saying only “Ya sum” so frequently that the family nicknamed him “Ya sum”—“myself”—and Rachmaninoff would answer to it: “myself.”

The week Susan left, she wondered through dinner about Rachmaninoff’s melody. “I *know* that song,” she said. “There’s a pop song just like it.” And she’d hum to herself. I knew she was right, but I couldn’t name it either, so I didn’t encourage her. I let her hum through dinner, occasionally reciting a word or two in excitement, then deflating “Oh, that’s not it.” I pretended not to

care, but really my mind was reeling with the tune; I was determined to find the song before she did. Susan, on the other hand, pretended to care a great deal, distracted, obsessed, distant.

The day after she left, I went to the library and with about 15 minutes of searching I found it: the melody we'd remembered wasn't a likeness at all, but an actual borrowing of Rachmaninoff's. Susan could have figured it out. She may have already known, but even if she didn't, she could have looked just like I did—15 minutes. I felt triumphant when I found it, that she and I were in a race, a contest and I had won. And when I need to find fault with Susan, when I need to feel righteous, I remember that last week and her distance, her looking off at nothing: "I know that song. That tune is so familiar." When all along she was waiting for the trucks and the delivery crew, counting the hours I'd be at work and those the crew needed to box and haul all her shit.

"I was in a profound depression, I had no life, and basically sat at 4 a.m. reading my Fitzgerald short stories, and purposely working myself into as deep a depression as I could get to, to then go sit at the piano and try to come up with this stuff." Eric Carmen knew how to live a lyric; he wrote "All By Myself" in 1971 and credits Sergei Rachmaninoff as co-author.

When I was young
I never needed anyone
and making love was just for fun.
Those days are gone.

"I can't imagine that Rachmaninoff was happy when he was writing the 2nd Symphony and the 2nd Piano Concerto. I don't think the anguish and angst of those melodies comes out of being peachy keen." To wonder about the happiness of someone else—I think we're always wondering about ourselves. Someone else's sadness

means tip-toeing around until their mood allows us to walk heel-to-toe again. When the neighbor's not playing, I wonder what he's doing. The piece isn't ready yet. Truth is, I simply want him back, want him playing, want the tune that gave Eric Carmen goose bumps every time he listened.

I found a note from Susan, slid under the door while I was out. Susan's letter:

No heading

"I'm staying with a friend from work you don't know because I knew you'd check my sister's. She says you haven't called and I'm forced to assume that the split is not an unhappy break for you, that you have no wish for our staying together, that splitting up was what you've quietly wished for for a long time. Too bad; I was hoping to cause some pain, to make you remember how you once wanted me and then to deny you. You're an asshole, a real asshole.

I have no intention of dividing the furniture or returning the \$500 I was forced to use as a security deposit. I'll have a lawyer write up simple papers arranging for a quick and clean break, nothing to negotiate. Take it. And keep that piece-of-shit car of yours—it suits you."

No signature

I'm so rarely gone, she must have waited, watched and waited for me to leave, then slipped up the stairs and left the note. So she must have seen me and remembered us and thought how sad. Did I look alright? I mean, I hope I looked good, I hope she wanted me.

I called work on Friday, technically the last day of my vacation, so I was supposed to return on Monday. The neighbor's recital is

Wednesday, and I want to hear him practice to the end, then go to the recital. I have sick days—I never use them—so I called Joe from the phone down the block.

“Hell, yeah, I’m comin’ back. I just need a few more days. I’m not well, but I’ll be fine on Thursday. I can’t explain now, I’m on a pay phone. She took the goddam phone, Joe. Susan. Everything, she took everything—you should see the place. Empty. I’m fine actually—I need to straighten some things out. She left, Joe. She’s gone. Listen, I’m running out of time. Thursday—I’m coming back on Thursday. I’m out of time. I have no change; I got nothin’. Thursday. . . .”

I kept going like that (I don’t know when the phone cut me off), Joe saying “Gosh . . . I’m sorry. . . . But. . . . Hey. . . .” but never finishing a thought, stunned perhaps, or I didn’t give him a chance to say anything. So the conversation went exactly as I’d wanted it. It’d have been better, I suppose, if I’d reached his voice mail.

I was simply too tired last night to gather the bedding from the dining room floor. I’ve been camping out there during the day to listen. He played beautifully yesterday. I dozed off and on, tired. The food’s run out, so I’ve been living on coffee and pastries from the bakery across the street from the library. Too tired to carry myself back to bed, I slept there on the dining room floor. Some time late, the sounds of love-making, faint sounds, came from somewhere I couldn’t determine. I pressed my ear to the neighbor’s wall, to the floor, to another wall in the kitchen shared by a second apartment. Nothing—I couldn’t trace it.

Then the piano humming again, and I couldn’t hear if the low sounds of sex were still going and the piano drowning them out or if the sex had stopped and the piano started, if the neighbor had made love and afterwards, satisfied, came to his piano to play, so soon afterward I imagined him naked or in a robe playing that

beautiful music. Or playing with an ache really, having worked himself and someone else but disconnected and machine-like, and come to the piano spent, chasing something that wasn't anywhere but in the music.

Then the playing stopped. What the hell was he doing? Practicing? It was the middle of the night. He was up playing whole passages straight through. Then stopped. He'd woken me up; then he wasn't playing the goddam piece. I stood, a little light-headed, and pounded my fist on the wall. "That's great, fucking great" I yelled. "Screw it. Screw Rachmaninoff."

From next door, quietly: "I'm sorry." The floorboards creaked and I stood there stunned. I meant play or don't play, you oversensitive jerk. I knocked on the wall lightly with my knuckles. Nothing. I knocked lightly again. The floorboards creaked. Nothing.

I've been an asshole. He's not practicing. The recital's tonight, so I go to the library to listen until it starts. I borrow the headphones for their player. "My equipment's out," I say. Susan never missed, not once, a birthday, an anniversary, a valentine's, a sweetest day. Not one. Why couldn't she forget or deliberately neglect to have a gift?

I thought that it was Susan lacking—not pretty enough, fleshy at the hips, bony at the shoulders, too loud, an inattentive driver. All of these, I wouldn't call them flaws exactly, don't add up to the disinterest I felt for her at times. And I thought it was me—incapable, unloving, a real bastard. Maybe those things are true. But I ache sometimes.

- You'll have to leave now.
- Why? What have I done?
- You've done nothing, sir. We're closing.
- Closing? What time is it?

— It's ten o'clock, sir. We're closing.
— But the recital's at 8.
— It's ten o'clock, sir. You've done nothing. I'm sorry.

It's over. What do we do now? Weeks, months with the same music. And it's over. Oh god, it's so quiet. How wrecked we become when beautiful things break us and older, we feel like shit crawling some place for rest.

“As for the estrangement you sense, I must confess I feel it here, too. I see very few real, sincere musicians. Apparently you are the only one left.”

Rachmaninoff to Medtner

Christmas 1931

a postscript written in Russian

Quoted material and biographical details gathered from the following sources:

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Julia Idlis

translated by Peter Golub

*

You love a certain person.
And this person loves that other person
because everybody loves somebody but
God loves everybody.

—James Joyce, *Ulysses*

someone walks on the parquet
half a step ahead of me,
half animal, half shadow
(from the waist down)
not frightened by noise
unthreatened by what may come
scattering ears of corn around the fire
watching me attentively
scratching himself with a hoof between the crooked shadows
finishing my tea before I've had a swallow
sees me off along the wall
an overseas miracle
cleans my cups with arsenic
the horse turns yak
horns and beard
and a tail from under the overcoat

my pale sweetie, he says,
here is an orach mignonette
ba-ba-ba da-da-da
well?
enters through the auditory canal
an intracranial examination, taps at the temple,
grins from under the printer:
...totals the detriment...
Jesus loves me
from the top and slanted

Jennifer Chapis

Fish Whisper

Disappear with me, you whisper.
You in awe
of phosphorescence,

the backs of in-flight fish
and the moon moving my hair

without touching it.

Violet light on Rainbow Bridge.

Lake Powell a trouty dark pocket.

Fish in mid-leap—
two silver crescents

against a blue-black backdrop.

It is not about
disappearing.

Shhh, the fish,

your voice
prismatic, beyond itself.

Who knew how persistent light
could be?

Silence craves. —Hush

hush hush.

The Arc of Air

Head copper, porcelain body
cracking with the room-sky at my feet.

Stuck in the fist of sex, each crest
a rapt ache.

The instant the tire swing, at the end of its arc, runs out of air—

Rain Lost at Sea

this scream is six
years going on
ten

this scream
bottle
 buoyant
tide

 atoll
smash me to gravity

dear flight
 will this be atlas
enough?

Cycle (Action/Figure)

“and who she is and he/
are templates”

Lisa Fishman

Filleted as is done to the year with seasons
light straddles the fence the height of she
who has arms agape in the outline of a fig
but arm-large for they are arms
noun-stammered toward hold.
But he has cajoled his body to sneak toward
the console where sockets of sheets wait for the screwing into
of sleep? or the streak their bodies meet to bold
against the monochrome with tints various as singular and
alone? Framed are the curious hours plaited
against the day-scalp shaved by whose recollection
of when, and there, thinned like grime
a rag envies of a counter top and invites off,
his hand, tarp-partial, owed to skin,
she covets for bones
they count with and on.

::

With his brain pampered behind its hard apron, a question pimps his mouth:

Is this not a duty more fit for galoshes than myself.
For she has wet her face has wedded her pores to the Great Lakes
in this map of her face as part of the upper states
he wades through with his gazing.

::

Verily, verily
the sidewalk corrupts their notion
of stroll. Composition consoles them. She composes
his name of shade and plastic chairs
cracked through the seat
by the meat of them
sitting.
His teeth punch in the tender calculator
of a grin. Agree, he requests, to submit
the I-beam your posture
presents you as
when it must be presented as such
to graft on the landscape
that's escaped into buildings
to consider the yield of its metallic
crops and whether or not
there's chance in them. Weather as a form
of chance that dices their willowy will. That decides if their
walk is hill or hallway. There their feet continue
down the way of oven doors
and when is the peering in
to see the progress of this leisure.

::

Faces fell like notes all over these arms all over the room.
Like bad-luck pennies, their faces went down.
Luck did not worry them as did this excessive respite.
Something developed they developed something
in the way their faces fell like notes like letters all over their arms
now a trail mix of arms that joined them like numbers
above and below the line in a fraction.

::

It works well,
the gnats that deconstruct
their breakfast fastidiously as mastication.
Tiniest black teeth zooming low near the lower jaw
of the manilla folder colored table.
She takes her collection of dolls and he his darkest markers:
Dentist, she pleas, clean, and the doll's teeth
become beyond the crack in the door
where light diets to a skeleton of light
laying patient as a train station.

It works well,
the platform where they perform
this construction. Vegetables coddled
in the cutting, thus zucchini lives its less remarkable
dream dreamed for it: Periscope with nothing
to spy. In unison, spoons move to their mouths, in unison
in a way more eerie than hunger in common. Like they are
tracing intentionally the flight pattern of a bird
when its wings are most upward.
Like this intentionality facilitates something.

::

Wand-like, her touch on his arm pale as innards of gum wrappers
and folded accordingly. The hermitage hammered sturdy by their cold breaths
allowed certain visitors keen on careening as is called for
with furniture of such spectacular air. What suspect thermometers
letting their mercury out like belts! Guests, guess your harbor,
he said toward the dinner plates in place of prayer. And the scents
rode them like ropes to swing toward better trees.

::

He raised a question she sat on
her knowing that was not unlike a tripod
this instance. Though on others.
At their own progress, they marveled.
At the complicity of their prepositions.
They were onto each other.
They were on each other.
On each other, they wrote tidy essays.
He used y often because it reminded him of the broom post-use
balanced on the wall. What a set of adverbs she had!
that he gave her that he was goggle-eyed for
because that was the word she gave him.
They had not yet swam together.
Landmark in water. Watermark
on paper. Saliva on the verb.
Such deterioration they supplied with their mouths.
For something to look forward to
they forfeit action for a while.
She acted out a dog ear he guessed
then joined her at her toes
spread out like islands near Antarctica where he wanted to go
but less cold.

Globe superimposed on the body.
She glowed like a globe lit from the inside.

::

What a ball they have passing a thought from brain to brain.
Goals their brains are the balls for.
Though they've been known to tighten their mauve corsets
too tightly against the bosom of their speech.
To stretch lips to the circumference of sweatbands
and secure them over the speech that crowns the thought.
Goalposts of their upright bodies.

::

Build a tree with me was all the note said,
an arrow pointed toward her head.
With the note down the arrow led elsewhere.
So much depends
upon the way in which
the substance the arrow
is etched upon is pointed.
She depended on what she knew of him
and headed toward the garage
which was only near her head
when her head was near it.
She held the note up again
and narrowed her eyes to the width
of the arrow that plagued her
then placated this displeasure through
gesture: as plaque a gum line, she followed it.

::

So it happened they hastened to secure the diurnal in the mirrors
of the mirror-plated urn she procured at the fair with her third dart and him
knitting sound-waves to slip up the leg that led to the crotch of her hearing.
Saying, more toward the mole, take a tour of it, tear it
from the face of our loss.

She could perhaps too well imagine him dust, having marooned herself
in their bathroom amid clumps of his curls, boat-colored but for a purpose
other than boating. The leak from the toilet was no relief. These little alms
of him she laid like barrettes where those would go.

::

This is a picture
of the image they know best:
The bright light that denotes
the carnival they have yet
to attend.

They've spent the day moving with the diction of cars
thus the dents their heft does to each other.

This is an image of closer,
the closer they close in on
to secure an image of it.

Their bodies tactful
like those moving out of an auditorium
where not even shoulder blades graze
so slim they have turned themselves
through the slits of the bleachers.

::

In this undressing they called steam
for its pace and the lightness with which
they moved their feet from sock holes
so that where their ankles had been
their ankles appeared still to be.
Not uncomplimentary with the scalping
of a hard-boiled egg edged open with the cleanest of knives
they removed their garments,
for unto each other they undid themselves
individually and undulated their stadiums
like parachutes so this calling would come down
in the form of rising.

Family Therapy (III.)

In this house of Ruth
clearness of mind is just
wishful thinking—
An unmade bed takes up
all the air in a room.
This illness was built
brick by brick,
but none of us knows how
to blow it down.
Our shame is seasoned
and matter-of-fact. We wear
bright clothes to trick the eye
into believing—We knew
that something was seriously
wrong when the clouds
called us by name—
But what we hear is the long
squeal of a train, before it finally
comes to a stop. Even the wolf
is sobbing. Our moods swing
easy as a top popped off
a soda can. We arouse
more than a little electricity
in a room. The family dog
can't fathom these domestic

complications. He eats and sleeps,
avoids eye-contact, and hides under
the bed during storms.

Matthew Derby

An Excerpt

from *Movement of the People*

Walton, my attorney, has asked that I start this brief concerning my involvement with the Nigeria Project by stating my name (Matthew Derby), my age (33), birthplace (Batavia, NY), and current line of work (serving twenty years in a state correctional facility for unlawful exhumation of a corpse). I have argued with Walton for the elimination of this information from the brief, as who I am and by what means I came into this world is largely incidental to the events I have been compelled by the committee to put down here. My body will not hold out for long, but the trauma it has left in its wake will surely ripple the piss out of the unborn futurepeople, they of smooth, translucent skin and tasteless nanomeals.

I have lost the argument. Walton is a rugged fat man who does not do loss. Fine. Now it's out of the way. Remember my name, remember Batavia, and may God bless us all.

The first important thing is that we were bussed from the joint to Port Williams on a prohibitively cold April morning, the sky wild with expansive, purplish light. The guards herded us tersely onto a modest, skidmarked cruise ship with other inmates from various prisons across the country. The ship sailed straight to Port Harcourt—A three week journey, during which we were allowed extensive privileges on deck, where there was a small, greenish pool, a fiberglass climbing wall, and a shabby array of weightlifting equipment. Much of the routine from the old life remained, but some of the urgency dissipated in light of the fact that we had nowhere to

escape to but the unforgiving depths, where we would be dined upon by blind, luminescent whipfish. It began to feel like a sort of summer vacation from jail. We were each given an entire pack of cigarettes a day, compliments of the oil company, just for signing up. Hard packs, plastered with stickers depicting the company logo. The generosity gave us pause, but it was nice to lean up on the rail on the ship's bow with our shirts unbuttoned, puffing into the breeze, the bright ocean surface trembling through the infinite, interchangeable days.

Gary, the rep from the security firm, met with us in the mornings to go over our detail and fill us in on the country and its people. "It might not look like much to you or me," he said at the primary instructional session, circling a projected relief map of the country with a dim laser pointer, "But Nigeria is right at the envelope's edge of being a country that is democratic, that is thriving, and that is trading with us as a critical and strategic ally. All we have to do is push the edge of that envelope a little, and what is now a weak and unstable country will become a strong independent state, free from tyranny and injustice, which it is now totally plagued with, which is what you are here for. Shelton Oil is pushing that envelope, working with the people to establish democracy. And you are, well, think of yourselves as sort of the liaisons."

A tall man in a brownish cotton tunic raised his hand. "The letter openers."

"That's apt, Patterson," Gary said, nodding, his face practically eating itself with self-satisfaction. "That's apt." Patterson's mouth, I could see, was drawn back in a crisp smirk.

Gary gave us a choice between the kind of anti-malaria medication with nausea as a side effect or the kind that made you paranoid. Nearly half of us chose the nausea and half chose paranoia, and that's how we eventually came to divide up the two teams. It wasn't like inside—they just gave us monstrous plastic bottles

brimming with hard blue pills. By the time we got to Port Harcourt I was taking one hundred and forty milligrams a day, which was one hundred and twenty above the recommended daily dosage, which was, natch, how I was drafted to the Paranoids. I figured there was already enough of a collusive gridwork gnashing at my braincase—what would a little more paranoia do but sharpen up the teeth? It just seemed like good housekeeping to me. Plus, I wasn't moved by the idea of being out in some dusty netherscape, having constantly to purge myself, but without the proper toiletries.

So there were the two teams, and it didn't take long for us to figure out a way to play a sort of constrained, modified game of basketball out on a stretch of packed earth near the eastern perimeter of the facility we were guarding—a double-wide trailer and eight derricks, which fed a single pipeline along the length of which we had to trudge every two hours. We Paranoids had planned on the nausea working to our advantage, since Patterson, Kwelib, and West were all drafted by circumstance to the Nauseateds. These three were enormous men who could palm a ball like it was adhered to their flesh with velcro. Men like bulwarks—to see them rushing at you was to know the terror of the tsunami as it profiled your shore. We were counting on the fact that the nausea would handicap them, but they bore it with great determination—their abdomens must have been laced with kevlar, because we never saw them loping off, ill-legged, to the bush-lined burnhole where the rest of the Nauseateds hurled chunks. They rarely even broke stride, sure and precise as factory components. They were confidently and absolutely whipping our ass.

Now, as I think of it, I may have exaggerated their dimensions just slightly. Again, the Paranoids were taking pills that made us believe we were being followed by an organized phalanx of foreign men in dark suits, and that our every move was being recorded and

analyzed by a supercomputer named Rodney. But it felt verifiable that we were at a tremendous disadvantage, our multitude of lost games being the primary evidence. We were two for twelve, and already into the semi-finals. We did have Garret on our team, one of only two women in the league. She couldn't shoot for shit, but she could outmaneuver the gargantuan opponents with a certain ruddy grace. Her body was just barely qualifying as an object, all the tendons and ligaments, but no muscle - she was that insubstantial, but tough as a drill bit. There was speculation among the members of the team that she'd boiled away all the muscle in her shooting of smack, back in the other life. We all had something dark in our past, otherwise we wouldn't be on this particular detail, is I think how we looked at it.

The dirt in the area we'd designated for the playoffs was packed hard enough to rebound a ball into your hand when dribbled, but it always came back a little short of what you were expecting, so in order to carry off a successful run you had to crouch low to the ground or overcompensate on the downstroke. We would have done a lot for a nice stretch of pavement, but there was just the single, narrow strip by the trailer that was where the middle management occasionally parked monstrous, spotless all-terrain vehicles. We made do with the packed earth, and became quite proficient. It may have improved our game, in the way that a boxer might run up and down a flight of stairs repeatedly, shouldering a sack of bricks. There were other drawbacks to getting our game on in this area—one was that there were no baskets to speak of, so we had Walsh and Yeager at either end of the improvised court playing the hoop (which accounted for some of the trauma about their faces and arms, for we took no quarter when it came time to dunk), and the second was the colossal plume of fire that rose up at the perimeter of the facility. This was the oil company burning off the natural gas,

which was a by-product of the oil manufacturing process or some such. Gary had shown us slides of these flares, which were apparently all over the delta, which is where the oil was. He told us that these flares had been burning, non-stop, for forty years, ever since the day Shelton tapped its first barrel of crude. It was hard to accept that the fire was older than any of us in the outfit. We spent many afternoons arguing about whether fire could be aged, whether it was an object itself or just the evidence of some other measurable process. Even harder to take was the sight of local women propping up chipboard tablets at the base of the fire, using its heat to dry cassava. This was more than we could handle. But its light allowed us to extend our games whenever we went into overtime, so that was a sort of silver lining in a place that otherwise resisted silver linings.

As I recall, we were in the fourth quarter on the day everything began to unravel. We were down by sixty-eight points, but still hungry for a win. We were playing defense, which was our strong suit. Otherwise, we were usually too preoccupied with the suspicion that our teammates were hogging the ball to concentrate with the required sharpness of mind and spirit. I was blocking West, who kept trying to deke and pass to Johnsonbaum. West always had a mouth full of juice, and he'd just let his jaw hang open while he played, so that flecks of foamed man's water would shower down on his opponent. It was a reckless abuse, and one I alone was able to endure. I'd been covered in worse fluids in my lifetime, and I wasn't about to let the Nauseateds walk away with the Delta title just because I couldn't handle another man's spit.

Patterson moved into position for a layup and shouted. West shuffled to the left to try to clear a path, which put him for a breezy moment in a state of vulnerability. I reached in and slapped the ball away from him.

I backed out of West's zone and hurled the ball to Gordon, but West dove in and rerouted the ball to Patterson, who leapt up to make the shot, his gothic torso obscuring the sky altogether, like a canvas sheet pulled over the sun—too high, it turned out, as the ball hit him squarely in the chest, sending it tear-assing off in the opposite direction, straight for the column of fire, which it went right into the fire and, after a throat-tightening second and a half, came out the other side of the column, itself now on fire, like the white comet some unitarded villain might lob at a comic book hero, alighting, finally, on the woman's chipboard drying rack, sending a sputtering radial of miniature fireballs out from the central conflagration, not to mention catapulting the drying cassava hides, probably the woman's meal plan for an entire week, coming down on the packed earth with a withering thud, sort of half-rolling into a stand of yellowed high grass until it came to a depressing, slumpish stop next to the pile of body parts.

West jogged over to the molten, smoking remains of the ball, which had ignited the crisp grass. He slowed on his approach, stopping shy about four feet from the site.

"Whoa," he said, and we knew it was involuntary, because West never said things like "whoa"—he'd been brought up in boarding schools, and his speech was taut and delicate as a clarinet. But he said "whoa," breathless, some blunt-nosed kid buried inside him venting for a moment through his mouth. We all ventured forward to try to get a better look. West stood still as a museum piece. I remember he put a hand to his chin and stroked it. It's funny now as I replay the image—the kind of thing a detective might do as he pondered a shred of evidence, but at the time it seemed eminently logical—what else did you do with your hands in the presence of the dead but touch your own living form as if to reassure yourself of the Cartesian divide between you and the

hollow, ruined mass of cells at your feet?

The body had been reconfigured to such a degree that one could scarcely make out a human form, which is maybe why we hadn't noticed it. The limbs were severed and stacked upon the torso, a morbid cord of firewood. The head was placed deliberately at a considerable distance from the body, looking on at the scene, frowning theatrically with terminal shame.

The woman whose fruit we'd irretrievably displaced was standing next to me. She took a hard look at the feet piled there, wrong-side-up. She weaved a little back and forth, but her face remained cool and aloof. It was either the sort of thing she'd seen again and again or something so wildly out of the range of her experience that it didn't even register.

Either way, I remember asking her, "Has this been here the whole time?" She didn't seem to hear, so I tried again in halted, tentative Ijaw. That got her to at least look at me and not the messed up feet, but still she said nothing.

"She's Yoruba," West said. I don't know how he knew this, and I suspected he was wrong. I told him as much, blending a few choice gestures into the mix, and then there was a scuffle, which only Patterson was able to break off, pulling us apart like a block of taffy. He had a good point in that this was, in the end, a crime scene. That cooled me down. Historically, I was not the scuffling type. I was pushed down in middle school just once, and that was enough. I spent my high school years hovering in the periphery, no interest in leaving a footprint there at all. My senior quote was just a blank space, about forty characters long, enclosed by two quote marks, a device that was meant to aid in my overall disappearance, but which only motivated my classmates to inscribe the phrase "dickweed" into the void. Something happened, though, somewhere between the second and third Gulf conflicts. It was a low period, that

intermissionary passage, during which I demanded more and more of the world's rapidly diminishing and thoroughly disappointing space. I'd torched an apartment building in Tikrit and watched while flaming bodies came tumbling out of shattered windows, and it was hard to snap that memory off from the version of myself I allowed to wander the streets of my hometown. I turned from a quiet man to a loud man. I ate buckets of theater popcorn and met the woman to whom I am now semi-committally bound. I went to war. I lived for a year in a Salvation Army bin. I went to prison for a crime I reluctantly committed. I got this detail.

But I am recounting this bit about the corpse, the hacked up corpse that we found while playing ball, the one which set off so much heaviness and sorrow.

Kinnear snapped into a more professional mode, radioing in to the security substation. She was a level-headed optometrist's daughter, a stout woman with a firefighter's brow and a voice as rapid and aggressive as a handful of tacks. Crazy for meth, she'd sucked off an undercover cop behind a Target in Delaware. Those are the stakes, I suppose. "We've got a sitch," she said, and then, after a long pause, "No, it's contained. But I need forensics."

We were at a loss. The Paranoids began searching dazedly through the tall grass for more evidence, and the Nauseateds started angrily in on some relay exercises, maybe to clear their heads of the grisly overture of the corpse. We were all gripped by a curious torpor—it was like our souls were watching the whole thing from fifty feet up, tethered to our bodies by a single golden thread. It wasn't at all like combat, or even that time just after combat where the world is slick and silent and you're just waiting for the next awesome blossoming of the sky, which will pelt you with a hail of bright, volatile debris. It was a chronic lightness—A sick feeling that you'd always be tethered like that, like a parade float, helpless as

your body huffed and muscled its way around the places you used to be able to inhabit.

The cassava woman, after having gathered the remaining, unmolested skins, took off deliberately toward a clutch of houses baking in the distance. I turned my attention to the pile. Campbell was kneeling, holding his cupped hand over the body parts at a distance of about six inches, much as a priest would consecrate something holy. He'd been a P.I. back in Baton Rouge, and—maybe he was just aping their behavior—I'll never know for sure—he presided over the scene as though he knew the protocol.

“What are you doing?” This was a voice from a ways off. We all looked over, and there were five men in suits rushing toward us with a deeply controlled swiftness, *in exactly the fashion our team had always predicted*. “That’s a witness,” one of them called, pointing in the direction of the woman. West, on hearing this, shook his head and started off after the woman, who was just a dark mote in the distance by now, fading into the treeline. West, shaking his head as if to put the heat on the rest of us, as if we all should have known. That was low.

“You should have detained the witness,” one of the suited men pointed out as they circled the body. Their tie clips bore the security firm’s insignia. “You should have immediately cleared the area, detained the witness, and radioed.” Any one of us could have told him we’d done at least two out of three of those things, but we were all green and none of us were ready to lose our positions on a matter like this.

“Who are you people?” He said, surveying the entire group of us, looking up and down at our jerseys.

“We’re guarding the derricks.”

The man took another startled, rapid-fire appraisal. “How did you miss this?” he asked.

It was a question none of us felt prepared to answer.

Two of the men began photographing the mount of corpse parts, circling it on their haunches, taking turns shooting. A third snapped a pair of latex gloves to his hands, flexing them as a television personality would. He shook the throat of a transparent plastic bag until it blossomed.

Though we strained to evoke an air of usefulness and import, it was clear we were being passively urged to busy ourselves with something other than looking on while the men in suits leveraged their science on the poor cut up fellow at their feet. We loped quietly back to the crumbling strip of blacktop that passed as the pickup point, feeling a little self conscious in our crisp, oversized jerseys and training shorts.

“What did we see?” Julius said, slumped on the bench seat next to me.

“I think we saw the dead,” I told him.

“I already don’t remember it,” he said. “I already see, when I think it through in my mind, only a blur where the body should be. Everything else is clear, but I can’t see the body. Was there a body?”

“I think so,” I said, but just his talking about it in such a way made the image go away a little bit for me as well. It might have been the body’s way of shielding one from the certain future.

“What does this mean for us?” he asked.

“Not much, I’m guessing,” I said, but saying so made my stomach tighten a little bit, because it was sure to have a great effect. If it made it up the chain of command that we’d been working on our game at the time of the slaughter, we would be shitcanned with extreme prejudice, sent back to our old lives, mired once again in dopework and housing projects, washing out condoms for reuse and bumming cigarettes. This didn’t seem lost on Julius, who shivered with discomfort at the notion.

“We’re not going to get to finish the season,” Julius said.

“I suspect not,” I said.

The green bus came and took us back to the dormitory, a narrow high rise on the outskirts of Port Harcourt. I went to my room, a shallow receptacle with breathy, tentative walls and a square of carpet rough-cut from an industrial remnant—the kind that collected a carnival of flaky human remains in its pile. I’d decorated the lone, bare table with a handmade portable stereo system I’d bought from a street vendor when we disembarked—a handsome, folksy artifact made from wire and cut-up coke cans and car parts. I powered it up and rewound and then played the tape it came with, which was *Thriller*. I went to the window, which looked out on a good hunk of the city, a looming meshwork of refinery cables and pipes violently upending the landscape, wicked columns of fire sprouting from the soil, a haphazard clutch of villagers drying clothes at its base while their children played tag nearby. It always amazed me, how many ways the people in this country had repurposed this apocalyptic rupture. The entrance to hell must be similarly appointed by a throng of bored citizenry who’ve jury-rigged its howling maw in some fundamentally mundane fashion. This was how our world met their world—this was the uneasy handshake—an old man leaning away from the steady conflagratory stream, scorching fish at the end of a sharpened stick.

The message light on the phone was blinking, and I knew without checking that it was Mandy. I picked up the phone, which was a mustard-colored affair, a boxy pushbutton dialer, the kind I’d last seen at my aunt’s house, before she started thinking she was a Viking reborn and they had to take her to a facility. I had Mandy’s number written down on a sheet of equine stationery, with the country code spaced out neatly and clearly in felt tip pen so I would not get it mixed up in the dialing, but still, I was sent over to some

automated woman chiming in Yoruba and then I got a busy signal, which in that country sounds like the bleating of a young goat. I tried her again, dialing the same numbers in the same sequence. I was again connected to the automated voice, but the message differed slightly. A third time I heard the line drop off momentarily, which meant that I would indeed make it through to the states. It was an act of magic, calling overseas from that place.

“You,” she said. Somehow she knew.

“I saw a cut-up person today,” I told her. I felt it was better that way, foregrounding the thing—otherwise, it might swallow me.

“That’s not in your job description,” she answered, which sounds like a kind of smartness but only to those who did not know Mandy, who was sweetly devoid of any form of knowing sass, part of why I loved her with the part of me that still wielded such things.

“No,” I said, “It is not. But we were working—doing some work outside, a survey of the perimeter, and we came across this body.” I was just twenty eight and already I was lying to women to whom I was still only half-heartedly attached. How little sense I had, then, of the girth of time, how the lies would stack up, woman to woman? I could have kept it lean, truth-telling from one to the next, working up a cache of good will to squander at a later time and place of my choosing. Instead, I played everything as though I wouldn’t be around the next day to enjoy it, leaving in my wake a sort of threadbare string of noncommittal projects, each mothballed in their own way, relative wastes. Mandy was no different, really. I treated her with the same degree of respect and consideration I treated my brother, which was little to none, and he was worse off by far, confined to a wheelchair. But she made active all the parts in me I thought deserved action. It doesn’t diminish me to add that she was a great comfort in those early days in the project, spectral and insubstantial as she was at the other end of the inconceivably long line.

“The body was cut up,” she said.

“It was a bit startling, seeing the foot so close to the thigh—a foot touching the front of the thigh, completely backwards. Limbs stacked on top of each other. And the head.”

“Please don’t tell me about the head,” she said. She was in medical school or nursing school or some school that had to do with the body (it was harder to keep track of her interests from the inside), so I’d assumed she could take it. It was, though, a head cut off—I suppose it doesn’t ever get easier to talk about something like that. I thrummed my fingers against the mesh window screen. The old man was finished cooking the fish. He was gingerly moving them from the stick to a paper plate with forked fingers.

“When did it happen?”

“I do not know.”

“Nobody saw it happen?”

“Nobody saw. It was left as a gift, I suppose.”

“What does that mean for you?” she said.

“It’s hard to say.”

“Were the parts white?”

“Yes.”

“That means something.”

“It means something different than black parts—is that what you’re getting at?” My grandfather was part black—what they called an Octaroon—the tone had been ground to a halt by two generations of rigorous whitening, but it was still there in my primal code and I liked to foist it at appropriate moments, especially with Mandy, who was fussy about race.

“You know what I mean,” she said, and I did. Whenever someone white was slaughtered here, the tension was palpable.

“It has an effect, yeah. What do you want me to say?”

There was an arm’s length of silence. Then, “I worry about you.

It's not someone from the oil company, is it?"

I told her I wasn't sure, but that it was hard to think of any other white people that deserved such an end. The head, cleaved from the body, no longer looked human. That was the thing about that corpse—it depended on the other body parts to give meaning. Without them it was just a rough ball of gurgled flesh. It looked fake.

"You'd know by now," she said.

"I suppose," I said, digging my toe into the carpet pile, some of which actually came up in a rippled chain of fuzz.

"Do you want to know how Jerome is, or should I just not mention it?"

"Don't be like that," I said. "Of course I want to know."

Jerome was our boy—not actually a real boy, but a peanut-shaped thing, approximately the size of a loaf of bread, designed to forestall grief in mothers who had miscarried. The peanut had a voicebox, and the longer you held it, the more things it said. Mandy had been cradling the boy for so long he was now reciting some of Aesop's fables, some of which are, I learned upon having them retold to me by Jerome, quite moving.

"I'll put him on for you," she said, and there was a shuffling sound. At first, I pitied Mandy for her attachment to Jerome—it seemed like a cruel and sardonic joke to put a peanut-shaped thing in a woman's arms after all of her hope and effort had come to naught, but I found that holding Jerome brought a certain peace to my own devastated heart, and I came to love him in a way.

"Greetings, father," Jerome said.

"Howdy," I told him.

"How is your season progressing?"

"Well, son, that's not a good topic, at the moment. I'm afraid I'm going to have to put all that away for a while."

"Why?"

“Some things have come up.”

“Violence in the region?”

“Something like that.”

“I worry about you, father.”

“I know, Jerome.”

“I am counting down the days until your return.”

“So am I.”

I told him I would send him a package and hung up the phone fast, feeling the dizzy weight of shame unravel inside.

Cynthia Atkins received an MFA in Poetry from Columbia University's School of the Arts. Her first full-length collection of poems, *Psyche's Weathers*, will be forthcoming from Wordtech in November 2007. Her poems have appeared in many journals, including *American Letters & Commentary*, *BOMB*, *Chelsea*, *Denver Quarterly*, *New York Quarterly*, *Pearl*, *Seneca Review*, *Son'wester*, *Texas Review*, and *Verse*, among others. She teaches Creative Writing at Roanoke College and is artistic director of Writers@Jordan House. She currently lives in Rockbridge County, VA with her husband and son.

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One reviewer called **Rachel Dacus's** recent poetry collection, *Femme au chapeau* (David Robert Books, 2005) "thrilling, one-of-a-kind poetry." It follows her first book, *Earth Lessons* (Bellowing Ark Press, 1998) and two poetry CDs, *A God You Can Dance* and *Singing in the Pandaleshwar Caves*. Her poems, essays, book reviews and stories have appeared in *Bellingham Review*, *Boulevard*, *Cranky*, *Image*, *The Pedestal*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Rattapallax*, *Swink*, and the anthologies *Ravishing DisUnities: Real Gbazals in English and Italy: A Love Story*. She serves as fundraising consultant to a wide range of nonprofit hospitals and charitable organizations and is a staff member for *The Alsop Review* (alsopreview.com).

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Jason Fraley works at an investment firm in West Virginia and is pursuing his M.B.A. His wife and cat see him occasionally. He has appeared or is forthcoming in *Forklift*, *Ohio*, *Redactions*, *DIAGRAM*, *Pebble Lake Review*, *Small Spiral Notebook*, *The Salt River Review*, and elsewhere.

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--Boo.
--Affirmative.

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