

The Bend

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Sami Schalk

At My Uncle's Funeral

No one had anything
exceptional to say.

He was an unremarkable man who
sat in corners quietly and began
awkward conversations on things
no one cared about: shortwave radio,
weather patterns, his alma mater's
failing sports program.

He was a soft spoken man who was
often sick, in and out of hospitals with
inexplicable pains: by his fourth
heart attack, people just shrugged, no one
visited except the wife and son, now
widowed and fatherless, whose
shoulders shook at the expected, generic
visitation remarks about a man who
loved his family, who will be missed,
who is surely in a better place, but who
didn't live the kind of life which
left anything in particular to
say in his memory.

Her Mother Taught Her

They've seen it before, the smile she creates,
peeling back each side of her mouth to reveal,
tooth by tightly clenched tooth, the silent
happiness they expect to see as he introduces her:
This is my wife, Sarah. My wife, Sarah.

And in this she knows where she stands,
pristine and weightless on his arm, she is
wife first, Sarah second. Some of his friends still
forget her name, just call her beautiful instead
and she smiles that same smile, following
the lead of his elbow or the pressure of his hand
on her back and, with each glass of wine,
the night passes, but the losing of herself is
not nearly as beautiful as that smile, though
just as forced, yet effortless.

And who could know that when she is alone
in the house he owns, she write screams
in a journal, burns the pages, then
gets dressed, makes dinner and does it
all over again and again, as if this is exactly
what she's always wanted.

The Night Before Monday Night

Meghan I am so sorry.
I am practicing these words
over and over,
syllable by syllable
until I find
the pitch and tone,
the pause and emphasis
right for saying this to her
when she sees
what's going on,
when the six of us
surround her to talk
about this so-called problem
she has confessed to me—
just me.

Meghan I am so sorry.
I say it with my eyes closed,
imagining her face,
how she will look at me
when she realizes I
flushed her cocaine
and told her secret,
sought out help
for the problem bigger
than both of us.

Meghan I am so sorry.
I am trying to prepare myself,
making up scenario after scenario,
a game of Choose Your Own
Intervention Adventure
I can't stop playing,
trying to figure out
the right words and actions
to get to the happy ending,
but there can be no
peeking ahead, no turning back,
so the only thing I am sure of is:
Meghan I am so sorry.
Meghan I am so sorry.
Meghan I—
But even now,
with her imagined shock
before my closed eyes,
I am choking half-way through.

Ann Palazzo

Before the Funeral Man Comes

This is what I do before
the funeral man comes—
let the dog say goodbye,
throw away the tissues and tubes.

This is what I don't do—
I don't say goodbye to you again.
Touch your skin that has gone cold.
I already told you,
reminded you about crazy parts that
you passed down to me,
angry parts that flipped around, doomed
little silver fish, glinting in puddles
next to a swollen river.

This is what I do before
the funeral man comes—
I palm one of your blue pills,
wash it down with milk
and wait for it to help me,
I sure hope
more than it helped you
before you left me to
wait for the funeral man.

Grant Osborn

Prelude to a Coda

I stalk living room carpet, lift
couch cushions as if you had fallen
out of my pocket with car keys,
loose change. last night's stars

still visible in the bones of my foot,
bruised after you did not come
home, after I kicked your nightstand,
stomped your armoire's heel. the sky

blotted where you were, where no one reads
texts, answers calls. the clock's second hand,
my restless leg, tumbles charades
between bed sheets, pretending it was you

singing on satellite radio. even in dreams,
I cruise airways, parking lots, scan
plates on Japanese cars, your little
red number pulling in after morning

when the clock's face is long, its arms
a needle hissing the upholstery of night:
your tattered hair, vinyl spinning
seams of unspoken static.

The Coming of Winter

In Kyoto

geisha fans prism autumn branches
whispering weathervanes, northern gusts
on city's side-street dancing cobble
spirits that tug, pull at hems of sky
but kimonos and silk-screened haori
overheard fall through walls, bodies
slap out tunes from a child's game
loosening her split peach, her hair-combs

tourists exchange miles for glimpses,
hours (in closed-quarters) translating
chance-photographs, an aberration
fuzzing tawny rims of hands, while theirs,
squeezed sashed breast and testicles afraid
to strip at hot springs, overexpose

Paper Warps

Life as Origami

1

at the end we march, accordion-fold
aside midwest trees holding hands
at dusk: merely mise-en-scène, silhouettes
pantomiming macabre billows
festooning the great seal, our roles vaulted

2

in kore-eda's *after life*
the still pink and grey sift memories
amber for cinemas, weigh stations
screening skylights of an entrapped moon
cycle, you directing paper and string

3

your eternity loops
dance as frames tiny enough to fit
a theater, a film canister, a time capsule
where seasons splice feathers, loom underfoot
with warped roots traced up scapes to leaf tips, back

4

there is protest in denying auteurship
of your life outside a poem, outside
a closed-set where you see no point
paying bills, playing the fate assigned:
sit up, *this* is a documentary

William McGee, Jr.

My Apology

Dear Ms. Fogel,

About thirty-two years ago, I was a third-grader and you were the principal at John Adams Elementary School. Unfortunately, during that school year, I was involved in an incident, and I did something I shouldn't have: I called another student—Craig Kenney, a large fifth grader at the time—a terrible name. I believe reports of this incident caught your attention, and I base this assumption on the fact that you voiced your disapproval of such incidents at an assembly not long after it happened but never actually talked directly to me about it. Although many years have passed, I still want to apologize for what I did for the following reasons:

1. Name-calling can lead to feelings of inadequacy. Calling a child names can make that child feel inadequate, and such feelings are harmful, especially, I imagine, for children, like Craig, who didn't have a lot of accomplishments to feel proud about. I first met Craig at the beginning of my third grade year—I was walking home from school one afternoon when suddenly a large brute appeared in front of me on the sidewalk. I did not know his name at the time, but even then I knew he was trouble. Do you remember Craig? He was tall and thick, and, if memory serves, he always seemed to have long, shaggy hair, an ugly Black Sabbath t-shirt, and ripped jeans (long before they were fashionable). I believe he was no stranger to your office. I'd seen Craig pulled from assemblies and yelled at by faculty and staff many times, upon which he would usually laugh in the faces of the angry adults. Thirty-two years ago, when he stood in front of me on the sidewalk (with three trashy-looking girls who I found equally frightening behind him), I knew I should be worried. I doubt that Craig was very good at things other than scaring younger children, doing bunny hops on his BMX bike, or, say, beating me to a pulp, and apparently getting away with it, even under the watch of the student school crossing guards, but I may have been responsible for making him feel inadequate, and for this I am sorry. I imagine Craig must not have had a lot of other accomplishments to feel good about. Why else his continual, unchecked abuse of me?

2. Name-calling can make a child feel unlovable. Every child—even a sociopathic bully, I would guess—needs to be loved. While Craig never did anything that seemed lovable to me, I believe that my name-calling might have made him feel even less deserving of anyone’s love. “HEY!” he yelled, the first time he had ever bothered to speak to me. “These girls”—he gestured over his shoulder—“said you called them a ‘pussy!’” When I was an eight-year-old, I would never have even dreamt of calling anyone—especially a girl, most of whom I feared, anyways—a “pussy.” Remember, thirty-two years ago, the word “pussy” was applied, as much as I could tell, only as crude slang for “vagina” and had not yet been accepted as a synonym for “wimp.” However, as I tried to deny this false accusation, BAM!!! Craig punched me hard in the stomach, and I tumbled to the ground, confused and in severe pain. I don’t remember seeing the frightening-looking girls ever again, but the next day, to my horror and confusion, the attacks continued. “HEY! Did you try spitting on me?” Before I could say no, BAM!!! Another punch to the gut, and I went to the ground. And almost every day, Craig would confront me, at first lamely accusing me of something but eventually skipping that formality, and then he would punch me—usually in the stomach, but sometimes in the mouth or eye—so hard that I crumpled and fell to the ground. I tried to fight back, and in my desperate search for a way to fight back against a bigger and stronger tormenter, Craig unfortunately became the first person I’d ever called a “fucker.” And while it’s very likely that me calling him a “fucker” had no effect on him whatsoever—other than making him laugh as I lay crying on the sidewalk—I still believe that if the potential for harm resides in calling someone a “fucker,” one should still take efforts to prevent doing so.

3. Name-calling can lead to changes in behavior in ways consistent with one’s self-image. When a child feels inadequate and unlovable, he naturally begins to act in accordance with those feelings, and if my one unkind word hurt Craig’s self-image and affected his behavior, then I am sorry. Of course, as for his behavior—well, Craig treated me cruelly before I ever said one word to him, if his willingness to attack me, without any provocation, is any indication. I had been in a couple of fights by the time I was a third-grader, albeit with kids my own age, kids who didn’t seem to be frightening sociopaths. Craig’s violent attacks, on the other hand, truly scared me; and when I did try feebly to hit him back, he’d pile on the beatings, punching me harder and more savagely, battering into me the lesson that

suffering one punch is obviously better than suffering two or more. I tried other routes home, but Craig eventually found me; I told the student crossing guard, but he seemed just as scared of the bastard as everyone else; I asked my mom to drive me home, but she would often forget; and I tried on one occasion to run away from Craig, but he caught up to me and beat me more brutally than he probably would have had I not tried to escape. I suppose it was my own fault that I did not tell a teacher, or even you, the principal, but I guess I believed then that kids who did that were “tattle tales,” so I learned to take a punch that knocked me to the ground without too much fuss or trouble. The other children walking home? They seemed all too willing to ignore the crying and bleeding child, probably because they were thankful Craig wasn’t assaulting them.

4. Furthermore, by name-calling, I was setting a bad example for others. After I had received one particularly savage beating from the monster, I lay crying on the sidewalk; my ineffectual rage got the better of me, and I did something I shouldn’t have. I screamed at Craig the worst word I had ever heard at that point: “You *FUCKER!*” I imagine I felt a shockwave flash up and down the sidewalk, as the offensive word jolted every child who happened to hear me. Craig just laughed and ran away as an anemic student crossing guard approached me. “You okay?” he asked, wide-eyed. “I’m okay *now*,” I told him, but did not ask where he was a couple of minutes ago. However, imagine if other kids my age—or younger—decided that it was okay to call Craig Kenney a “fucker” when he decided to brutally punish them with unprovoked assaults? Such a question is purely hypothetical, since Craig had already found a victim he could punish, and an environment in which he could abuse that victim, unchecked and unpunished; but I was setting a bad example, and for that, I am sorry.
5. Finally, by calling Craig a “fucker,” I was resisting the lesson he was teaching me: how to suffer senseless violence in a way that doesn’t bother others too much. This, I believe, is a valuable lesson, one that Craig has not taught me alone. I assume the crossing guard reported the incident to Mrs. Shell, who was in charge of the crossing guards, and she then relayed it to you, since less than two weeks later, we had an assembly at which you referred to it. Do you remember what you said? You began, “Now, I’ve heard that some of the older kids are beating up on some of the younger kids, and then the younger kids are calling them

bad names, when they're walking home from school." I wondered for a moment if you were about to say our names, but you did not. You continued: "You older kids? You leave those younger kids alone." For a moment, I felt the beginning of vindication—but that was soon abated. "And you younger kids? You'd better SHUT YOUR MOUTHS!" I remember clearly the anger in your voice. At that moment I decided not to tell any teachers, since you made it perfectly clear that I had committed a crime far worse than inflicting beatings, like the ones I had received, on smaller children. At that moment, I realized I had either to suffer quietly or to suffer more than I already had suffered, a lesson I've been able to apply to the many years that I have endured since I attended John Adams.

I apologize for what I did. Apparently I, the younger child who only shouted a bad name once at his tormentor, did something more heinous than did Craig, the bully who brutally and regularly assaulted me after school, but I can promise that I will never do something like that again. Now that I am older, should I ever find myself again in a similar situation, I'll know how a responsible adult should respond to these things.

Sincerely,
William McGee, Jr.

Jessica Maich

Swimming with the Old Broads

We've met at the pool for years
without knowing much, only

that water is a room we love, and movement
a sleek and slippery pleasure.

Going back, there were stronger strokes
and less use of the ladder, in and out.

But now is now and the pool stands ready,
so we move towards what we crave.

Afterwards, we steam up the shower room,
and a young one wanders in, drawn to the herd.

The Birds

The birds are singing somewhere out of sight,
a frantic song as winter reappears
and breathes an air of crushing leaden gray
across the yards so rusted and without
a leaf or stem or pulse of opening,
instead the cold, then stiffness settles in,
and wind blown, stoic fistfuls of the snow
clamp onto screens determined to adhere,
though they will fall, as surely as I stand
inside this house so full of present tense,
well knowing that my time will soon be past,
yet knowing that the birds will come again.

Alan Lindsay

The Wet Log

Too much depends
upon

a wet log
that won't burn

in the middle
of the fire.

Shit.

Book Lovers

We crawl under the covers
of a book,
lie
between the lines,
make love,
smoke the words.

It's all very dangerous.
It's not even our book.
Anyone could peek between
the sheets, follow to our hiding place
the ashes
smeared by our bare feet
across the pages.

Careless, we laugh our footprints
along the ridge and loosen the spine.
We pore over fields of text, page
on page, rolling in the leaves,
setting each sentiment,
each groping groping sentence,
ablaze.

Iris Law

Marie Curie, Dying

Soft wounds, round and rimmed with white,
small pits of pain halo the crests of her swollen lips.
On her tongue and in her cheeks, a constellation of throbbing stars.
Tired mouth and tired mind. She is done with talking.

She had wanted to laugh at God.
She had wanted to kindle the heavens in her hands.
She had wanted to unpin the earth at its luminous seams.

But the earth grew deaf to her.
And the ore, with its necklace of fallen particles, grows dim to her.
And the moon grows cold, and the wind shifts,
and a thought slips from her fingers.

Shooting the Farmhouse

It is cold, nearly Christmas, and elsewhere
the town is ablaze with ribbons of colored lights.
Lena and I turn our lenses towards the crumbling building,
its plastered stones, its rain-blackened roof, intent
on documenting the angles and textures of decay.

Westfield Road slips from our consciousness.
The streams of cars pouring out towards
the new shopping center blur into a single hash of silver,
silky against the stillness of afternoon light
sliding down a hard strip of sky.

We are careful to capture: brown against
a ground of sapphire blue, a wisp of moon
slipped into the corner of a frame, the shadows
of naked trees swimming out to meet us
as we crouch among the weeds,
backs to the skeleton houses rising in the distance,
fingers clutching at the rubble of our childhood.

This Void Particulate

or, the voice of Sally Ride, dispersed in space.

Floating, you may hear my voice.
I am ineffable, steel cloud. Pare me
to black and find no skeleton. I am mostly
debris, mostly made of: superterranean
lightness, atoms inordinate, dust of orbital
radiance, thin line of radio (Lady ephemeral)
scattering blues across the Way, and severed
steel, that small hinge flitting by (rusted sunbeam),
a titanium butterfly slicing along through
the astral swirl—all these are mine,
and were, before the soft discordance
of the white red sphere, the strange
awakening, worms uncoiling through time,
the solstice swallowing, swallowing.

An Overestimation of the Erotic Object

Bidart makes “the irreparable” a character, it breathes, returns, “twists,” like a dancing steak knife, a ribbon of metal after the tin snips eats.

I once wrote a poem called “The Irrevocable”: It begins, “When we pretended...” [it is an old boring story, yet a story] and ends with the image of a crow eating a road-kill fawn, “sleek bird, harbinger, neck / bent, muscle moving. Furious / beak, pulling strips of fur, cherry-colored / meat, long sinews / from the thigh, gulping, swallowing, / no teeth to chew.” [The difference between “irreparable” and “irrevocable” is slight, one of intent. One is past, sad as a torn seam. The other codifies a complainant, a defendant. The difference is forgiveness.]

*

(I will concede there is a difference in desire)

(I’m not sure when it happened)

*

Freud never questions love—posits the root of Dora’s neurosis to be love of Herr K. Here, love is the antecedent of desire, or perhaps it’s the other way around. Why, when men write, does “love” become the unquestionable, the supreme? Kundera does his share of this: *For if we love someone, he cannot be compared. The beloved is uncomparable. Even if we love both A and B, we cannot compare them, because in making the comparison we are already ceasing to love one of them. And if we say publicly that we prefer one over the other, it is never a question of proclaiming our love for A (in that event, it would be sufficient to say merely, “I love A!”), but of making it discreetly yet unmistakable clear that we don’t care for B.*

When is a young girl touched by an old man only a young girl touched by an old man?

Even Dora, who must have read a fairy tale now and then, knows that to love one, is to kill another. It is why the heroine [Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, but also, obliquely Rapunzel, even Cinderella, dressed in sackcloth] suffers a false death before the prince appears. To love one, is to kill another. And what of the beloved—

*

You've said, *It's an excuse for bad behavior*, I laughed wryly. I've said, *It's a consolation prize for respect*, you've laughed less. Despite all the precautions.

Like the first day of deer hunt: poor bastard doesn't even see it coming. The air smells of hoarfrost & leaf mold, then bloodspatter & iron filings. Like that kid in New Orleans, vomiting blood all over the brick wall in the alley. He wasn't long for it. Neither were we, the [we] I was a part of [then].

Now, it's like the ditch I walk the dog in. Along the old railroad tracks, they pulled up telephone poles to bury the lines, and never filled the holes. Winter's treacherous, after a snow. I forget one, end up hip deep, stranded, the dog licking my face, yelping.

Look, it's the second day of our fight. Last night, even our feet refused to touch. The animals know—they've taken up their positions. We were always careful: "love" without the preposition "in."

After the hole, my leg stiffens, the knee swells. For two nights, I sleep with it perfectly extended, boxed in by pillows.

It passes. It always does.

*

... the value and quality of any love is determined solely by the lover himself.

It is for this reason that most of use would rather love than be loved. Almost everyone wants to be the lover. And the curt truth is that, in a deep secret way, the state of being be loved is intolerable to many. The beloved fears and hates the lover, and with the best of reasons. For the lover is forever trying to strip bare his beloved. The lover craves any possible relation with the beloved, even if this experience can cause him only pain.¹

*

Semantics distract. Love is uncomfortable and actual, like the intimacy of a public bathroom.

¹McCullers, *The Ballad of the Sad Café*.

Desmond Kon Zhicheng-Mingdé

: qibla in the mughal hall :

joy is simple as this horse in the middle of a page, not that there are other pages like all books and what journeys they promise : this horse is going nowhere, even if its chest seems to advance, to lunge into the air before it : want to live like joy in forever twos, and sadness thereafter, the eternal grieving : would walk alone in small fields but survived by the memory of you, and your love, and how you loved, and what you loved, and where we loved : no longer want to be arabian-white as desert sand, cool breeze, mane flaring like arrows shot to aim at gods who create with such mirth, such irresponsible ravishment : ravished as loneliness ravishes men : am but a man striped into the equine state of compliance and discipline and obedience, obedience even to god, good lord, and gods who only promised us pure freedom, to stand, still, or kick up our heels and run like the wind : could run into joy, its clichéd love but this condition splays, stalwart stories, thin lines that portrait this amber horse, another wild rush.

{hidden stairwell and subway}
{commune for the homeless}
{beyond and despite the pain}

this acknowledgement of life thus, the raft
all our men, red-faced women cling, fling
fingertips in soup bowl, saliva in a dribble

and its sorrow too; shafted between bases
capitals stippling this world; live out here
this relief world and I miss it, old silences

the round barn, without interest, rips clean
without the shaking, chilly and still quaking
to be sparing, austere as these tense verses

{use the chalk for the circle}

return me to faraway places, faraway times
rites like savants on knees, belting habitual
this afternoon not dying desolate; nor alone

{spring and its purple pollen}
{hear the shop, its soft opening}
{archivist on his way to work}

windmill turning into sunflower decisions
made for it, partial circumferences, larger
like open receptions and niceness, palaver

it accompanies the rich, an escorted turning
pointed thunder like turbines, like hurricane
fans ready to spin more myths, daubed gold

him but a returning pilgrim, pencil outline
begging the tailspin, a quartered golgotha
never seen anyone so calming, sanded in

{feet and centuries under us}

plain butterspread of buttercup tastes sweet
even in these things, freedom wills its run
me scaling a square tract, its saffron field

The Accident

Although the *Athens News* is forecasting sixty-mile-an-hour winds, thirty people travel by fishing boat from Perthika to Moni. Most travelers have not read the news, and those who have feel papers tend to exaggerate weather. Jere and Elizabeth slouch on the cracked gray benches that surround the boat's perimeter. Jere shields his eyes from the strong afternoon sun, but the light glares through. Elizabeth adjusts her Ray Ban sunglasses. A German tour group hovers near the back of the boat. They are sunburned and chatting amicably.

"I can't believe our honeymoon is nearly over. We'll be home in just a few days," Jere says to Elizabeth.

"I know it went fast," Elizabeth yawns. "But it's really time to get back, don't you think? I need to get stuff done."

Jere thinks now, as he has for the past week, that the trip has been disappointing. Elizabeth has not been present. She's been agreeable, but not there. The sex has been non-existent, and she's spent most of the trip talking about her damn play. Jere doubts many people will care for the subject matter but he has learned to keep his mouth shut.

Elizabeth stares at the restless water and calculates the time wasted on the honeymoon. If they'd just taken the weekend trip to Martha's Vineyard as she'd suggested, they'd have been back to work in days. Balancing her creative project with her scholarly one is starting to seem impossible. The play, she knows, will be really good, and Giorgios Katszanopoulous, the founder of Akrotiri, will be immortalized after his personal tragedy. The tragedy is that Giorgios suffered a heart attack while on site and died falling into his notorious excavation. Elizabeth dramatizes his last weeks up until and including the accidental stumble to his death. Her other project is stalled. Elizabeth cares deeply about Chaucer's *Wife of Bath* and her impact on feminism—but the writing won't come.

Elizabeth thinks it's only fair she's going on this silly trip to a god-forsaken island because Jere did visit the archeological site for her and he must have been bored stiff. Jere's reason for visiting Aegina, and now this islet of Moni, is that he was curious to see if it had changed much. Fifteen years ago, his father had surprised the family with a two-week excursion to the Greek islands. The act was startling coming from a Kansas-born man who had never left the Midwest. "It's time you all saw something different," he had said. "And besides, we can afford it. The company did better than well this year." A man from his Knights of Columbus group had traveled here recently and he'd just loved

it. Jere and his sister, high-school students at Cottonwood High, were curious.

“It’ll be nice to go somewhere new,” Kathy had said. At sixteen, Kathy knew how to get the most out of life. Jere was unsure. What was Greece like? They’d never been further than New York City for a cousin’s wedding three years ago. Still, he reasoned it would be good to get out of Kansas for a while. Swimming pools and Dairy Queen got old after about the third week of summer.

The family had visited smaller islands, including Aegina. Their father, armed with a guidebook, tried educating the family on places of national interest. On Aegina, he’d been very excited about the Temple of Aphaea. “Look, kids,” he’d said. “This ruin is thousands of years old. It’s just incredible. Do you want to know the history?” Kathy and Jere did not care all that much about the ruins. After the fourth day, Kathy devised an escape system. They would eat dinner with their parents at 8:00. Then they’d discuss the day’s events until 9:30. But when their parents fell asleep, they were free, and Kathy showed Jere how fun retsina and ouzo could be.

The island approaches in a bright, hot wave. Elizabeth adjusts her headscarf, and Jere notices that she seems entranced. “This place looks amazing,” she says. “The water is crystal. Look, you can see straight down to the bottom.”

A loud noise startles the passengers. The honking lasts about a minute, and then they are in dock. Three boys accept the rope thrown to them by the captain. They carefully tie the rope to the pier, and the passengers rise up and move forward. Jere thinks to wait until everyone is off the boat before advancing, but Elizabeth pushes forward in spite of Jere’s arm on her shoulder. She is quickly pressed up against the other passengers. After a few more crushes, everyone is on shore.

Moni is different from all of the other Greek islands. For starters, it’s tiny and has no actual inhabitants. Jere’s father had brought the family there as part of their island tour. Their tour-guide had disappeared and left Jere and his family to explore the island.

Jere remembers some of the trip, but not in vivid detail. He does remember that his father, who timed everything, made predictions on how long it would take the boat to arrive, and both ways his watch registered eighteen minutes. Elizabeth, when told of this statistic, was fascinated. “See, you can control some things,” she’d said. “I wonder if the speed of the boat is always consistent or if the captain adjusts the engine to make up for wind?”

It is the peacocks that hold everyone’s attention at first. There are six of them parading down the path toward the fishing

boat. Their feathers are jeweled and widespread. They form a neat line and then move out to create a horizontal barrier. Blues, greens, and turquoise are the most evident manifestations of their brilliance. But Jere does not notice their colors. He's watching their eyes, timid beneath the show.

They begin to walk up a sandy pathway until they reach a small forest. Although Greece is broiling in August, the shade from the trees makes it feel about ten degrees cooler. Still, Jere is starting to sweat. He is not a large man, but he is six-foot three. Jere sees that the spot they have chosen overlooks a cliff. They are up high now, but after lunch they will walk down the winding path that leads to the sea.

"This looks great," Jere says. "Let's stop here and then go down to the water."

"I agree," says Elizabeth, pulling out plastic bags from her backpack. "I've got Feta cheese in Pita for you, Jere. I put cucumbers and tzatziki on it. It's from last night, but it smells good."

Jere and Elizabeth eat their lunch. Elizabeth drinks a coke. Jere drinks two beers. The beers aren't cold, but they are refreshing anyway. They eat in silence and then carefully dispose of their trash. "We can sleep now, swim, and then walk back to the boat. We'll maybe catch the one at six or six-thirty?" says Elizabeth. "We probably don't want to be too much later since we've got to get the bus back to town."

Jere doesn't answer. He begins dozing on his straw mat. The heat feels oppressive. Elizabeth unzips her pack and takes out her yellow notepad. She takes a thick gold pencil and begins writing in clear block print. "The Wife of Bath has been ignored, in some circles, as being a lesser figure of importance. Upon closer examination, however, it becomes clear that the Wife's tale and the Clerk's tale both have moments of intertextual digressions. Note to self: What is really behind the mask? Is Chaucer playing around with traditional gender roles, or is he reinscribing those same fixed ideals?" This is all crap, she thinks. The sun begins making patterns on her paper, and she moves her mat closer to Jere. He's breathing heavily now, deep in rest. She closes her eyes and wonders why she feels so afraid. She'll finish her dissertation in August, and then she'll get a tenure-track job at a second-tier university, but then what? After that is one big blank. She feels like she will enter a black hole from which she can never return. And why, after all, is she writing her dissertation on the Wife of Bath? What does it mean to be a wife anyhow?

Elizabeth can't rest, so she sits up and peels an orange. The bright color reminds her of Aunt Shirley's dress at her wedding. Christ, what a choice, she'd thought then as she'd looked down

at the faces in the chapel. The elderly aunts, including Aunt Shirley, sat six in a row dressed in thin silk dresses. The ladies fanned themselves with their programs while their sweating bodies pressed flush up against the white lilies that her mother-in-law had placed at the side of every pew. Standing in the church at 2:00 PM in the eighty-six degree weather had not been pleasant. Elizabeth recalls a dull aching feeling in her stomach—not a constant pain, but a pressure too strong to ignore. It was all very warm, Elizabeth thinks, and then the music, flowers, and people faded to black.

The wind begins howling, and Jere wakes up. “What time is it?”

“It’s nearly four,” says Elizabeth. “I want to swim, Jere, so I’m going to do it now. It’s starting to get windy.”

“I’m still sleepy, but I’ll come with you,” Jere says. “The water looks rough.”

“Don’t be silly,” says Elizabeth. “I’ll be fine. You look tired. Why don’t you keep resting until I get back? Then we’ll start packing up.”

“But feel that wind, Elizabeth. It just knocked over that branch.”

“I’ll be fine, Jere,” she says. “It feels amazing.”

Jere watches Elizabeth walk down the brown winding path to the sea. The water looks ominous. Elizabeth’s beautiful legs stride purposefully, her towel wrapped around her waist. Her hair hangs down her back in a thick plait. Jesus, she is lovely, he thinks. But it’s windy and from what he can tell there don’t seem to be any other swimmers out there. Jere opens his backpack and searches for the marble-covered notebook that holds his poems. He can’t decide what to revise. Nothing original has entered his brain in days. He has thought a lot about the military guards with machine guns at Athens International airport. When they’d arrived, the soldiers were riding on tanks, patrolling the one-mile strip of land in front of the airport. Maybe he should write about them? He realizes, with a pang, that when they return home there is nothing ahead for him but countless hours of revision.

Jere packs up his notebook. He notices that Elizabeth has left her journal outside of her bag. He wants to open it up, but that would be a violation. He feels a pressing urge to relieve himself. The water and the beers have run their course and now the fluid needs somewhere to go. The problem is there are no bathrooms anywhere near their site. Jere calculates that it will take half an hour to walk down past the wooded area and back to where they started from. He also calculates that it will take nearly that long to walk down to the ocean—the next obvious choice. He will have to just do it there and hope nobody walks by.

Jere exits the site and looks around for a quiet place to pee. He wants something more secluded. He retraces his steps and walks back down the path. The air is warm but not humid. The breeze has picked up and is now quite strong. He sees a few isolated boulders at the edge of a cliff, and he walks toward them. As he approaches the boulders, he sees that they are higher than he expected. Their surface is warm and gray. Jere chooses the tallest boulder. The climb is easy, as there are ridges at the base and center of the rock.

The breeze makes him sway, just a bit, but he steadies himself and looks out at the vast expanse of ocean. He is closer to the cliff than he had realized, but the wind feels exhilarating. Jere unzips his pants. The sun pounds on his neck. The white, hot, heat moves to his back, his legs and ankles. Pine trees scent the air with a pleasant acidity. He thinks that Elizabeth must be swimming right now, and he wonders how far out she's gone. The wind grows stronger, and the heat moves to Jere's arms and chest and thighs. Jere thinks that maybe for once he can be sure of Elizabeth. She is a creature no longer out of reach. But he senses a growing uncertainty about her. The wind begins to move tree branches with greater determination. Jere cannot know that all boats have been grounded until the wind passes. He cannot know that at this moment Elizabeth is not thinking of her life with him but of her life in spite of him. He could pee forever out here on this boulder and the release is so exhilarating that Jere does not immediately notice the wind plummeting him sixty feet down the mountain.

The Athens news carries the story. "American Tourist Dies on Moni Boulder." Elizabeth is still dumbstruck when the concierge brings her breakfast on a tray with the newspaper. It does not seem possible that Jere is gone. She'd returned to the lunch-spot after her swim expecting to find Jere. When he failed to appear after two hours, she'd asked a group of Germans from the tour to look for him. A young man found Jere one hour later. Two Greek policemen had arrived with numerous forms, but since Elizabeth couldn't read Greek, she'd been told to wait for the English interpreter. In the meantime, no one seemed quite sure what to do with the body. "Please just let us leave," she'd cried.

"I am very sorry," the older policeman had said. "You look like nice young womans and this is very sad time for you. I wish you could go but my hands is tied. Please try and understand." The policeman then produced a bottle of Metaxa that he poured into tiny shot glasses. Elizabeth accepted two shots and contemplated a third.

"Life is strange," the younger policeman had said. "Life is here one minute and then poof it is gone. To the nice American

boy, may he find peace and happiness in his next life.” The men toasted Jere, and then a compromise was reached. Elizabeth was permitted to act as official witness to the body until her passport could be retrieved. The police wrapped Jere’s body in a sheet and placed him on a mule. The mule carried Jere to the boat, and Elizabeth accompanied him back to the mainland. After the body was transported by taxi to a local island hospital, Elizabeth had returned to the hotel. The shock came in waves, and she’d curled up in bed, still dressed, and rocked herself to sleep.

The next day, phone calls were made, and Jere’s body was loaded onto an express ferryboat and transported to Athens International airport. Once there, the Athens police took over and placed him in cargo on an Olympic Airways jet. His parents had naturally been devastated. Elizabeth could barely explain. The mother kept saying “Are you sure, are you sure it’s our boy?” The father had finally been given the phone, and it was he who took control and made concrete plans. It was decided that they would meet Elizabeth and the body in New York. But then what? Elizabeth had wondered. The father had not discussed the funeral, so Elizabeth was unsure if they would have it in New York or if Jere would make a final trip to the Midwest.

Elizabeth sits in first class and watches the plane take off into the sky. The engines are powerful, and she enjoys the ascent. Her work lies at her feet, but she doesn’t feel like touching it. The plane moves upward, and she closes her eyes. She thinks that her play and dissertation seem like ghosts from the past. She wonders if she will ever be able to work on them again. The excavation seems silly now. The ruined underground cities are meaningless. Who really cares about an ancient cistern? On the day of their visit, she remembers walking around the site by herself. Jere was chatting with a photographer, and she’d taken the opportunity to take some detailed notes. What had surprised her most was how modern the buildings appeared. Some areas contained intricate tile-work depicting scenes from everyday life. But she was disappointed that she didn’t feel more about what she was seeing. After all of her research, the experience was almost anticlimactic.

The plane reaches cruising altitude, and Elizabeth sees that her neighbor, a middle-aged male, is tapping away on his laptop. She gazes out of the window and is slightly startled by the view. The mainland is shrinking away, but she can still see clear buildings and streets. The landscape looks much smaller than it had seemed on the ground. This is always the case, but Elizabeth is surprised by the density. Sharp outlines begin to fade, and then there is nothing but clouds and sky. A sharp ache moves over her body and this, she decides, is grief. Over the past two days, she’s been surprised by how much she feels. Her feet

hurt. Her jeans press too tightly against her skin. Coffee burns her mouth. She thinks that her apathy has been rubbed away and has been replaced by sadness. The plane moves out and she succumbs to sleep.

When she wakes, it is 9:45. She's slept for seven hours. Her stomach is growling. She wonders if the flight attendant will give her a meal even though the service is over.

"Hello," says the man in the next seat. "You've been sleeping for a long time. Too bad you missed the movie. I'm Bradley, by the way."

Elizabeth yawns and turns her gaze on the man. "I'm Elizabeth. What was the movie?"

Bradley places his book and glasses in his lap. "Oh something ridiculous—a Brad Pitt film. I tuned out after ten minutes."

"I see," says Elizabeth, unsure of what else to say.

"Are you just back from vacation?" Bradley asks.

"Sort of," says Elizabeth. "My husband passed away on our trip and I'm getting him home now."

"Oh, God. I'm sorry—seriously, that's awful. Are you OK?" Bradley seems shaken.

"I don't know," Elizabeth says. "It still doesn't seem real. He was young and healthy—it was a freak accident on a mountain. I can't really talk about it."

"I'm so sorry," Bradley says again. He reaches over and squeezes her hand. "You need to eat—do you want me to ask for something?"

"I'm fine. I'll just get some—but thanks," she says.

Elizabeth gestures to the flight attendant and asks for food. She wonders about the casket and if people would mind having a body onboard. The thought of Jere's body in cargo is oddly comforting—it's as if he's chosen a different way to return home, that's all. The dinner, a baked chicken breast in wine, is well-seasoned, and she eats it ravenously. When she's done, the attendant removes the tray. Elizabeth settles back in her seat and reaches for the in-flight magazine. In a few hours I'll be home, she thinks, and then what? Bradley opens his mouth to speak, but Elizabeth turns away. She needs to think. She flips the magazine open to the crossword section and begins the puzzle. None of clues are familiar. She stares blankly at the page and begins filling in the spaces. None of her chosen words fit. Her head begins to throb, and so she puts down the magazine. She closes her eyes for an instant and then is immediately aware of a severe change in air-pressure.

The plane lunges forward, and Elizabeth sees that oxygen masks have broken free from the overhead compartments. Drinks spill. Bradley has grabbed her arm. People are crying so loudly, she can't hear the captain speaking over the loudspeaker.

An elderly Greek woman holds up her rosary and begins to pray. The plane continues to pitch, but now it's moving from side to side.

Elizabeth finally turns to Bradley. "It'll be fine," she says. "Don't worry. It's going to stop in just a minute, you'll see." A few more sharp thrusts, and the cabin lights are back on.

"The turbulence had passed," the captain is saying. "I'll be honest, that was a close one. We can thank our lucky stars that we escaped a crash. Please stay in your seats for the remainder of the flight, and God bless."

Bradley gently removes his hands from Elizabeth and begins collecting his materials off of the floor. A child screams loudly. The passengers uncurl themselves from their horror and, as the plane descends into safety, Elizabeth wonders why they'd been so afraid.

Kelly Russell Jaques

The Weather House

If you walk down my street,
And go over the bridge,
Then climb up the hill,
Out near the ridge,

On the outskirts of town,
Where few people go,
Is a house that is magic.
I've been there. I know.

It looks like any other,
Until you go in,
Just open the front door
And the fun will begin.

It's a marvelous house,
And I don't know the reasons,
But this house has the weather
Of all of the seasons.

It's like traveling through time,
When you go through a door,
The temperature changes,
As you walk cross a floor.

I seldom bring friends,
(I prefer to go alone)
There are no interruptions;
No television or phone.

The wind whispers gently,
Through hallways and stairs,
Sharing its secrets,
Blowing away cares.

It rains on the first floor,
From morning 'til night,
Sometimes a monsoon,
Other times soft and light.

Head to the top floor,
If you need to get dry,
It's always warm here,
With the sun shining high.

If you tire of the sun,
To the basement you can go,
Just sled down the stairs,
And make angels in snow.

Want a tan in winter?
In summer, want snow?
Whatever the weather,
There's a place you can go.

If you visit this house,
Please don't tell a soul,
Let peace and reflection
Be your only goal.

Kathryn Hunter

Lay Bare Your Muddied Feet

well of course she screwed him—
he wrote the good book, didn't he?
who do you think the god was,
planting trees in that first place?
not some exalted deity but a high
human, this atom who until then
had been in the garden, eating
the earliest pine tar glue
and chewing on blue lotus until
he needed someone else to do.

what better to do than find a woman
wandering in paradise, lost and looking
for a creator, then pencil himself in?
makes more sense than some great air or
spirit drying the seas, creating beings
who would later write it into oblivion.

she had a small tattoo on the sole of her left foot;
a circle incomplete but curving inward to complete
itself, spiraling into her sole, a thousand tiny holes
punched with a clean acacia thorn and soot

he had no idea: who cared for her feet? until
she planted them in the dirt, set herself,
screamed his sons into dust and death.

come now, Adam, God,
lay bare your muddied feet,
your grey lead-smudged fingers,
for our backs arch, ache, and
our necks tire of looking for you
somewhere above this lump of clay.

Return to Eden

smell the summer like spent lust
cedar bark and manure fresh in the nostrils
the faint tang of pale skin exposed too long

mulch splinters ignored in a cotton top
drag faint furrows into eager skin
pinpricks becoming afterthoughts

rich earth clutched between clutching fingers
grass stains on jeans torn at the knee
sweat and sprinkler rain cooling flushed flesh

ozone scent rises from earth like after
a rain when the worms emerge to
the pungent musk of mushrooms

Gulf Noir

Here's the living room of my best friend Dawg's apartment, but he prefers to call it his Hole. He'll say, "Let's swing back up to the Hole, Slick, do us up a few monster lines." Course, that's not the name on my nametags. My real name is Adam S. Perez, but most everyone on the gray boat called me Slick.

When people hear that we were in the Navy, the assumption is, okay, they go way back, to childhood or, according to how old people think we are, high school, or college, or jail. Dawg's thirty-five, going on thirty-six in December, and I'm thirty-four, just turned thirty-four on Halloween, and we only go as far back as Desert Storm. But I don't know. It depends on who you talk to. Some people might consider that jail.

Lately, Dawg's been getting creative with my nickname. Now it's *Slickshit* or, if his weird girlfriend is around, he puts *dick* behind it and they grin. Now he flushes the toilet, drowning out *CNN*, and I hear him running water in the sink. "Cut that shit up good!" he says. "Lotsa rocks in there." Dawg doesn't have to tell me. I can see the rocks.

I stick a finger in the powder I've been working on, rub it under my top lip, and spread it around with my tongue. It grinds like sand, but cools the whole front of my gum, chilling places my tongue didn't even touch. My tongue feels like it just dissolved, shrunk about a quarter of an inch from the tip. No feeling. "Dawg, this stuff is good. Has a nice edge to it," I say—just like in the movies, as I work the blade on a mirror on his coffee table. Then I hit a few rocks in the sand. Dawg goes, "Hearrrd that," kind of late, as he agrees with me about how good this stuff is.

That's another one of his sayings, almost makes you think he's preoccupied with something else at the time. Usually he's scratching himself in places you don't want to see, but he doesn't want to completely tune you out so he goes, "Hearrrd that!" Scratch. Scratch.

"Yo Slick, thought you'd have a line all carved up for me by now. Whuz up?" He lumbers toward me from his bathroom in Navy silk shorts and a blue Obama T-shirt already rolling a cut straw around between his thumb and index. Andersen Cooper is yapping about Barack Obama's first few days in office and his broadcasts stops Dawg dead in his tracks. The boy clears his nose and swallows what he collects with an *ahhhh*. His mouth is stretched so wide that, from where I'm sitting, I can see phlegm hanging like white thread from the roof of his mouth. "See there! We got a man just like us at the helm, Slick. Yes we can, Homey.

Whuz up for tonight, Slick? It's Friiiiiiiiday night!" There he goes again stating the obvious. I work, too. Of course I know it's Friiiiiiiiday night or however the hell he says it. I know what day it is. I couldn't wait to get off work and loosen up on this tie that's been choking my ass all week.

"You done with that shit yet, Slick?" He's always calling people names. It's a skill with him, one he picked up while we were on our big gray boat in Uncle Sam's Navy—me and Dawg and the officer that supplied us with our doses. I don't want to tell his name because he's still in the Navy, on his way back to the Gulf as I tell this. He's a big swashbuckling white boy, just made Lieutenant, too. I'm sure he'll be hanging with us when he gets out in a year or so, whenever we find Osama or whenever we're done turning Iraq into a parking lot.

Dawg will say, reaching for some gin to help us come down off the stuff, "Next time we head out to Tijuana, we buyin' a pound! A fuckin' pound, Slick!" Hell, he'll only be kidding, caught up in the moment, because by then it'll be like going on *half-past serious craving time*. We can't really afford all that. And besides, we have to go to work on Monday.

We usually go even-steven with the lines but he seems to be in a tizzy already, so that extra one is for him to start off. I have to cut the lines because Dawg's hands will start to tremble like a jackhammer with that blade in it after he's had a few lines, making me watch where I place the remote and my digits. I'll just bump myself an extra line when Dawg takes off for the bathroom again, and trust me, he'll be going again soon. He already has the straw in his nostril and leans forward from his dirty brown couch dotted all over with piss-sized stains and burn holes, to inhale the mound, too if he's not careful. We're best friends but I won't share his straw because he will bite one end together and use it to pop a pimple, scratch his eye, or remove some earwax. Or he would squeeze the other end between his fingers and slide it under the jagged nails of both big toes and pull out stuff that looks like fungus, and watch it turn from deep brown to dark purple right before our eyes. He won't even think there's anything wrong with that. Then he would smell it. Serious business. I've seen him. I angle the mirror toward his face just before his nostril makes contact with the straw and fogs up the glass.

Now, we've been at this for a while, so there are some house rules. No one made up these rules. They just came from partying that began in the desert and never quite stopped. Almost everyone recognizes them. If someone's overheating, he has to wipe his face clean before it's even in the vicinity of the mirror or whatever flat surface we're using. Nothing like mixing up someone's sweat beads with good coke—especially if it's Dawg's sweat. Can't make any sudden movements either because no one wants

to use his nose like a Hoover on Dawg's thick dirty carpet. We tried that once and he ended up clogging a nostril with an old toenail. When he switched nostrils, he pulled up a few Spanish rice grains in the other nostril. So we gave up on inhaling altogether and just licked the damn rug clean. No laughing either if you have the straw directly over the mirror or within blowing distance. And absolutely no talking. No one wants to be responsible for starting a snowstorm. If we're partying with a crew, let somebody else tell the damn story. Chances are someone's simply repeating stuff that happened when we were on the USS Huxxley anyhow, and even if we're too toasted to recall everything, most likely we already know the ending. And the blinds if we're at Dawg's hole have to be closed because his apartment is ground level.

Dawg hollers like he just got branded. The boy pinches his big nose shut, hangs his head all the way back and shouts with a heavy tongue, "Thatz my prezident, Zlick," as Barack anoints us from Dawg's flat screen. He hands me his straw with an arm outstretched over the coke and the coffee table as dry anti-deodorant from his armpit floats like dust to the table. I take the blow and put it aside because I don't want any fuckups tonight.

Motorists in America's Finest City are swarming on the 5 and 805 freeways like locusts, according to a local news. The Friday night drive, I think, and shake my head. We always miss it though, because we get off early on Fridays, do a little happy hour at El Torrito's first, then pick up some stuff and hit the Hole via the carpool lane. Sometimes we get a little serious and talk about the War and how it messed up guys, even guys on a boat. Dawg's off to the bathroom again, just like I said he would, leaving me alone to watch Andersen Cooper interview John McCain.

"I got the motherfuckin' runs again, Slick. Must have been that goddamn bean burrito we had this morning," he says, and hustles down the little hallway from his living room.

When it's my turn, my lines are usually small because, hell, I like to know what I'm doing at all times. You learn that quick living with guys on a gray boat during a war, especially if you're a little guy like me. I never went for the mind-bending hallucinations or the blackouts like Dawg and other guys did on the Huxxley, because I didn't want fellas posting pictures of me and poultry or drunk Aboriginies on YouTube or Facebook, you know, starred views of pod casts I would not remember participating in. Truth is, some of those dudes got a little too freaky for me.

"Dawg!" I say, "We're gonna have us a hell-of-a-time tonight, man. I can feel it already. Gonna get real nasty tonight, yessir."

“Heard that, Slick,” is what escapes from the bathroom along with his smell and a fresh set of hollow butt noises. No joke, I tell you. The man is gross.

“We’re gonna have us a damn good time tonight,” I say and throw my head aft to send that stuff on its way as I look up at Dawg’s cracked and water-stained ceiling.

Dawg flushes the toilet quick with a loud, industrial flush, and I hear no water running in the sink. Instead he tiptoes out coughing and claps his dry hands together. The boy smells his hands with a grin, clears his nose again, and swallows more of that slimy stuff he’s always rattling around in back of his throat, making me sick. But he’s only fooling about not washing. He just wants to keep his eye on the lines. He walks past me and runs water on his hands over the kitchen sink and wipes them on his shorts, his Obama shirt, then his head, and brings his big self over to the couch and bounces down on it. Now, you see why we have the house rules? Sometimes Dawg just gets crazy.

“What’s that old motherfucker doing on my flat screen?” Dawg asks.

“He’s still running to be President,” I say.

“Where we at, Slick?” Dawg eyes the lines.

“Right where you left off,” I say, rolling his straw towards him with a fingernail.

“Let’s burn one up then, Slick. Roll up a joint, man. Hell yes, we can. Get this show on the road!”

“Gimme a flame then,” I say, and watch him twist around to look for his lighter, the one in the shape of a locust he picked up in Dubai. He lifts up one leg and a testicle swings free from his loose Navy shorts. He pushes a hand under the cushion like he’s scratching himself or he suddenly realizes he’s sitting on a bulky object and pulls things out one by one: an Afro pick, a CD, and a flattened blue and white tube of K-Y jelly. I give him a look that says I don’t even want an explanation. He begins one anyway. “Don’t even go there,” I tell him. He finally produces his silver lighter and hands it to me. “Burn it up, Baby! Burn it up!” he says. Hell, I haven’t even started rolling the joint yet.

I’m sliding my tongue across a *zig-zag*’s edge as Dawg twists the cap off a stout and tilts the short, thick neck in an obscene way, his Adam’s apple riding high as it does a, now-you-see-me-now-you-don’t kind of dance. “Donna coming over or what?” I say.

“Hell no. She ain’t coming over here. TGIF, Slick! Ain’t got time for her this evening. I’ll tap that this weekend. Hell, this boy ain’t on no leash,” and he pounds his thick chest. “We hittin’ the clubs. Gonna get me some fresh poontang later on tonight, Slick. We gonna get you hooked-up, too,” he says, and giggles. I’m not too sure about that. Last thing I need is his help to get *hooked*

up as he says, but I'm feeling nice right about now, so I play along with his antics.

"Don't need no help, buddy, because... because..." I say, as we both shout out on cue, "BECAUSE, YOU'RE MY WHORE, ELIN!" And we burst out laughing like everyone did when they first heard it back on the Huxxley, everyone except Dawg.

"You think homeboy's in the closet?" he asks, pointing his stout at the flat screen.

"Who, McCain?"

"Nah, Slick. That CNN pretty boy."

"Dude, I don't know. Ask Donna, she knows all that stuff. You show her that trick you used to do with your butt yet or you waiting to surprise her?" I ask, still giggling. I expect him to tell me it's none of my fucking business but it's not in the boy's nature to pass up an opportunity to brag about something obscene. He picks up his beer again but can't drink he's laughing so hard while he eyes Andersen Cooper.

Hell, Dawg used to grab dog-tags—chain and all, if he saw them laying around unattended, and slip them between his cheeks and walk around the berthing compartment on the USS Huxxley naked as a Jaybird after a shower or something. People'd take bets on how long he could keep them in place, then he'd ask the owner to pay-up. Nobody'd complain because, well, you'd have to deal with Dawg sooner or later. And besides, guarding your nametags was like the ABC of boot camp. The words were stenciled on your brain. *NEVER REMOVE YOUR TAGS, RECRUIT UNTIL UNCLE SAM DON'T OWN YOUR DUMBASS NO MORE!* So if you were a scared Recruit who'd just been stationed aboard the USS Huxxley to do some sea time on the way to the desert and didn't learn your ABC right the first time, it'd be initiation time for you Dawggy-style. And if you didn't appreciate Dawg's *Lesson in Review*, that'd make him tense-up. It would make him clamp down on those suckers like they're his and you're a dentist. Then he'd have you try and get them bad-boys back with your teeth. The longer you'd take the more money he'd make and hell, you bite him in the wrong place and it'd be all over for you. And guys with real names and fake ones like Brick, Spanish Fly, Sweet Cheeks, Claap, Dripp, Chinaman, Dilldough, Charcoal and his sidekick Ghost, Shorty, Señor Peaness Breadth, Dude, Ralf, and Whorebiggs would all be cackling and hooting and stepping back, as long as it wasn't their tags between Dawg's cheeks, to give him some room to parade his big self around like he was on a catwalk.

"Still have me a couple of unclaimed tags in a drawer, Slick. I believe yours might be layin' on top," and Dawg tosses his head toward his bedroom with a grin on his lips as if he's giving me permission to do a search. Hell, I ought to call the Health Department on his ass. He knows I learned my ABC right the first

time. I fire-up the joint instead and listen to Dawg try to recall the names of guy's tags he says, "wasn't lost. Sons-of-Bitches gave up is all. Didn't want to pay-up. Couldn't stand to see a bidnessman doing bidness, Slick. Man, some of 'em dickheads even went and got discharged! Who told 'em to do that?" And Dawg grins and swats my second hand smoke away from his eyes. "Course, there was that one sorry soul who'd just upped and died," he says and becomes long-faced, like he just spotted an old friend on the Obituary page. "Thought he was finally coming around, but naw... Son-of-a-Bitch went and died on me," he says and beckons with his peace sign fingers for the joint.

"Here," I say, hoping he doesn't hog the damn joint. "It's our first one!"

Dawg's talking about Whorebiggs. The boy would do anything he could get his hands on. It didn't matter if he was out at sea or on land—hell, it didn't even matter if he was in a foreign country. He would do hash, opium, smack, ecstasy, glue, or paint thinner from the boatswain's mate storage room, pills, varnish, whatever, as long as it gave him a buzz. A big white boy too, who was into looking good from the outside, you know, weights and stuff, but throwing all that extra stuff he could get his hands on into his temple. Naturally him and Dawg didn't get along. He had a habit of telling fellas that he and Dawg could never ever see things eye to eye, as he grinned. Hell, I knew then Whorebiggs wasn't going to last long. Nope, I didn't think that was funny. He wasn't the initial problem, though, because it didn't matter how much dumbbells Whorebiggs threw around on his chest and shoulders, Dawg could still damage the boy. He was a big boy when we were on the Huxxley, still is, natural big, drop-you-on-your-ass-if-you-mess-with-him kind of big. He outweighed Whorebiggs by about sixty pounds. But it wasn't Whorebiggs Dawg didn't like. Well, at least it didn't start out that way. It was the guy Whorebiggs hung around with, a little guy. The problem was Chinaman.

Sometimes after staring at Chinaman in the Mess Deck for about ten minutes, Dawg would slam his fist down and get up and leave his tray sitting there, food gone cold, gravy or whatever sliding around with the roll of the ship if we were out at sea.

"Lost ma appetite, Slick. I'll be in ma rack!"

I'd look across the Mess Deck at Chinaman, behind his wire-rimmed glasses, grinning from ear to ear, sitting next to Whorebiggs. It was like he had some kind of Buddha spiritual radar transmitting signals from the Orient that'd make Dawg want to do the boy in.

I remember one time on the gray boat me and Dawg were kicking back in our racks with the curtains drawn. Guys were beginning to flip lights off in their racks for the night but I kept

mine on because I was into my *Daredevil* comics. Dawg had his on, too, but who knows what the boy was doing? It was a long hot day of steaming in the Persian Gulf, so fellas were tired. Nerves were like rope on the ship's stern—a little frayed. Dawg had the ground rack, I slept in the middle, Señor Peaness Breadth had the top rack. Dude was walking around our berthing compartment with a flashlight, spitting snuff and trying to find his keys. So, naturally he approached Dawg's rack. When Dawg said—from behind his curtain—he didn't have 'em, Dude mumbled something about a human crevice and spat in his empty spittoon and simply moved on with his flashlight. Suddenly, Chinaman's voice jumped out from inside his own rack. It was like the boy had done some opium for the first time and it was making him come up with deep spiritual nonsense in the dark because he never spoke unless he'd been out drinking and vomiting. All he did was grin, wipe his glasses, and look sweet around Whorebiggs according to Dawg. Chinaman went inward.

"There are many keeys in life," he began. "None so essential as the very keey which turn life."

Someone hollered, "Chinaman, what the hell you on? Shut up and go to sleep! Can't you see the lights are out, boy?" I believe it was Señor Peaness Breadth because Charcoal in the rack directly across from me pulled out his can of Lysol and began intermittent sprays around Señor Peaness Breadth's rack as if he were dusting crops to kill fruit flies. Pffft, pffft, pffft.

"Quit stinking up the place with that can, Charcoal! Spray that crap in your own rack! Señor Peaness Breadth said, and I could hear him above me in his rack turning and coughing.

"Get you some frickin' Listerine then or don't say a goddamn word! You polluting my air!" Charcoal said, and held down the button on his can as if afraid he was about to run out of pesticide.

Hell, Dude was still stomping through the compartment searching for his keys but nobody was taking him seriously. Dude was getting irate and began spitting in his spittoon in a frenzy and cussing. He had a picture of his wife attached to the ring and thought some bold son-of-a-bitch had taken it and was probably hiding in a rack with the curtain drawn masturbating to his wife. The boy had a good-looking wife, too—if that was his wife. Picture showed a woman dressed in a black string bikini straddling a small calf somewhere in Kansas, and twirling an umbrella. Now, come on! When does it ever rain in Kansas? Dude should've known better than to pass his picture around because, after a few weeks of waking up to a bunch of sailors in the middle of the Persian Gulf even the calf began to look good. He missed his wife, too. I could tell. I always caught him sitting somewhere out-of-the-way with his spittoon in one hand, staring all pensive-like at the picture attached to his keychain in the

other hand. Eventually, Dude began to make general accusations about thieves aboard the ship, raising his voice and spitting like a crazy llama. He felt that it was his moral obligation or something, since they had struck so close to home, to warn fellas about how experienced this thief was since the son-of-a-bitch had removed the ring from a loop in his belt and he hadn't even noticed. Kept saying he couldn't believe how desperate the son-of-a-bitch who had stolen his keys was, and Dude's voice began to shift, began to follow the flashlight as it made its way back to Dawg's rack again.

All of a sudden, Chinaman laughed out from inside his rack. Laugh was more like a loud chuckle, nasal too, nebulous, full of mischief. You'd think the boy had someone else huddled in there with him. I kind of expected him to throw out some fortune cookie stuff after that *There are many keeeyes* nonsense, words guys like Spanish Fly and Sweet Cheeks might appreciate. Maybe the boy missed hanging out at *The Brass Rail*.

Me and Dawg had been in *The Brass Rail* once—only once. Hell, there were so many women there that we had stayed past last call. But then a bouncer had come up and pissed Dawg off, which was real easy to do in those days. Dawg had just up and left. "Let's go! We outta here, Slick!" I still hadn't figured out what was wrong until Dawg said later, "Man, didn't you hear what he said? The man wanted to push in our stool!"

"What's wrong with that?" I asked, because hell, if I'd remembered correctly the guy'd been straightening up the bar. "Man, that was a fuckin' gay bar we was in, Dumbass! Man, I don't know 'bout you, but I was sittin' in a chair! I wasn't sittin' on no stool!"

So I could picture Chinaman in *The Brass Rail* trying to find his e-harmony, handing out cookies with fortunes as idiots read deep words like, *Intelligent and persistent—in bed! Auspicious and persuasive—in bed! Divine and mysterious—in bed!* Or maybe he and his partner, Whorebiggs, were about to square-off and give us that Confucious says rendition they always gave with Whorebiggs playing the Karate Kid and Chinaman pretending he's Kung Fu.

Confucious say, get your ass out my rack!

Confucious say, No! Suck my dick!

Confucous say, loan me a twenee!

Confucious say, bend over!

Instead, the boy went off on a tangent. All that talk about Dude's wife must've made him think he was about to get some pussy from somewhere because Chinaman continued mumbling kind of soft-like, "Because Sweetheart, you're my Butterfly. And if you stoop down with dogs, you'll stand up with fleas!"

Señor Peaness Breadth said, “Chinaman, hope you ain’t up for a piss test soon ‘cause your Dumbass is about to fail! What you smoking in that rack, boy? Turn on ‘em lights and let’s see.”

Charcoal whipped out his can of Lysol so fast you’d think it was now a can of spray paint and the boy was still tagging free-ways in L.A. He just began to shake and spray in Señor Peaness Breadth’s direction—pffft, pffft. Chinaman wasn’t studying those guys. Sounded to me like the boy had gotten hold of some psychedelic weed and it was messing with his brain—or he had Gonorrhoea. Hell, whoever Chinaman was thinking of had now gone and pissed him off, because the boy lost it and yelled, “BECAUSE! BECAUSE! YOU’RE MY WHORE, ELIN AND THAT’S MY PUSSY!”

Fellas started to roll. Hell, I almost fell out of my rack. I figured Chinaman was switch-hitting, like a hooker in Dubai must’ve pissed the boy off, before we left for the desert, slept with another sailor or something, and Chinaman was just then letting off steam because we had just left The Emirates. Dawg didn’t think that was funny.

“WILL SOMEONE SHUT THAT COMMIE MOTHERFUCKER UP!” Dawg hollered. It was like he had yelled AH-TEN-HUN! The whole berthing compartment went silent. Hell, if I was standing, I’d have just kept still. It was as though Captain’d just cut the engines so the sonar boys could listen for submarines. Charcoal stopped spraying his can of Lysol. Dude quit spitting and took a sharp turn somewhere because his flashlight disappeared.

“Lighten up Cyclops! Guys’ just trying to have a li’l fun out here in the middle of nowhere. Ain’t no harm done!”

Whorebiggs must’ve been hitting a pipe too because that wasn’t a good move calling old Dawg, Cyclops. No sir, that wasn’t smooth at all. Dawg went ballistic on the boy. I kept still. I was just hoping Whorebiggs, knew what he was doing and prayed Dawg would spare the rest of us if he decided to go postal.

“Alright, Motherfucker! You’re the goddamn Yeoman on this ship! Okay! You wanna be his motherfuckin’ mouthpiece? Maybe you’re sweet on him. Maybe you’re his honey, too! Now tell these sailors! How the fuck did he get into *my* fuckin’ Navy? Thought we had rules! Thought that motherfucker was the enemy! How’d he get in?”

Whorebiggs took his time.

“Same way you’re here, Boss! Same way you’s part of the crew.” Another bad move. Hell, I just closed my eyes and stuck my nose in the air after that. I felt sorry for Whorebiggs, because I thought I smelled ass-whopping in the air. I could already picture the boy slipping and falling off the starboard side one dark night while we were underway and Dawg running all over the deck, but in no real hurry, yelling, *Man overboard—Port Side!* The berthing compartment remained quiet. Fellas were probably

tossing that one around, waiting for Dawg to get it over with, you know, go ahead and drop a scud on that motherfucker, sink him a big white sailor. But Dawg didn't say anything. I thought he was asleep because someone began to snore. Yeah! Snore. Hell, that tripped everyone out. I couldn't believe it but that snore was like permission to stand at ease. I could hear guys pulling open curtains and knew they were peeping out of their racks as if they were trying to figure out what season it was. Me, I held onto my comic book and stayed put until it was safe.

"Chinaman! Chinaman! You awake under there?" Charcoal said. The snore just got louder, muffled, more nasal.

"Ain't that a bitch! You mean he's been talkin' in his damn sleep all this time?"

Pffft, pffft.

"I'ma shove that can up your ass in a minute, Charcoal, if you keep that up!" Señor Peaness Breadth said.

Chinaman just kept on snoring until fellas began throwing things at his rack—shoes and towels and whatnot. All our commotion woke the poor boy up wondering what all the fuss was about. Everyone began to laugh. Hell, even old Dawg *lightened up* a bit. Went on over there and told Chinaman he was cool—called him Holmes and all that. Called Whorebiggs Home-boy too.

He and Whorebiggs left Chinaman behind and went out on liberty together when the Huxxley pulled into Dubai again, you know, to show guys that there were no hard feelings between them. They even joked about Whorebiggs getting lost in Dubai and how easy he'd be to find. Dawg said the white boy had better keep up anyway or else he'd have to put his ass on a leash and attach it to you know where. But that night Dawg returned to the ship early. He said that they had gotten hold of some killer stuff that night to go along with some sweet African poontang that would make Dawg's whore-of-fame list. He had hooked Whorebiggs up with his first taste of black Arab poontang. "That babe was so fine, Homeboy jumped off his leash. Might take that sailor all night, Dawg said with a grin as he climbed into his rack for the night. Next morning he was up for breakfast early—up even before me. When I finally joined him in the Mess Deck he was already polishing off his scrambled eggs. But he looked worried. The boy enjoyed eating that stuff swimming in ketchup, too, but it wasn't tasty enough to hide the sinking look on his face. Dawg said, "Heard what happened to Whorebiggs?"

"Don't tell me the boy is in love already," I said.

"Naw, Slick! That motherfucker o-deed!"

We Americans

Two blocks away stands a twenty-four foot aluminum pole and, at its tip, is the flag—large enough to smother a king or queen mattress, like a bed sheet so big it rose only in strong wind, the kind of wind that rang the purchase-ring against that tall hollow aluminum and so broadcast through the neighborhood a mock-maritime chime of the Midwest.

The wind had extinguished all hope for the grill. His wife washing the skillet in the kitchen, his son back in the basement with the electric guitar, only Cuddy remains. Alone on his back porch, he regards the flag from afar and finishes off the last of the potato chips. Ruffled, broken, and barbeque-flavored, these Cuddy pinches from the bag's greasy corner, his fingertips stained a rich, salty red. To his lips he brings a cup of pop, and upon noticing his fingers wrapped around the white rim of that blue Dixie, Cuddy feels a distinct surge of pride, for the day, the flag, the wind—it is all to him very, very correct.

The wind had been his forecast, a cool front from the northwest. Just this Friday at ten-thirty, eleven, and noon Cuddy with his right hand had pulled the spiked blue band down from the Dakotas. A forecast fulfilled, in these rare moments of hubristic indulgence, Cuddy imagines the weather, the wind, the air itself somehow a work of his sole production.

And Oh, thinks Cuddy, can that flag billow.

And Oh, swears Cuddy, yet again does it beckon.

He leaves his seat and slips to the screen door, eases it through its pneumatic wheeze, and latches the lock softly. He walks the two blocks of sidewalk squares, clean and even, up to where the flagpole rings louder, to where the flag like fire flickers and cracks in the wind and conjures up the old black spirit of the country. There—on the porch beneath the flag, in a slat-back shaker chair, sits that wizened spirit, his hair gone hoary, his eyes cloudy and as yellow as yolk. There again is that sage black prophet, ready with wisdom and forecast.

Asks Cuddy—a quick one this time,

Why, neighbor, do I see you only when that flag billows so?

Says the spirit,

We Americans.

And the forecast? Cool and windy. Partly cloudy. Highs in the upper 70's.

Your morning commute (roll screaming) be-longs to the Cracker. No sports, no politics—pure madness in the a.m. on AM 660 WMBU, your home for Heyman and the Cracker in the morning.

Tuned in on the drive, Cuddy tries to stay abreast of this morning's madness, with the hopes of being ready when the Cracker calls with a hot toss for weather. His cruise is controlled through the suburbs and the madness tuned out for the most part; he heeds only on the city's outskirts come the quarter-hour—roll Ricky Ricardo, roll Beatles, cue Cracker—*time for the traffic with AM660's Lucy in the Sky. Lucy, when you going to take me for a ride? Can that chopper even get a mile-high?*

Just wear a ball-gag and you're on.

You've got the whip already, then?

Just give me the chance, Cracker.

She handles him with ease, Cuddy thinks, plays his game but wins. The Cracker respects only the bawdy and perverse, foreign things to a scientific mind like Cuddy's. But Lucy—her real name he's always wondered—how she can turn it on and off in an instant, cut her voice an octave and get down to work, that skill, that ease, a thing of beauty, he thinks. Her voice is throaty—a brunette, probably, under her helmet. Or maybe no helmet, just a mic and headphones and long brown locks lifted in the wind. Or a short, choppy, stylish do? With sunglasses. And a leather jacket.

There's a woman in the sky to guide him.

But Cuddy sticks to his route always, and during her report he never strays, only looks up through his windshield, hoping to see the chopper. If she could look down at him, Cuddy thinks, if she could only pick him out of this long line of motorists all making a slow, dark way into the city.

But many couldn't miss Cuddy if they tried. His face pasted widely over billboards across the metro area. His boyish part breaches the frame, his skin tinted darker with a thick cake of exhaust. There Cuddy smiles, dirt-tan and two stories high, selling the severity of the weather.

By contract, he must say "severe" at least once a broadcast. By contract, he must mention twice a day the Skyview66 atop the new Sacred Heart Medical Center. By contract, he is obliged to three minutes three times a morning doing weather and whatever for the Cracker, to take and run with anything the Cracker should toss. Today:

...it's five 'til eight and time to chew the Cud—what do you think, Cuddy, do transsexuals need their own public bathrooms?...

...coming up on nine o'clock and time to chew the Cud—did you wax the Volvo again this weekend, Cuddy? I know Heyman was out waxing ass, ain't that right, Heyman?...

...five to ten now and time to chew the Cud—now we all know Heyman's had plenty back on the plantation, but what about you, Cuddy, you ever eat squirrel? Is that what I saw you trying to grill out there this weekend?...

The Cracker's laugh™ is signature. A screaming fit of maniacal hoarseness owned by Midwest Media, Inc., a registered trademark with reproduction punishable by law. From his porch, Cuddy often hears it carry over the few backyard fences between them.

Civility hits the studio come ten-thirty. Radio is spontaneous, but the camera doesn't like surprises. The show is scripted, he tosses clean, cordial and chatty, there's an X taped on the floor where Cuddy stands and delivers a firm four minutes all to himself. Down comes the greenboard and Cuddy in his suit imposed upon it. On screen, he stands as tall as his country and, with arms that stretch across the continent, Cuddy plays a week's worth of weather across the nation, setting the skies in motion with only the slightest of gestures.

For the noontime audience—seniors and stay-at-home moms, say the ratings—Cuddy has inherited the failing daytime shtick *The Weather Could Be Verse*. It made Gene Freiber in his bowtie for twenty-five years prevailing poet of the westerly counties. But the ratings have slipped since, and for that Cuddy catches hell; he wishes daily the routine had retired when the old man had. Today:

*A clipper wind was sent us
from our friends off to the north,
their gift will keep on giving and
fill our flags well past the Fourth*

A good one today, say the elderly who all call to tell him so.

A perk of the profession—Cuddy is home before rush hour. He tunes the garage radio to 660 and listens while washing and waxing his Volvo. He shuts off the hose for the traffic report.

In the passenger seat now, with the hand-held CarVac® running, there comes over its hum the faint, nasal voice of the Cracker. With the hopes of a commercial, Cuddy looks up—the laugh, the man, is real and live and walking up his driveway.

I knew it! What is it with you and this car, Cuddy?

The Cracker is taller than he sounds on air. Always a surprise every time they meet. Odd, also, that he looks so intelligent. The Cracker is bald and wears thick glasses that could cast him as a rocket scientist were his hand not wrapped around a silver can of beer—in public—as he strolls the sidewalk in shorts and socks and sandals. He leans an elbow on the car's hood and sniffs the air like a bloodhound. That smells good, he says. Is that Love My Carpet®, Cuddy?

It's the bushes, he says. The gardenias next door.

Gardenias? No shit? Who lives there?

The Steins.

The Steins, huh? Okay Cuddy, I got your next poem for you. This one's a winner. After a long pull from his beer the Cracker holds the can aloft, assuming the pose of an orator, a daytime reveler toasting the white blossoms next door—

*Jew,
Jew.
How has
your garden
grew?*

He burps, turns, and shuffles back down the sidewalk. Watching him, Cuddy thinks only of the Cracker's ratings, the Cracker's many personal appearances, and the twenty-some thousand more dollars the Cracker brings back to his home five houses away.

The wind blows again that night, and Cuddy again sits on the porch of the spirit, the two of them below the flag, spotlight bright flying colors against the darkness. There at the bare black feet of the man, upon the two wooden porch steps like those of a squat altar, Cuddy sits and Cuddy muses.

It's not that I don't like him, Neighbor, I just have no respect for him. What he does, what is that? It's *trash*. And the producers encourage it. And for him to earn so much, I mean it's.... But I suppose he earns it, the ratings earn it. It's the listeners who pay him, really. But I just don't see how he does it, how a man can make such a living out of being crude?

So says the spirit,
We Americans.

And the forecast? Cool. Windy still, and set to last the whole week long.

Yet the winds have tapered come Friday, when Cuddy and his wife together visit PeachyBee's® Neighborhood Bar and Grill. It is crowded, and they settle for a booth by the bar, sharing between them a sampler plate of Poppers®, Kickers®, Barbeque Zingers®, and Boneless Dingers®.

His wife is talking, Cuddy knows. But talking to him or simply herself, he's not quite sure. She is saying something—about their son, the cat, the lawn, the drapes, his job, her job, the weekend—she is talking. And talking.

And to himself Cuddy rues silently this booth by the bar, with its clear view to a trio of female thirty-somethings on stools, drinking wine and multi-colored cocktails. Desperately beautiful all three of them, each with hair a different color and cut, with thin wrists and necks and dangling jewelry, their smiles sharp

and bordered in three shades of red. Each one could belong to that throaty voice Cuddy follows from the sky every morning. But this is a restaurant, not a car; it is evening and not the morning, and the visuals are not so much a pleasure as they are furtive and precarious.

The 401k? he says. It's fine. It's down of course, he assures her, but Midwest Media has weathered storms worse than this.

Could he put some stock in a wandering eye? A sure bet, he thinks, to invest in the quest for *more*. They've since finished the sampler, and Cuddy is already full before his entrée comes. If he could, Cuddy would buy PchyB shares right there from the menu and watch the business page accrue daily every Pop, Kick, Zing, and Ding that are ringing in throughout the country.

At home he finds he has eaten too much as usual. He tosses and turns and eventually in slippers walks through the night to relieve the pressure. The wind almost gone now, the flag halfway sagging, the spirit of the country again on the porch is no more than an old dark shadow. But his eyes are still lit a dim yellow, and still Cuddy says,

Neighbor, I care for you. I care for my wife. My son, my home. My land, my car, my city and state. My life is a blessing, and my country is resilient. My job is fine, the weather is certain and always a pleasure. Why, he asks, is all this not enough?

The spirit starts but speaks no longer.

And the forecast, the flag, is calm.

Nathan Gunsch

Four Parts

I. (Company)

At dinner, we considered the division of labor,
the penal phase. We reconsidered
imagination, and the worth of invoking angels.

There was a stand of trees, winter bark,
the black dog outside getting older. White
around the chin and eyes, behind them nothing

but a raven, almost blue, flying low over soaked lawns.
We considered counting and the thingness of the thing
with chapped feathers at our table.

II. (Spread)

You are so bad at naming pets, she said.
The rush of wings brushed any attention away.
Now an empty wrist, released
for some movement somewhere beyond.

Wild calligraphy, worn leather, and condensed breath
when I said, It's not a pet.
Just another blank staring through attachment
to where emotion doesn't move needs.

The city crickets rise under the question,
Where is it going? I don't know.
This is my first time listening for bells
while dogs bury and mice stay very, very still.

III. (The Champion)

Officials reported that tomorrow begins Fame's downsizing.
Like a snapshot on a sponge—one of those
puffy stickers we were told, No, not on books.
They tore the cover, peeling and leaving gray. Curbsnow.

Fifteen minutes was too long.
The spokesperson wore an overcoat
and leather gloves, talked slowly. Experts nodded—twelve.
Reporters consulted their watches as the weather came.

The press conference was interrupted by an oddly dressed man.
He stood up, spoke. He became violent when no one answered.
He threw a spear at the podium. It shattered.
Authorities are still unsure of his whereabouts.

IV. (Prologue: Uninvited)

In a dust jacket straight from nature are
volumes bound in canyons and arcadia
pulped forests, heavy in planted rows.

We found a walking fish (in Canada, of all places)
before snakes with hips burrowed Patagonia
and screwed space to tropical river banks

with flatheads. Tiktaalik!—this is a poor way
to travel through a state. Give up your legs
for the double sky five feet under.

La Sub-Commandante

Henry's mother clucked her tongue when he told her that, maybe, perhaps, going to Mexico wasn't the smartest thing to do given the current political environment. She clucked her tongue and, looking at the ground, shook her head with disappointment. That wasn't the first time he'd gotten that treatment, or the mocking half-smile that came after it.

"What do you know about the politics there?" she answered back. "Like you've been there. You don't know."

"You're right. But I know what I read, Ma. Times are tough. And people in places like that get violent when times are tough."

They had had this particular conversation in her kitchen almost a month ago. She'd been standing over the sink, straining potatoes. Her thick handled smasher stood at attention, alone, in the drying rack to her left. She shook her head again.

"That's all you do—read. But you don't know. How can you *know*? You live your life here. In a small town. How tough can things be for you? The newspaper has the business of selling newspapers. How they going to do that? By telling you everything is okay and nice? They need to tell you something is going on somewhere so you buy another paper. You don't *know*. You think you know. But you don't *know*. You read the paper because it's like going to a movie."

Henry tried again a week later when he was better armed. "Look, Ma, right here," he began bravely, pointing to his newspaper. "A tourist from Germany was kidnapped right off the street. The *narcos* wanted a big ransom. When it didn't come on time, they cut the guy's fingers off one at a time."

She clucked and shook her head right on schedule. "And what was he doing on the street? Probably something he wasn't supposed to. And who would kidnap me? Do I look like I have a lot of money? I'm an old lady doing church work for the poor. Who would hurt me? You don't know."

"You're right, I don't know, Ma. I'm just saying. Maybe right now isn't the best time."

"The best time for what? For doing church work? For helping the poor? When is the best time? Now stop this. My Ladies are coming over with Padre Pio in a little bit and I don't want to be angry when they get here. Your nonsense. Stop it."

"You're right, Ma. But all I'm saying is that maybe you could make your trip after things calm down a little bit."

Her back straightened as she hissed, "Enough. Of. This. I'm a little old lady doing The Good Work for people who need it. And you? Who are you to say to me? You talk and talk and never do

nothing. Never is the best time for you. You talk and read and never do. Now. Stop it. My Ladies are coming over with Padre Pio. We have to talk about church business, and I don't need the extra stress. Now. Go get me some coffee from the freezer. The decaf. Be a good boy." Her shoulders relaxed again, and Henry realized he'd been holding his breath.

He walked out of the kitchen, down the back steps, and out to the garage. She didn't really have to tell Henry to get the decaf. That was all she ever bought. And he knew this because, at the end of the day, Henry Nieves was a good boy. He lived where his mother approved of him living. He worked at a company that his mother approved of. His few friends had his mother's approval. He parted his hair to the right and slicked the sides back because that's how his mother had told him to do it. At twenty-eight years of age, Henry was still his mother's good little boy.

A week later, Henry's mother was gone to Mexico. A week after that, life had already settled into a tranquil routine that Henry enjoyed. That Wednesday evening, Henry stopped by her house on his way home. He emptied the mailbox, then let himself in. He sorted the bills into their appropriate slot organizer, tacked the coupons to the side of the refrigerator, and tossed the rest into the wastebasket. On his way to the backdoor, he hit the answering machine's blinking red button.

Beep. "Lupe? Did you leave already? This is Charlene. If you already left, call me when you get back. If you're still there, call me quick. I have some questions about the church's year-ends and tax paperwork. Thanks."

Plucking a pen from the Mason jar next to the phone, Henry took notes carefully and to his mother's specifications.

Beep. "Mrs. Nieves? My name is Paul Crouch. I'm calling from the office of Bishop MacFarlane. This concerns the submitted year-end paperwork for St. Cecilia's. Please call me during business hours at 505-240-4438, extension 23. Thank you."

Henry scribbled more notes and was proud of himself for not having to replay the message just to get the phone number.

Beep. "You don't know my name. But I have something very dear to you. You have one day to call 884-11-091-2149."

Henry thought that last message odd, but dutifully recorded it according to his mother's specific format for phone messages. Having already checked the back door to make sure it was locked, Henry left his mother's house locked and secure for another forty-eight hours.

When Henry returned to his mother's house that following Friday, two men dressed in dark suits were standing near the front door. Henry asked them if he could be of help. In reply, the taller of the two asked about the whereabouts of Henry's mother.

"She's in Mexico. Doing missionary work," Henry told them. "Who exactly are you?"

The tall one spoke again. "We're with the Diocese. Your mother is a member of the parish council at St. Cecilia's, isn't she?"

When Henry asked if they were lawyers, the shorter one spoke for the first time. "This is very serious business, sir. Your mother has to answer some very serious questions. We're hoping to avoid having to call law enforcement."

Henry didn't have a reaction to his last statement because, in all honesty, he didn't know how to react to it. His mind went blank, but his palms suddenly burst into a sweat. He stammered before choking out, "My mother is in Mexico. Doing missionary work."

The two men looked at each other, then each bade Henry a good day and walked off the porch to a dark American-made sedan parked across the street. Henry made sure they had turned the corner before entering his mother's house with the day's mail. As usual, Henry checked all the windows, made sure the laundry room's door was secure, then headed to the kitchen to check the answering machine and the door that led to the garage.

There were messages from both Charlene at St. Cecilia's and Paul Crouch. There was also another message. "You can't ignore me. I have something of great value. Call this number. Make sure you get it right. We need to talk today or dire consequences may be needed." The voice then rattled off a twelve-digit phone number and went silent. Henry wrote each message with precision, then left, still feeling a little numb from his encounter with the two men in dark suits.

The next day was Saturday, and Henry was scheduled to get his hair cut. He went about his morning uninterrupted, and by the time he arrived at Abraham's Hair and Style, he had completely forgotten about the tense encounter with the dark-suited men. In short order, Brenda, his mother's first choice for stylist, snapped her apron and motioned Henry to her seat. With Henry seated, collared and wrapped, Brenda snapped her gum and asked, "The usual, Henry?"

Here Henry paused. He stared at himself in the mirror. He'd had the same haircut his entire life. In fact, on the pictographic haircut chart to the left of the cash register, his cut was labeled as a "Boy's Cut." At twenty-eight, Henry still had a little boy's cut. He stared at himself a little longer but didn't speak. Brenda smiled, then nodded, then smiled again, her clippers suspended in midair, the fat of her arms dancing with the effort. Henry finally drew a breath and said, "No Brenda. Not the usual. Let's do something different."

Brenda jolted as if her clippers had shocked her. She stammered, then stuttered, then, having come to her own conclusion,

spit her gum into the waste basket. “What would you like me to do, Henry?”

Henry looked at himself some more. But just a little. Not a lot. “Short on the sides. Spikes in front. Not long. Just longer than the sides. But spikes. Like on TV, Brenda. Please.” Brenda nodded solemnly and went to work.

It was later that afternoon, at the Kroger Supermarket, that someone called out Henry’s name. Henry swept his eyes from side to side but kept moving. He only pivoted his head when the same voice called out again. Moving toward him was a woman wearing fashionable sweat pants and a State University sweat-shirt. “Hey, Henry. Henry? Do you shop here, too?” she asked him as their carts moved closer.

Suddenly, and with perfect clarity, Henry knew her. Her name was Vivian, and she manned one of the receiving desks in the warehouse where Henry drove a forklift. She wasn’t the prettiest girl in the office, as the other warehouse guys had been quick to point out to Henry when he’d started there three years ago. She was fun to be around, but there, at Kroger, under harsh lights and an unfinished ceiling, with no make-up, her hair up in a bushy tail, and only flip-flops on her feet, Henry thought she looked downright presentable.

“Only when my mother is away,” Henry told her, wondering when he’d get nervous. “She thinks Kroger is too expensive. But I like it.”

“Oh. So. I guess your mother’s away, then?”

“She’s in Mexico. Doing missionary work.”

And that’s when two remarkable things happened to Henry Nieves. He didn’t get nervous about talking to this strange woman that his mother would not approve of. His palms did not get sweaty, and his tongue did not thicken up. In fact, just the opposite occurred. Henry felt the tension at the nape of his neck evaporate, and his shoulders slump just an inch. Henry actually relaxed into the conversation. And that sudden release of tension opened a neural pathway inside of Henry’s brain. A single neuron, greased with electrochemical lubricant, slid down a path long unused, and Henry knew exactly what had been happening over the last several weeks.

“Henry? You ok?”

“I’m sorry.” Henry thought fast. “I just looked at the time. I’m supposed to be somewhere. Soon. I’ll see you on Monday?”

“Yeah. Sure. I guess. Well...”

Henry had started to turn his cart away but stopped when she faltered.

“Well, I’m meeting some friends tonight. At El Patio. You think you’d like to meet us there?” She smiled awkwardly at the end, and Henry noticed that her bottom set of teeth were as mis-guided and crooked as her top set were straight. *So that’s why*

she hides her mouth when she laughs, Henry thought. "It's my birthday," Vivian finished lamely.

Henry looked her right in the eyes and thought. Not for long. Just for a second or two to be sure he was right. "Sure. I'd love to. What time?" he asked her.

Her eyes went round and she slid her hand in front of her mouth to hide a nervous giggle. "Oh. Great. Like eight?"

Henry nodded neatly. "I will see you at eight o'clock tonight."

Henry was more than halfway to the end of the aisle when Vivian called out after him. "Henry? Did you lose weight?"

"No," he called back over his shoulder with a smile. "Got a new haircut."

Henry unpacked his groceries into his mother's refrigerator and ransacked her home office. He went through every drawer and every shelf. When those provided no answers, he went through the closet in the room. He very neatly tore into the garage and its many boxes. As the afternoon lengthened, Henry went back inside and searched the guest room. After that, there was only one room left to enter.

Henry was mildly shocked to discover that his mother's bedroom was left unlocked. He entered the room as if he were entering a strange church or a big city museum. He stopped just inside the door jamb, looked to the ceiling, perhaps hoping for divine guidance or maybe to check for cameras. Then the phone rang.

"Are you stupid?" was the first thing the voice said. It was the same male, slightly accented voice that had left the earlier messages that featured the incredibly long phone number. "You were given instructions."

Henry forced himself to focus. "There's no one here. This is my mother's house."

The voice hesitated just for a moment. "She told us this number would contact someone important." Then the hesitation was gone and the voice was back to business in the next breath. "We have her. And we will hurt her unless certain conditions are met. All we want is money. There's no reason this has to go any further than that."

Henry again forced himself to focus. "What do you want?"

"A million American dollars. We've done our homework. We know she has access to that kind of money."

Henry smiled and, just as he inexplicably had at the Kroger's, relaxed into the conversation. "Then why are you calling here? If you have her, you have the money. This phone call is a dead end." Henry waited for a reply. When he didn't get one, he continued, "What did she tell you? That she was down there doing The Good Work for the poor? Ask her how she financed the trip. Ask her about the bookkeeping for St. Cecilia's Catholic Par-

ish. If you have her, you've already got the money. That's why she gave you her own home phone number. Because she doesn't want to come back."

The voice stammered and whispered something in Spanish to someone else on his end of the line. "We'll release her for a hundred thousand dollars."

"You think I've got that kind of money? I drive a forklift."

"You think you play games with us? We have her..."

"And you can keep her," Henry suddenly hissed, hot and angry. "She will guilt you. She will shame you. And she will wear you down to the bone. She will break you and bend you to her will." Henry let that sink in for a moment. "She's your problem now. If you ever call this number again, I'll hand everything over to the cops. Think about it. You grabbed a helpless old lady on a church trip. You think they won't hunt you down for that?" When the voice didn't respond this time, Henry went one step further. "And you grabbed an old lady who stole money from the Catholic Church. In the middle of a recession. You think they won't be after you, too?" Henry listened with all his might and could still hear nothing. Then he hung up. And took a long breath.

Twenty minutes later, Henry found what he was looking for in the back of his mother's closet. Not surprisingly, it wasn't very well hidden. After all, who would have suspected a little old lady who spent her free time at the Church helping the poor and those-who-didn't-know-any-better? He glanced at the twin accounting ledgers. He understood now why she had pushed him out of law school and into the job driving the forklift. *Health and retirement benefits be damned*, Henry thought coldly. Without another thought, Henry tucked the two sets of books into his grocery bags, double checked the locks on the doors, and let himself out.

The short man in the dark suit was waiting for him at the driveway. "Henry," he said, "We should talk. About your mother."

Henry walked right around the man to his car. "My mother's in Mexico. Doing missionary work." Henry deposited his grocery bags in the front passenger seat of his now six-year-old Honda sedan. His mother had directed him to it three years ago. She had called it sensible and safe.

"What do you get out of this, Henry?" the man asked. "I'm curious."

"Sir, I really don't know what you're talking about. I drive a forklift for a living. And my mother's an old lady. A widow doing good work for the poor in Mexico." The man started to say something, but Henry cut him off. "But, you never know. Maybe when she's somewhere with a phone, she'll call with a number."

"You don't really believe that, do you Henry?"

“My mother is a very persuasive person when she chooses to be. Now, I don’t mean to be rude, but I must be going.”

“To Mexico, Henry?”

Henry smiled and almost laughed. “No. Not to Mexico. I would never go there. Not now. Too much violence. It’s in all the newspapers. Haven’t you been reading them? No. I have a date tonight.” With that, Henry slipped into his car and drove off into the rest of his life.

Henry left the short man standing on his mother’s driveway eight months ago. It’s winter now, and a recent storm has dumped an uncharacteristic five inches of snow on the Mesilla Valley. Life in southern New Mexico has ground to a halt in the ice and cold. But Henry’s apartment is warm, and Vivian has left the bathroom door cracked open so the steam from her shower snakes into Henry’s small bedroom. He’s sitting atop his new bed, his feet propped up on a thick, brick-like pillow that Vivian bought him exactly for that purpose.

Henry flips on the TV. The receding storm is the lead item on the Saturday morning news. Then there’s a segment about pet care in cold weather. This is followed by the international news segment. The anchor reads that *narco* violence in Mexico is markedly down, thanks in part to a mysterious new paramilitary group from the south whose stated mission is to return the rule of law and the presence of justice to all of Mexico in these tough economic times. Grainy video footage of the group’s even more mysterious leader, *Commandante* Elijah, accompanies the anchor’s practiced robust voice. Henry bolts upright and stares intently at the screen. There, in the background, behind *El Commandante*, wearing a dark yet obviously tailored military coat and round sunglasses, Henry sees his mother. An instant later, she’s gone. And then, in the next instant, Vivian is back. Henry turns the television off.

Ai'dah

I was in Tangier to rescue the kidnapped child. She'd been posted missing far too long, and no one—not the media outlets, the brand names, the faces on the dollar bills, Command C—had a holy hope in hell of finding her. Only I, with the full blessing of the internet behind me, had the wherewithal to ask around online. Who hadn't sought the advice of thegenie.com? Who hadn't exchanged emoticons and a few lines of text with lildimples99? Who hadn't dug the latest post at oasismadeamistake.blogspot.net? Everyone, apparently.

It was round about the end of July, hot as a hipster's brow in Los Feliz, American-made but foreign-born, and every corner I curved, every open doorway I approached, seemed to draw back its shade like a parent withholding love. For a moment, I stopped walking, shifted my backpack in fear of it sticking permanently to my shirt, changed hands holding my fake-leather laptop case, raised my sunglasses and wiped the sweat from the ridge, adjusted my khaki fisherman-style cap, and marched on. The sky above stood a stalwart blue, bordered on either side by the high walls of the medina in which I was now pleasantly lost. I passed a large closed entryway, the semi-circular double doors painted a cartoonish blue. At the foot of the doors sprawled an emaciated gatita, one of several I'd seen in the hours I'd been wandering. I slowed to linger, but the cat did not move nor did it open its eyes, so I moved on.

Ahead, a long path stretched straight and appeared to end at a wall and what I assumed would be another corner to turn. No one walked before or behind me. Indeed, since entering the medina I had seen very few people, and it had been peculiarly quiet.

The cry of a man, shrill and hopeful, ripped my perceptions. I looked up. At the end of the long corridor, just above the wall, the top of a thin and proud spire poked, its black megaphones blaring the call to prayer.

I had seen a movie once in which men were at the edge of an ocean on their knees, their lips touching ground. The theater had been cold and crowded. I had eaten half a box of chocolate-covered raisins and laughed when one of these men suggested peace.

I realized there was another sound now, closer to the ground and my ears.

"Assa'lām ā'laykum, greetings," said the man blocking my way. He was short—shorter than me (but then a lot of people are), and he had thinning dark hair and sharp teeth that he did not hesitate to bare when he smiled. I smiled back, albeit thinly.

"It's time to pray," he said, "but I cannot when you are here. What is more important? You are more important."

I knew I wasn't going to get around him without a conversation—and perhaps something else.

"What are you trying to find, my friend?"

I wasn't about to tell him what—whom—I was really after, so I said, "Dar el Makhzem."

"Ah, you know the Arabic name for it. That's good. Do you speak Arabic?"

"Atakalam Al Arabeia Kaleelan," I said.

"Atakalam Al Arabeia Kaleelan," the man repeated. "That's good! Amir ismee." He extended his hand, which I took. "Má huwa ismuk?"

"Dennis ismee," I lied.

"Dennis." Then he busted out with a string of sentences, all in Arabic. I must certainly have looked aghast, for Amir laughed and said, "We will converse in English. I speak English. You speak English..."

Somewhat sadly, I nodded.

"So you are trying to find the Kasbah. Come with me, my friend. I'll show you."

Immediately I started to protest, but Amir cut me off. "Dennis. Really. It's just a little walk, nothing more. This way, please. You are my guest now."

As I walked just behind him I practiced my exercises. I started with the tip of the forefinger on my right hand. I bent that finger so that it curved at the top of the knuckle, nothing more. Then, satisfied with the stance, I curled the rest of the forefinger inward so that it rested neatly, natively, in the palm of my hand. I did this a few more times, each time with a significant increase in speed. I then went on to my left hand and repeated the same moves, just in case.

"Do you know of the invasion of Spain by the Moors in 711, Dennis?"

"I do."

"Many people do. But many people also do not know that Spanish prisoners were brought back here, to Tangier. Did you know that?"

"I did not."

"Good! Then before we go to Kasbah I will show you the prison."

Our shoes skipped and scratched across the stone. The call to prayer had since ceased, and again the medina was quiet, hot and still. I placed a hand to the sun-stroked stone on my right, then withdrew quickly with a stifled hiss between my teeth.

"Those who converted from the Christian faith to Islam, the muwallads, were saved. The rest..."

Who says Tangier isn't the true Morocco? I thought. They really do mean well. Don't they?

Amir had come to stop in the shade of another massive doorway. This building appeared very old, its wooden doors busted and falling to either side. Inside only darkness. The last people to have lived there had not lived there in a very long time.

"They will tell you different things," Amir said. "But I tell the truth. This is the entrance to one of the old prisons."

"Really? Should we, uh, go in?"

"No! No. It is, what is the word..."

"Condemned?"

"Yes! I remember that word now from my studies. Good! This way."

And again we were off, he just ahead and keeping up his pattering.

"Not all the prisoners were happy being prisoners—ha! So they dug."

"They dug?"

"Yes, they dug, under the city. You look hard you may find entrances to secret underground passageways. They are in certain places in the medina. Secret places. Now come to Kasbah. Kasbah is..."

His voice was beginning to interfere with my voice, the voice I would need to refine in my head if I was to succeed with my mission. At that moment I was thinking, Toilets without seats. I was thinking I really should read some Moroccan writers. The Pauls. A Mohammed. I was thinking 238 euros for five days—can I make it? And really I couldn't be thinking about any of those things. I had only to think of her.

"It is a fact," Amir said, "that in the 20th century the secret tunnels were made better by movie stars and foreign officials, who wanted undisturbed access to the sea."

We entered a kind of courtyard, blessedly shaded, with all the doors to all the houses shut save one pair belonging to a basement-level abode. I looked past the stairs into this maw as Amir rambled on. At last I said, "I gotta go." And I began to head toward the stairs.

Amir held my arm firmly. "Where are you going, my friend? The Kasbah is still ahead."

I explained that I understood, sincerely, but that I was here to meet someone, alone.

"Why alone? If it's your friend than he—or is it she?—can join us on the tour."

I insisted that I go and claimed it was business—which, in a way, it was. I made it known that I would not be stopped, but then so did my guide.

He stepped in my way. "Sir. Then if the tour's over you must make the payment." And he held out his hand.

I shook my head and told him I hadn't really agreed to any tour. It had not been announced up front (he'd only said something close to "I'll show you where the Kasbah is"), no price had been agreed upon, and what had at first seemed like a gesture of goodwill had morphed into a capitalist endeavor to rival the clev-crest of Orange County.

I was lucky in that Amir hadn't asked for a specific amount. I had something of an out, but I also had a bit of fight left in me.

"Why?" I said. "Why do I have to pay for this? I told you I thought you were just helping me out."

"It is my livelihood, sir. The same way you are here for business, I am here for business."

"Yes, but don't you have another means of making money? Some kind of trade or something..."

Amir beamed mightily and said, "Allow me to show you my shop. It has what you need I'm sure. Belts, wallets..."

"Oh no, no belts, no wallets..."

"Then, sir."

The hand was out again.

Feeling like a bastard, anticipating the result, I reluctantly reached into my pocket and brought out a few dirham bills. I placed this pathetic amount in Amir's hand, and he looked at me as if I'd just plopped feces in it.

Without bothering to count it he spat, "It's nothing, sir. *Nothing.*"

"Well, I'm sorry, but that's all I have." This was close to the truth—at least as far as on-the-ground cash went. Apparently I hadn't taken out nearly as much as I should have at that bank in the Petit Socco. Amir's hand remained outstretched, as if he either expected me to give more or take back my meager offer, shamed.

But I wasn't buying. I actually, forcefully, pushed past him, my eyes set on the open doorway of that basement-level dwelling. I heard him call out after me. "Only a few minutes. A few minutes! My shop is right above!" And then, as I descended the staircase two steps at a time: "Arie Fique! Do you know 'Arie Fique'?"

Inside the house—for it was surely a house—I saw all the clichés I could ever hope to conjure up. Rugs and carpets of dazzling patterns and eye-splitting colors hung from walls or draped over ottomans, Arabic pop music thumped from a speaker somewhere in another room, the lighting was dim, the air hazy, candle flame wavered in the breeze blown in from a lone window off to the left, and the air itself was thick with hookah smoke.

I crept cautiously from one vacant room to the next, my hands raised and clasped as if in prayer. I had slung my laptop over my stronger shoulder, and the computer's weight combined

with that of my daypack no longer seemed to bother me, for I was focused now, I was close.

The pop music grew louder to the point of squealing. I rounded yet another corner, expecting to see the ultimate, a belly dancer, but instead I was met with a small room, a miniscule window letting in a little light, a chair in one corner, an empty metal bowl in another, and a body dressed all in black curled up on a cot. I approached the still form, careful to remain positioned sideways so that I could keep the doorway in sight. But even that stance had to drop eventually. I crouched down in front of the cot and nudged the form with both hands. It was a body, and judging from the softness, the malleability, it was the body of a woman. I waited, no longer caring who or what came up behind me, clobbered me, kicked me repeatedly, took the money that was rightfully theirs. I no longer cared because I knew. It was her. It was Ai'dah.

Eventually she turned to face me. She wore the traditional burqa, only her eyes showing through the mask-like headdress. Tears had welled up in those eyes, but amazingly they had not yet fallen.

"I know this is messed up," I said, and I brought out her hands, which had been cuffed together, solid steel. "I should've been here sooner. So many of us should have been here sooner. If only we had gotten in the loop!"

I helped her up to a sitting position and stroked her head. "But now," I announced, "you don't have to fear anything anymore. You're coming to America with me."

I pinched the top of her headdress, intending to yank it back and off, but Ai'dah shook away so violently that I held up my hands and said, "Fine. I understand. It's your culture. Now it's time for you to experience mine." And with that I grabbed her around the waist, hoisted her up, and tossed her over my shoulder, sack-of-potatoes-style. She made not a single sound. She was heavier than I anticipated—the internet had put her in at no more than eighty tops, and I wondered if perhaps her captors hadn't been feeding her more than captors are supposed to.

With a deep breath and a cry of rage, I barreled out of the room, linebacker-style, using my free shoulder as a kind of battering ram. And I was in luck for, just as I crossed the threshold, a man dressed in a Boston Red Sox t-shirt, jeans, and a wrapped-up facemask, appeared in my way. Before he could fully raise his pistol, I smacked into him, felt the crush of his sternum, and just had enough time and slack in momentum to see him drop. I picked up speed—until I was a blur carrying a beauty, and no bullets could touch me. I heard the zings, felt the shattered glass and stone chips against my face, but it all was of no consequence as Ai'dah and I—Ai'dah still slung over my shoulder—raced through the front entryway and up the steps

leading to freedom. Now the plaza—indeed, I suspected, the entire medina—was teeming with the angry and the anti-American. Another masked captor came at me with a fierce-looking knife, but I deftly side-stepped and brought him down with a single chop to the back of the neck. Then it was time for the real weapon.

“I’m sorry,” I shouted back to Ai’dah. “I know this is uncomfortable and not very flattering, but I need this arm free.”

Indeed I did. Men—masked and unmasked alike—were on all sides of me, and I had only one hope of breaking through. Like a gunslinger in a well-meaning movie I drew my hand out, arm up, and fired just the way I’d been practicing.

“Bang!” I said. “Bang! Bang!” I continued to curl my finger over and over, spinning in place, swirling my living load. Each time I aimed and fired I hit: our attackers either crumpled into nothing or flew back as if blown by a hyper-powered storm-simulator on a Hollywood back-lot. I watched the points rack up on the screen. Then I ran.

With Ai’dah safely sandbagged and my backpack and laptop case secured, I took off along Rue Ben Raisouli—or was it Rue Dar el Baroud? (I had no time to check the internet.) Regardless of the route, we were in extreme danger: on either side of the street I spotted what could only be called terrorists in the upstairs windows of the buildings I raced by. Each window warrior held some sort of weapon—be it an AK-47, an older-model sniper rifle sans scope, a bazooka, a grenade, a potato peeler, or the tried-and-true Molotov cocktail. I sensed the bullets close, the grenade pin about to be yanked, the trigger of the missile launcher about to be pulled, but before any of them could actually follow through with the intended action, I had aimed at my own killer and hit each and every target in sight. Every so often in between “Bang!”s, I belted out snippets of “Oh say can you sue...” while alternating with asking Ai’dah how she was doing. Of course I received no response from back there, not even a punch in the spine to tell me to slow down, stop all that bouncing already.

And then I was in the Petit Socco, which had more people than I had seen in a public gathering place in quite some time. Men wearing sports caps, fisherman-style caps similar to mine, makeshift masks and police uniforms, yelled obscenities and ran toward me, their weapons drawn, aimed but not firing. I brought several more of them down, but there were just too many. Old women and crippled children had taken to hurling slabs of stone and bits of undesirable food at Ai’dah and me.

“No one ever listens to the traffic cop,” I said as a Tangier traffic cop took it right between the eyes, whistle in his mouth still sounding. “Bang,” I said. “Bang, bang, bang!” I was running

low on ammo, and our attackers—her captors—had brought out the heavy weaponry. I heard the rumble of a tank. Rather than wait and see if the locals were willing to destroy one of the most popular tourist areas in the city, I kicked and punched and pistol-whipped my way to a side alley. Here more attackers surged before me, but at least I had a way out. I remembered Amir's tour.

"Here!" I said, triumphant, and kicked through the bottom of a wall that had been showing signs of disintegration. A sizable hole was ready for our entrance. I threw Ai'dah in first and then, without another look, launched my own body in after her. "Go go go!" I shouted after her. She moved fast, so fast I had trouble keeping up. For a while I feared she might even lose me, and then my trip would have been for nothing.

We crawled for some time in complete but cool darkness. At times I felt that perhaps Ai'dah was no longer just ahead of me but rather a giant rat whose tail twitched just before my nose. I felt slime and grit and other things on my hands, but I dared not stop to cover them nor adjust my backpack or precious laptop.

Finally I crawled into an open space with a small slab of light beaming down. I heard footsteps and voices above. A man said, "That'll teach me not to order hot soup in the middle of a Moroccan summer."

Ai'dah sat against the wall opposite from where I stood. She appeared to be either dead or resting, but I'm pretty sure it was the latter. My guess was confirmed when she opened her eyes and looked at me with great approbation.

"What," I said. "What did you want me to do? It was either us or them. Wouldn't you rather it be us?"

She said nothing, neither nodded or shook, and I set about finding a way out of the hole we were in.

"Amir was right," I admitted. "The secret passageway the Spaniards dug in the 700s, refined by movie stars and foreign dignitaries in the 1900s, *does* lead to the sea!" I could hear waves lapping when I pressed my ear against the wall. "There must be a way..." I began to tap the wall, probing for any possible weakness. "Ai'dah," I said. "Help me tap. Please."

Reluctantly, she did so. Together we tapped until, at last, Ai'dah broke through. Her entire arm went into the wall, and I jumped and clicked my heels together. "You're amazing," I said as I hugged her. "Let's go!" I crawled out first into the late afternoon sunshine to see the turbojet tourist megaboat just starting to pull away from the dock.

"Wait!" I cried, waving my arms. I grabbed Ai'dah, bent down, took her into my arms, and then ran the rest of the way with her along the narrow ledge of the dock. Above was the edge of the boarding area and below the ocean itself, waiting eagerly

for us to fall. I balanced along until we came to the ship, now a little over six feet from land's edge and receding fast.

But the door to the hold was still open. With the last of the Red Bull in me I jumped—Ai'dah in my arms, laptop across my shoulder, backpack on my back—across the threshold and into the ship's hold. The door cranked shut.

In the passenger seating area, Ai'dah would not look at me, even though we were seated together and I had rescued her from that awful house, that awful room, those awful men. Her hands were still cuffed, but I took care of that after some strenuous effort involving a couple of toothpicks and a maxed-out credit card. The cuffs dropped to the floor, and I quickly shoved them under the seat with my foot.

Still Ai'dah said nothing—not a word of thanks on my behalf. She was free now—did she not see that? Perhaps it was too soon after escaping—the shock of her horrid experience was probably still with her strong.

Eventually I took my leave of her and walked up on to the sundeck. If I smoked, I would have lit up a cigarette then. How old was she really? Now that she was free, would she take off that unbearable burqa? What would be my reward, back home in the States, my fame, back home in the States, now that I alone had found and rescued her with nothing but my wits, my weapon, and the internet? The high-speed megaboat skipped across the waves like a stone I'd tried tossing when I was a kid. The creek had been shallow that day, and I'd kept going back into the water to retrieve the stone, fetch it back to the shore, and repeat the process.

The ship made landfall at sundown. Not far from the Spain-side marine terminal, the beach stretched like a basking snake. All along the shore, topless bathers of all genders cavorted with the waves and each other. Windsurfers glided in from the relatively mild ocean to call it a day. Only the wakeboarders seemed determined to stick it out into the night.

On equal footing at last, Ai'dah and I walked side-by-side from the marine terminal to the old walled city section. "You'll like Tarifa," I said. "It's a lot like San Diego in the late eighties. You know, beer bottles on the beach, Steve Winwood and Gloria Estefan on the tape deck..."

Ai'dah continued walking face-forward. She had not really looked at me since we'd boarded the tourist megaboat.

"I bet you take that off while you're here," I said in reference to the burqa. "It'll do you some good to get out of that thing. A young girl like you should be on the beach with friends."

Ai'dah looked at me then, and in her eyes I swear I saw blood. Then, just as swiftly as she had glanced over, she was back to staring straight ahead. We passed the entrance to the

ancient walled city section and headed up to the nearest hostel on our left. It must really have been our lucky day: they had two beds available in the same room.

We took the stairs. Along the way I saw a sign that read, "NO THROWN THE PAPER IN W.C. thanks you." I saw a sign that read, "The glasses, plates, cups, knives, post, etc... They cannot be led to the rooms."

The rooms were cramped with at least six beds—a mix of bunk and single—in each. At least ours had a functioning door. When we entered, a surfer dude, no doubt from Australia, judging by his sunburn, lay clothed and sleeping on top of a single against the right wall. To the left, another guy, this one taller, thinner, more angular, was just finishing shoving his backpack under his bed—the bottom bunk. The bunk above him looked to be vacant, as did the lower bunk on the set opposite him.

"Hi," the tall guy—taller than me even—said, his arm outstretched. "I'm Maarten."

"Hi," I said and gave him my name.

"Is that really a name?"

"Yes," I answered in all seriousness. With his sharp facial features, Maarten looked a lot like a devil, but I wasn't about to tell him that.

"Who's she?"

"This... is Ai'dah. I just rescued her from captivity in Tangier."

"She was captured? What for?"

"Honestly, I forgot," I said. "She was held for so long I think everyone did. Anyway, the important thing is she's safe and coming with me to America. We have a flight leaving Malaga on Tuesday, so."

Maarten nodded but concentrated on my ward. "Uh... maybe she can tell us why she was captured."

"Ai'dah's not really into talking right now. I aim to change that when we get to the States."

I expressed my hunger then, a hunger Ai'dah apparently did not share. She pulled herself up onto the bunk above Maarten and refused to look at either of us. I settled on to the lower bunk of the set opposite. "Don't worry," Maarten told me. "The girl above you is from Switzerland. She's clean." He added that he was game to eat, so the two of us agreed to head to the nearest decent restaurant. We left Ai'dah alone on her small single bunk bed, staring out the dirty window to her left.

"Is that your computer?" Maarten said when we had put some distance between us and the hostel.

"It is."

"It must be expensive to have to carry it with you."

"Oh, I carry it with me everywhere. I have to. It's my job."

We spotted a restaurant just across the street that looked promising and so postponed our conversation until we were seated and had ordered food and drinks.

“Your job is to carry around a computer?”

“In part, yes. Without it I wouldn’t be able to take orders.”

I left it at that, unaware that my newfound associate was hanging. Finally he said, tentatively, “Who gives you orders?”

“The internet.”

“Okay. Who on the internet.”

“There is no who. There’s only the internet.”

The drinks came. We sipped our brewskies in silence. I watched Maarten stare out at a large yet modest church across the way. He seemed hesitant to turn and face me. “Do you really think she’s going to go back with you?” he said.

“She has to. Where else is there?”

“Another Arabic country maybe.”

“Saracens,” I scoffed, as if that word solved everything.

When we got back to the dorm room, Ai’dah had disrobed. She was seated in her previous position, on the top bunk bed, only now she wore a tasteful and quite fetching sundress, patterned pink, a bracelet, and earrings that highlighted the color of her intense eyes. I was drawn to her long lashes and wavy dark hair that fell past her shoulders. Not only that but her age: she was not a child after all but rather a young adult, or an adult, perhaps in her early twenties, maybe mid-twenties at most. The internet had been, well, wrong—about her age, anyway.

My mouth must’ve been slightly agape, for Maarten nudged me with his pointy elbow.

“This is what you wanted?” he said. His voice was low, though not low enough.

Surrounding Ai’dah on her bed was a bevy of shopping bags bearing the brand names of fashionable shops I’d never heard of. Many of the bags appeared full and undisturbed. I wasn’t aware that these stores existed in Tarifa.

“I’m happy for you,” I told her. “Let’s celebrate. Do you want to celebrate?” I addressed this question to Maarten, who said sure.

Later that night the three of us met up with the Swiss girl, Pamela, who slept above me. Pamela, to my surprise, seemed interested in me. She certainly made fun of the fact that I’d brought along my laptop. “Are you going to dance with that too?” she teased.

“I can’t very well leave it at the table,” I said.

“What a shame. I never thought I’d have a computer as a chaperone.” And she touched my beer-holding hand.

“You speak excellent English,” I said.

“I’m Swiss,” she said.

Maarten came over. “Hey,” he said to me, again with the low voice. “Would you mind if I, you know, tried something with Ai’dah? I mean, you’re not dating her, right?”

“I’ll have to kill you in your sleep,” I said, only half-joking. Maarten laughed, didn’t detect any seriousness. I added, “But go for it.”

Maarten left our table and went out onto the meager packed dance floor pumping to the Euro-trash techno hit of the month. He sidled up to Ai’dah, her eyes closed, her arms up, her fingers snapping, head turning either way with each alternating beat, and opened his mouth.

“I hope he speaks some Arabic,” I said without turning my attention from the blood.

“He’s very good at Arabic,” Pamela revealed. “He’s spent the past two months in Morocco, and several more in other countries in the Middle East. Iran, Jordan, Lebanon...”

“All those? He lied to you.”

“He wouldn’t lie. He’s from Rotterdam.”

Feeling an emotion I would have to google later, I got up from our table and stumbled toward the crowd. I clutched what might have been my seventh or eighth or ninth beer, even though the bottle was empty and I had some sense not to order another. In my left hand I clutched my laptop case and used this as an aid in forcing my way through the pack. College-aged kids, rock-faced Eastern Europeans, super-sun-exposed Australians, vomitous Brits—all curled their lips and noses as I and my laptop passed by. Eventually, we reached Maarten and Ai’dah. Unfortunately now I can’t remember much of what was said beyond “Don’t even try it” and “She’s mine” and “Let’s take this outside” and other gibberish only an American asshole who’d been drinking nonstop since early evening would spout off. I know I dropped my bottle on Maarten’s foot. I think I called him tulip boy. I’m almost positive I pushed him in the chest hard with my laptop case, which must’ve hurt on impact. What I do clearly remember is Ai’dah running away from us, Maarten indeed taking me outside, and the two of us crunching and scrambling around on the curb just outside the bar.

We were lucky we didn’t end up in prison. Instead we ended up back in our hostel beds, he in the lower bunk opposite mine. I awoke with sun filtering through my slowly opening lids. Maarten was dead to Tarifa—not dead, I was thankful to see—on his side, arms wrapped around his chest as if it were seven degrees in the room instead of seventy.

With much pain and exertion, I stood up. The first thing I saw was the upper level bed on my side—Pamela’s. It had been cleared, the sheets pulled up, smoothed out, and neatly tucked in. All her belongings—all evidence of her existence—were gone.

Holding my head to my hand, I turned to Ai'dah's bed. She was on it, dressed now in frilly pink pajama shorts and a matching spaghetti strap top. She was again staring out the window, her eyes absent of emotion. If I had thought she had made too many purchases the previous evening, that thought was now eclipsed with the sight of her most recent haul. So many more shopping bags—more than I thought any human possible of carrying, let alone taking out of stores legally—were stacked on her small single bed. Stacked behind her, creating a wall that rose to touch the ceiling, more bags and boxes were on either side of her, a veritable fortress of faith, and as I took a step toward her bed she hastily reached out and grabbed these bags and boxes from the left and right and pulled them toward her. She covered herself in them, created a barrier that stood between us, defiant, a mass so tall and imposing I could see only her eyes through the plastic and paper shimmer. I held out my hand, hurt.

"Ai'dah," I said. "Let's go. Come on."

Very slowly, she blinked.

Believing she would see reason in my words, I continued. "We have to go. We have to get to Malaga. Our flight's early tomorrow morning. We can't miss it."

Nothing. Nothing from everything I had come here for, everything I had done, the training, the targeted searches, the participation in discussion forums, the repeated entrance—and sometimes denial—into chat rooms, IM boards, live video conferences. All that—and for what?

"Ai'dah. Those tickets are nonrefundable."

I went for a walk with my laptop, which, amazingly, had made it intact to rest against my bed that morning. I thought about all the things I could say to Ai'dah that would convince her to take that flight with me. I thought of the little Arabic I knew. But mostly I thought of what I still had to learn.

In a stripped-down plaza off the main waterfront, I found a comfortable-looking bench and took a seat. Then I fired up my laptop. I got online and began to search. I went from googling "Arabic lessons" to "lessons in Arabic" to "Arabic language schools" to "pickup lines in Arabic" to "how to talk to Arabic women" to "shopping addiction" to "binge drinking" to "Rotterdam" to "are Dutch guys good in bed?" to the meaning of her name and the history of her people. But no matter how many searches—in quotes or not—I made, I was still searching, I would always be searching.

Back at the hostel, I found Maarten sitting on the edge of his bed, his face buried in his hands. Above him Ai'dah's mattress still held all those unopened shopping bags—perhaps now even more—like a mountain of treasure a dragon sits on, only there was no dragon. Ai'dah had fled. I looked. I stuck my hand in the

pile and knocked bags and boxes off, making a racket, pissed, but she was nowhere around. She had taken her burqa and nothing else.

Maarten got shakily to his feet. “She wanted me to give you this,” he said through gritted teeth—gritted from pain and not from anger, I was relieved to realize. In my hand he placed a business card, blank on both sides, pure white.

“Did she say anything?”

Maarten laughed and shook his head. He asked if I wanted to get something to eat. I told him I couldn’t. I had a bus to catch.

“I understand.” He smiled and offered his hand. “Good luck with your job.”

“Good luck with your women,” I said, shaking.

I hurried for the bus station, my laptop swinging, backpack lighter now. I had left my gun back at the hostel for some poor fearful American to find. He would need it, whatever the reason. As for me, I didn’t need it. I was going the way of the world, and I could not be stopped.

J. M. English

Goose & Girl at Lake Mayer

I tried to shuffle down the bank below
before the others noticed you—the bread
between your fingers, rolled like balls to throw
into the water where they flowered, spread

open like water lilies. But they saw
you first—the patient Mallards, the inland
seagulls in their frenzy: that strange guffaw
& freakish lull before the white rush &

delirium of beak & bill. I shift
on shore: dark webs, left wing stripped long ago—
the Canada gray, gone.

Nothing, but white:
the broken wall, the crude arm-like-broomstick,
the scarecrow (my wing, too, a sudden blow
to body). I wait, hungry in your sight.

Americana

I think the moon
has been following
since Texas—

my brother,
curled in a gray
blanket on the backseat,

doesn't know that
we've slept for miles,
my cheek still marked

when I stand
next to my mother
as she pumps gas.

I like to let the burn swirl,
hit the back of my throat
before I breathe out

the misty fumes,
mustard-colored
in the dingy light.

Across the parking lot,
a little black boy stares,
nose pressed to the bottom

of a foggy car window.
His eyes do not smile,
even after my hand waves.

It will be Mississippi
before dawn—the yellow
lines that blur together,

break apart, glass cold
& hard on my temple—
& the moon so oddly foreign

crossing borders
in this big, Southern
star-spangled sky.

White Houses

A sailboat.
Post
meridian
sun
over the sea foam's
meringue, golden caps floating, islands
crust on
the edge of a sugar
rush (unbeaten), tart
rind, the pale
yellow afterglow
of a Hemingway novel in
a hammock as the sun slides down, wedged
between two palms like a conch

Sweets to the Sweet

A hot night.
The
Mason-Dixon
line
below the fuzzy
navel, in a bar on Broughton Street
it's on
the menu, & jazz drifts
downstream in between
velvet brick
buildings, Polly White
alleys of cobblestone, nectar
red in the gas lamp light, heat so thick
you could slice it with a knife

Kevin Ducey

Triste Trotskyste

Before the tribe and
its language recedes
into the dustbins,
carted off by multinational
waste managers, let us remember
the people once so happy they
imagined religion as
just another superstructure
fattening on the body politic.

The Fade Out

We believe we must not suffer
—it's the transcendentalism of American belief:
there is a motorboat of credit
waiting just offshore, waiting to take
us off into the warm summer afternoon glow.

Medea in Darkness

Keep Medea in the darkness as she butchers her sons...
—Horace, *Ars Poetica* (translated by Burton Raffel)

One spins, out of balance
(oh yeah) head down, wings working
but no lift. All summer
they've whined invisible
in the upper canopy—
now the husk of that noise
skitters along under a finger of wind.

An insect clatter as
I pass the skeletal frame construction
of the DeBartolo Arts Center—
not the same DeBartolo
my father knew coming up in eastern Ohio.
That Youngstown-DeBartolo made his fortune
in 1960s shopping centers—
crucial player in the malling of America.

Land of midwest mafia, the fat
of steel union pensions
and construction deals
the local racket
run by Mr. Naples. If you were
a friend of Sandy Naples
the money came in.
DeB. built malls all over Ohio
on labor supplied by contractors
he never paid—except for the ones
who were in Sandy's corner.

My father, up from the farm
and business school,
went to Youngstown to sell construction supplies.
Sometime in his first week there
he met these hard-working Croatian brothers.
Their mother spoke no English, but she
liked my father, "you too skinny. You eat today?"
took messages over the phone.
"Yes, Dick, I tell boys. No Tile to Tuesday."

The Croats get the building work, using the goods
my father sells and everybody's happy and six months
into the gig he gets a call to visit the boys out
on a job. The guy at the door to the house introduces
himself, though my father knew Sandy Naples
from the newspaper mugshots. It's his house:
The Croatians were in the basement laying
tile in the game room and
the escape tunnel behind the wall—
stretching out under the green suburban lawn.

Contractors don't get paid.
It happens all the time. All over
southwestern Wisconsin you
find the children who went without
because their fathers worked for
Frank Lloyd Wright as he
built his mausoleums. Now,
Frank's another local attraction
and people don't talk so loud.
Must be a different DeBartolo.

My father was always paid up front, and two years
after the company
packed my family up and moved us into executive
suburbia, Sandy Naples stepped from
his front door to pick up the morning paper—
and the shotgun blast cut him in two. My father laughed,
telling this story, he liked telling this story, always
shaking his head: the murder weapon
tossed aside on the hollow lawn—
standard Youngstown police ordinance—that
seemed to make him happy.
And my Croatian buddy? He tells us, leaning
into his second highball (I only found this out
years later, when I met a competitor
from that time who spelled it out for me):
married to Sandy's sister.

The Co-Prosperity Sphere of Greater East Albuquerque

Johnny-Cat:

His name was Richard Rescorla. The amazing thing is that his name is not on a United States Stamp. There's no National Rick Rescorla day, but more amazing than that, this guy ran into the North Tower when everyone was screaming, choking and terrified. Not just running, but trampling one another, coughing, scared mindlessly, and this guy not only kept his head, but rose up to his duty. Not just the duty of a Security Man for Morgan Stanley Dean Witter, but the duty of a human being.

When I sit at a traffic light, I ponder this. Would I have had the balls to do that? To usher out as many people as humanly possible despite knowing that the Tower was going to collapse at any moment? I guess some take refuge in knowing that they'll never have to know, they weren't there... couldn't have been posed the question. As for me... it drives me insane knowing that I'll never know. That I wasn't even given the opportunity to find out. Then that just folds in on itself when it prompts the thought, "Was Rick Rescorla there in the first place because God knew he would save over 3000 lives that day? And was I driving this fucking truck making pretend deliveries because God knew I didn't have the set on me to save those people?"

Yeah, this shit could drive a person insane, but I have these packets to keep my mind thinking of eleven other things all at the same time. Still, he's in there as he ought to be. You know there's an entire next generation of people that will never read about him in their history books. Never do a book report on this guy who had the whole fucking catastrophe predicted to begin with. Yeah. How many ignorant assholes on the streets of Albuquerque could tell you who this man was?

He was a father and a husband. The guy had everything to live for so I have to ask myself: did he even have time to weigh his options and consciously decide that the lives of all those hysterical strangers were worth his never returning home to his family that day? Or was he just acting? Doing what a Vet was trained to do without any thoughts of his home life?

Yeah. There's no Rick Rescorla postage stamp but maybe it's better that way. Piloting a dive bomber, knowing you're giving your life and staying the course anyway. I guess I can understand one trip back into the Towers... that's your basic act of heroism, running into the burning building to save the neigh-

bor's toddler. That happens. But leading those people out and turning back around and thinking to your self, "Leave no man behind..." That's the extraordinary. Too good for a postage stamp.

You'd think two trips would do it, right? That this alone would be enough to define yourself as a hero, pat yourself on the back and live out the rest of your life feeling that you'd gone above and beyond, and it was a terrible thing that all those others had died in the collapse, but you'd done all you could. Not so. He turns around, probably coughing and choking, wades back through the victims stumbling out on the street, and goes back in. If the tower hadn't collapsed on that third trip, he'd have made a fourth trip. A fifth. A dive bomber coursing toward inevitable death, unable to turn around even if he wanted to because he would run out of fuel on his way home. At this exact moment in time, God asked him to prove his worth, and he answered the call. The call. I'm lucky if I'm standing in the Supermarket and someone needs a penny so they don't have to break that twenty.

Jesus. It has to be in the hundreds today and the air conditioner is disconnected. I have one sunburned arm, soaked arm-pits, and a slow moving delivery van that pisses off every driver behind me. Mediocrity and boredom. I have five packets left, and since I usually try to keep my shit straight while I'm working, I decide to wait to stop at Evie's to visit her medicine cabinet. I get my brother on the cell and tell him I need him to meet me there to sign for a few stolen deliveries. He works at the same company, but it's his day off, and I know he has nothing better to do. Besides, Evie's having another party tonight and my brother, Justin, could really use the change of scenery.

These days he's always got a toddler in one arm and a Pabst in the other. His girlfriend just had their third kid, which, by New Mexico standards, implies that she's 20 years old.

Belle calls her "Chola," which of course implies the reality of the situation... she *does* draw black lip liner around her lips and fill them in with goeey lip gloss, and she actually does draw on these insane black eyebrows above where her own eyebrows used to be. She's even got the 1980s Heavy Metal hair coiffed to mythic heights, and she generally makes me uncomfortable in my own skin. I can only hope that he doesn't show up with her. Even Rick Rescorla may have chosen to leave her in the building. I make an illegal turn and floor it toward Evie's. Just thinking about his jackass decisions makes me need to get there.

Belle:

I don't know how long I've been sitting on Evie's couch doing bong hits and watching this infomercial for this company that basically makes miniature shit, like unicorns and plastic bonsai

trees for other people to sell at 300% markup. Tom Bosley is telling me that selling this shit will literally change my life and give me endless earning potential and, though I really appreciate Mr. Cunningham's concern for my well being, I'm just trying to get high enough to forget my day, which basically culminated in my being called to the women's restroom to perform janitorial duties despite the fact that I am security and at best should be guarding the backed-up toilets. But there I am, seven years' experience in Security plunging turds and thinking this trip to Mexico can't come soon enough.

It wasn't an entirely unproductive day, however. My plunging the toilets that I had backed up with maxi pads the night before did give me reason to not secure a damn thing while Joseph moved the cameras to the Home Décor section and Skunk literally strolled out through Appliances with a new laptop and what I believe were at least twenty pairs of briefs. How attractive. At some point I'll do the same for Joseph when his old lady comes in for onesies for their twins and a classy bottle of J-LO perfume for herself.

At some point Evie walks in, kisses her dog on the head and starts eating ice out of the tray. Says, "You see this shit? They turned the fucking water off. Is that even legal? Can you do that? We need to go down to Skunk's place. Come on, Dietrich. Grab your baby doll. Let's go. Fuck, Belle, come on. Let's go!"

I meander down the steps of her place with her in front of me. Her dress is completely unzipped, and her control top stockings are clearly visible. The dog is next to me with both a new name and a kid's baby doll in its mouth. Evie occasionally takes the limbs off this creepy thing, fills it with peanut butter, and gives it to the dog to devour.

She pounds on Skunk's door, screaming, "Open up! I need water! I brought a glass."

He opens the door a crack and looks out at us from behind three chains. Assesses, like it's actually necessary, slams the door, and fiddles with the chains while Evie gets progressively more irritated.

She marches directly to his kitchen sink, her dress flapping open and coming partially off her left shoulder. Fills a glass and puts a bunch of capsules in her mouth.

"I need to fill your tub. I'll use it for pitchers of water. Nice look," she says, and I realize that he's wearing tightie whities, standing there scratching his neck.

"Nice dress," he says, returning to his laptop. "I was thinking... maybe this death pool thing is a shit idea. I mean, we sink all this money into the pot, and it's not that often that anyone drops dead. Aside from the John Ritter year, I haven't made any serious cash off this thing in a while."

“John Ritter,” I murmur. “That was such a fucking long shot I swear you killed him.”

“I’m ignoring you, Belle. Evie? Evie, are you listening? I have a good idea. This is solid, this’ll work. Just look at the news. It’s every fucking day of the week someone is shot or missing around here. Nonstop. What if we bet on streets where the bodies will be found?”

“That’s too easy,” I tell him. “And we’ll all be predicting the same mesas.”

“Okay, here’s another one. Amber Alerts. Every time an Amber Alert goes out we bet on whether the kid will ever be found, and if so, how they died.”

“That’s fucking sick and wrong, Skunk. That’s not even mildly amusing. That’s not like the death pool, those are kids. People actually care about them.”

“Touching soliloquy, Evie, but aren’t you the one that bet on Jon-Benet Ramsey... last year?”

“I wasn’t following the news. That wasn’t my best work.” I’m watching her grip on the glass loosen, the relaxation starting to wash over her. “Besides, I have some good celebrity bets this year. You fear my bets. I can tell,” she says smiling.

“Did you get the booze for tonight?” she asks.

“Yes, of course. That was really a priority for me,” Skunk tells her. “Would you happen to have a basket I could put on the front of my bicycle? I am without a proper vehicle to properly serve your Highness.”

Evie puts her car key on the counter, smirks and says, “It smells like ass in here. Belle, would you please grab a couple glasses of water and help me bring them back up? I was trying to just melt enough ice in my mouth to swallow a pill but that wasn’t working... I almost fucking choked while you were calling that shit-store company.”

“Uh. Yeah.” I say. Everything feels calm. Gentle. I suspect *I* smell like ass. I have *e. coli* under my nails. Maybe I’ll go jump in the pool, I’m thinking. I’m laughing as I throw a twenty at Skunk. “Beer, please.” And walk out, totally forgetting the H₂O.

Evie:

“It was a bust,” I tell them. “He wasn’t a Medical Doctor! He was a fucking Professor! A Doc-tor-ate. Like that helps me at all. I mean, unless of course I wanted to review the periodic table of elements or discuss viscosity.”

“Viscosity. That’s when a bunch of fat women get in the pool and the water rises?” Skunk asks, cracking open another Pabst. “What? You didn’t think I knew that? Fuck all you. You can fill a canyon with the shit I know.”

“So what’d you do?” Belle asks.

“Told him it was a pleasure meeting him. Left a ten on the table for my Margarita, which I hadn’t touched by the way, and left.”

“Cold. Very cold,” Skunk says, pushing his chair back across the linoleum and making room for whichever stripper this is to sit on his lap.

I usually interview them, but this one is particularly pathetic in her stilettos and boa. Maybe 19? Skunk calls himself “Stripper Candy.” Says it’s no fault of his own that he’s jobless and virtually homeless... that’s just moth to the flame for a stripper. And from what we’ve seen... he’s right. He picks them up at the local stripper dive named TD’s, right off route 25, which is very convenient for those leaving the airport on their way to a hotel. The rest of us call it STD’s. The real kicker is when he pulls up in a stripper’s car with his bicycle in the back seat. This time he arrived with her on the bike itself and, sadly, Johnny Cat had not yet arrived to witness this.

“And this gem is?” Belle asks, big grin on her face. “Aren’t you going to introduce us to your new girlfriend?”

She laughs all cute-like, leans forward way too close to Belle’s personal space, and slurs something out like “Darletta.”

“Douchetta,” Belle says. “It’s a fucking pleasure. Love your perfume, what is it? Britney Spears’ Curiosity?”

“Are you insulting me?” she asks, like she honestly can’t tell. “Is she... Skunk, is she insulting me?”

“Just ignore that little squat man, baby. She envies your beauty,” Skunk says, shooting Belle a look.

Now I’m laughing, a little drunk and on a lot of pills. “No, she’s definitely insulting you, honey. I’d never let someone say such a thing to me.”

You have to understand, this isn’t instigating for the sake of instigating. Belle loves this shit. There’s a pretty prominent “Gentle Man’s Club” industry here, and yeah, it’d be pretty easy to take that way out of your financial troubles and go peddle your ass to guys like Skunk... or worse, even. Then you also have women like Belle who would clean toilets, go sewer diving, and clean toe jam without so much as considering actually demeaning themselves. She comes from a long line of women who have supported their husbands, their sons, and themselves, scraping by and usually not having the benefit of speaking English.

“Look who’s here!” Skunk announces, waving Johnny in, who has a six pack in his hand and looks like hell. He sets the beer down in front of us and carefully lifts a chair, sets it down with great care and straddles it.

“You okay?” I ask him.

"I will be," he mumbles, taking a packet from his inside pocket. I reach into my purse and give him my grandmother's compact. He thanks me and pours his coke onto it. Takes a box cutter from his jacket and draws a thick line. Belle takes the stirrer out of Douchetta's drink and hands it to Johnny-Cat, who cuts it into thirds and uses the dry part to snort a line. Shakes his head, brushes the hair off his face and says, "Yeah... Yeah... okay. Okay, then."

"Box cutters," Skunk says, completely dismissing himself from the Belle versus Douchetta debates.

"This will interest you, Johnny-boy," Skunk says, rearranging the stripper who's in his lap, forcing her to lean even closer to Belle's face. Bad idea.

"I was reading about 9/11 and I am certain, I mean I have made up my mind... having considered every conceivable angle, I now KNOW what happened."

"What a fucking relief, and don't call me that." Johnny-Cat says, opening a beer and smiling at me.

Now, like an imbecile, I make the mistake of thinking that this idiot story Skunk's about to embark upon will interest Belle or at least Douchetta, who are now engaged in a staring contest, and however Douchetta manages to keep her eyes from blinking with 3 pound fake eye lashes per eye lid I have no idea, but she's holding her own over there. So I ask, "What do you now know?"

"Mutherfucking Government conspiracy, Johnny-Boy. That's what I know. Hear me out on this, John, John, over here, man... focus," Skunk says, noticing that Johnny-Cat is reading the ingredient label on his Pabst. "A fistful of jack offs with no actual professional flight experience could never have navigated three airplanes across the friendly skies and into actual targets with any sort of accuracy."

"Name me the fistful of jack offs and I'll actually sit here and listen to you," Johnny-Cat says, putting down the bottle and leaning in while Skunk swirls his eyes. "I mean it. Name the hijackers. Name the accused that you're about to defend, Johnny Cochran. I'm all ears."

"The fact that I cannot pronounce jibberish Iraqi names does not make my argument any less accurate. Anyway, this isn't about names, this is about our own government plotting against us, man."

"No, it's about the fact that you get all of your information out of chat rooms and obscure Websites and you've never read an actual newspaper and your attention to shit that takes away from the devastation of 9/11."

"My distrust of media coverage does not lesson my argument, in fact it strengthens my mind," Skunk adds, shifting Douchetta once again who, this time, flails forward and catches herself with her elbow in the spilt beer on the table.

“Hey!” she says, momentarily distracted from Belle, who has since added:

“Are those Lee Press on Nails?”

“Don’t you think it’s the least bit ironic that you’d distort Mainstream Media coverage but you’ll always hand-pick your obscurities from ‘reports’ based on the same coverage? And Skunk, before you continue... let me school you...”

“You school me?” Skunk laughs and wipes his wet lips on Douchetta’s shoulder.

“Mohammad Atta was the pilot for Flight 11, Marwan al Shehhi, Flight 175, Hani Hanjour... Flight 77, Ziad Jarrah pilot-ing Flight 93....”

“That’s something else, Johnny, you talk Iraqi super-good, but it is I that will school you for those planes, if they even were air planes, and not missiles... ah, ah, ah,” he says, holding up his hand. “Those planes were more likely than not remote-controlled.”

Johnny cracks up and opens another beer, practically finishing it off before sitting back and saying, “These guys were not highly skilled pilots, you’re right on that account, but what you’re overlooking is that what they had to do that day was not that difficult. Any flight trainer will tell you that the three hardest parts of operating a plane are take off, flying through shit weather, and landing. These guys didn’t have to do any of that. They waited till after take off to hijack the planes, the day was fucking lovely and, as for the landing... The navigational system told them where they were. Hanjour only flew the plane manually for the last eight minutes of his flight to the Pentagon and, subsequently, the guy input autopilot instructions to Reagan National Airport when he was only five fucking miles from the Pentagon. All four hijackers forced their planes down at rapid speed just after they took over. The fucking passengers were puking on themselves. Do you understand why, Skunk?”

“Because the guys operating the remotes didn’t know what they were doing.”

“Because it was a clear day and they were able to fly MANUALLY, just by sight, which was lucky for those bastards because using instruments to navigate would actually be a difficult task. Think about the targets... they could have seen their targets from up to 50 miles away. It was a bunch of clearly visual targets prominent in the skyline, prominent from...”

“If any of your Dan Rather Night-Line bullshit holds any water then talk yourself out of this: If their flying skills were rudimentary at best, why didn’t anyone notice that? Anyone whose job it is to notice that?”

“Maybe they all worked about as hard as you, Skunk,” I add, getting up from the table and heading to the door where some

asshole insists on knocking instead of walking in. There are maybe 40 people in the apartment so this isn't exactly an invitation to the White House.

I open the door to Justin, Johnny-Cat's brother, who is closely tailed by his endearing wife, the one that clutches the kids and refuses to speak English despite the fact that she can. The one whom Belle refuses to speak Spanish with, swearing up and down that she only speaks English, followed by this huge guy, maybe 28, 29, bad tattoos on flabby arms, a gut and a shaved head.

"Hey," Justin says, handing me a paper bag and kissing me on the cheek. Fucking great. Now I have to endure dirty looks from the Spanish Rose all night. "There he is, see, baby? I told you we were coming to see Johnny! Sweetie, this is Rigel, oh and this is the new baby. Want to hold him?"

"Oh... oh God..." I say, as he dumps this wiggling thing into my arms. I intuitively know I'm supposed to have some sort of maternal response, offer it a teat or something, but all I can think is this is revolting, till Spanish Rose takes him back and says something in Spanish to me in a tone that clearly translates to: "Give me my fucking kid, and p.s. I know you're screwing my husband."

Justin, by the way, is about 5 foot 4 and weighs in at 125 tops. Hair is receding but he had the good sense to shave it, and somehow every shirt I've seen him in has the arms torn off so that you always find yourself looking at his overgrown pits flaked in deodorant. He's about as desirable as the kid itself.

"Rigel," this guy says to me, like I missed it the first time.

"Yeah, come on in. How do you know Justin?"

"I load trucks with him," he says, staring at my chest. "I didn't catch your name..." he smiles, which is very attractive. He has the extra tooth. The one that grows up there over the canine. Hideous.

"Johnny, your brother is here!" I announce, like he can't hear and see him from 3 and half feet away. "Always the host-ess!" I say, shrugging and turning around. My ass feels Rigel looking at it and tells my legs to move faster.

"I don't need to take shit from you," Douchetta snaps, leaning toward Belle and, I think, losing some spittle from her glossy mouth.

"Get the hell out of here before you anger me," Belle tells her, plinking her in the nose as she leans into her face.

"The linoleum, please," I say. "Scuffle in the den, or better yet, outside."

"What's your fucking problem? Jealous?" This girl says, firm in the belief that her ass will never get flabby, that her coat of high gloss will forever endure. Belle lights her bong and takes a

long drag, holds it in her lungs while we all wait for the response. The very promising response.

“Uh... yeah, no. Jealously would mean that I want what you have, and what do you have?”

“I have a fucking Camaro and a 52 inch screen TV, bitch.”

“That,” Belle says, taking another hit, “was what the rest of us know to be a RHETORICAL question. I know about the Camaro, you didn’t have to tell me that. I bet it’s yellow with expensive rims and a souped up stereo system, and as for the television... Eve, tag me out a moment, I need to piss,” she says, carefully getting up from the table so as not to mar the linoleum. “Go to the bathroom” is her way of saying that she’s deliberately escalating this to slamming a beer and fucking up this girl’s face so bad she doesn’t dance for a month, or letting it go, maybe leaving the house altogether, which I definitely don’t want.

“As for the television,” I smile, “that’s the freebie on the Bingo card.”

“The fuck is a Bingo card?” she asks Skunk, smiling and thinking maybe I just complimented her.

“Outdated game, sweetheart. Not important. Eve, not right now... Darletta and I are on our way to a perfect relationship.”

“52-incher here knows you only have 4 inches, right? I mean, you met like, what? Two hours ago? She must know by now.” I say, smiling, reaching for my shot of whisky.

“I didn’t come here to get into a scrap with some ex, honey,” she tells me, yet not in a tone that tells me she has any sincerity about this.

“I’ll call the Archbishop in the morning and see if we can’t get the paperwork rolling to have you Sainted. Nonetheless, in light of your accusation that I’d touch a guy named ‘Skunk,’ you may now leave. There are some electrical poles outside. You’ll be right at home.”

Johnny snarfs up a beer laughing, which cracks me up so hard I utterly miss it as she plunges across the table, causing Skunk’s chair to fall back into the wall and ultimately slide across the linoleum and leave him flat on his back. From the sound, I’m guessing he’s having his jewels trampled by a stiletto as Our Lady scratches me across the face with one of those Wolverine talons. I’m touching my face and looking at the fact that she actually drew blood, which will undoubtedly affect my dating itinerary, when Johnny-Cat grabs her flailing hands and pins them to the table. Skunk’s trying to get up, but he’s moving in slow motion and apparently catches a heel in the face because he chokes something out about his already deviated septum.

“Is she serious?!” I yell. “Sonuvabitch. You’re lucky I have no feeling. Fuck! Fuck, Johnny, is it bad? It’s bad, isn’t it?”

"It's not good," he says, still holding her down while she screams homage to George Carlin.

"Get the fuck up, Skunk, and get your skank out of here before I take this out on you," he says, dead seriously. There's laughter in the background and the g-damn baby is crying. I'm thinking Bacitracin, Johnny is amazing, if-that-kid-doesn't-shut-the-hell-up-I'm-going-to-sympathetically-lactate, Belle is gonna murder her if I don't get her out, Skunk is an imbecile beyond all fathomable proportions, and I think I need a Fioricet all at the same time. Suddenly Rigel comes out of nowhere ready to "rescue" me now that the situation is contained and goes to lift her off the table. This is especially amusing as Skunk is knocked back down, grabs the table cloth on his way to the floor, pulling it out from under her both spilling beer everywhere and... soaking Johnny's coke.

"YOU!" I scream at Rigel. "Back it up! I got this," I tell Johnny, taking her wrists myself as Johnny dives for Skunk and Justin's wife screams in Spanish what likely translates to "You expose a child to this?" then lets the door slam behind her.

Skunk is coughing out, "I'll... pay... you... back!" as if that's the problem as I yell to Belle, "Ysabelle? Honey, I need my nail clippers, please."

"Huh?" she asks, leaning out of the bedroom. Smiles big. "Oh. Where are they?"

"Medicine cabinet. Do hurry. The urge to fight like someone who actually knows how to throw a punch is overwhelming."

"I... I can hold her," Rigel says.

"While I appreciate your too-little-too-late offer, please make yourself truly useful and get me my purse from under the table, put a pretty white pill in my mouth, and then eject Skunk before Johnny quite literally kills him. In that exact order, please."

Just as Douchetta spits on my stolen Allen B. Schwartz dress. Who does that?

Belle gleans the nail clippers like she's holding an Academy award, pushes the hair out of my face, and draws her breath in. "Evie! I swear to God, I leave the room for 2 minutes..." She grumbles, crosses herself for taking the Lord's name in vain, and replaces my hands over Douchetta's, then drags her across it so the acrylic daggers are hanging off the table.

I politely pull up a chair, careful not to mar the linoleum, and commence cutting them down to the skin.

Rigel pops a pill in my mouth, which I opt to chew over having him raise a glass to my mouth as he will already be savoring that first contact with my lips for later that evening in the privacy of his rental on Fourth Street. The fact that he does not have running water either will prove a greater problem, I'm sure.

Douchetta is shrieking as if I just tore her firstborn from her arms, though I promise this is not hurting her. Rigel has suc-

cessfully pulled Skunk to his feet and the guy's face looks like... well, someone who poured beer on Johnny-Cat's remaining coke.

You can hear Justin's wife screaming for him from the parking lot and he's shifting his weight telling Johnny that he has to go. He'll bring him more tomorrow, here's some meth till then and he really, really has to go as he exits stage right already breaking into a monologue groveling to his wife.

When I cut the last of the fake nails off, which are incidentally flying like rice at a wedding, Belle drags her off the table and takes her by the hair which, of course, turns out to be a wig. Douchetta wastes no time in jumping on Belle's back, and Belle is admittedly laughing even when hands clasp around her throat. The grip must not be too bad because Belle easily opens the front door and walks out, giving new meaning to a piggy-back ride. If it were anyone else, I'd be afraid she was going to push her down the steps and cause an ambulance and two cops to show up, but Belle knows far better, so she simply flips Douchetta over the railing into a soft bed of endless pit bull shit in the courtyard below.

Don't get the wrong idea. The charming residents below are in the business of stealing all the clothing from the laundry rooms in order to sell everything at local thrift stores. Even if the ferocious barking and slamming on the glass doors could conceivably wake the drunks, they'd be the last people to dial 911.

The Fioricet has hit, Belle is obscenely high, Skunk is lying on the floor again sniffing what he can from a packet before Johnny confiscates it saying, "Mine." Belle's blotting my face and swabbing it with goop on a Q-tip while Johnny, after much pleading with him, is soaking his hand in ice. We need his hands. We need Johnny. We need Skunk. We need one another.

"Nice dog shit toss there, Belle," I say, laughing. "Never saw that one before."

"Thank you. I just thought it up. Nice job on Skunk, Johnny," she says, reveling in the glory of Skunk's swelling face and busted lip.

Johnny raises his beer and says, "Well, thank you, Belle. Liked the manicure, Evie. Peaceful, yet poignant. The Ghandi of problem resolution," he says, breaking into a smile.

"Guys?" Skunk asks, still face down in the carpet sprinkled in flung acrylics. "I need ice. Someone beat my face in."

I put a beer on the floor and kick it to him. It makes a calming sound rolling across the kitchen floor. "Ya don't say?" I mumble, reaching for my purse.

"You want this asshole ejected?" Rigel asks.

"You still here?" I ask, not even turning my head.

"I'll fuckin' kill him," he says, all puffed up in this bouncer stance, then kicks Skunk in the gut with these massive para-

trooper boots. The three of us look at each other, each take a glass bottle off the table and rise. Maybe for the first time ever, our chairs fall back, my concern for the scuff marks a million miles away.

Seat Belt

When Deborah saw the red and blue flashing lights in her rear-view mirror she wished she'd remembered to put on her seat belt. She was never good at remembering to do that, like she was never good at remembering to buy tissues since toilet paper was just fine for nose wiping. And for that matter she never thought to buy napkins since paper towels were just fine for wiping fingers and mouths at mealtime. But when the cop approached Deborah's window she saw that he was surprised to see her white face, and she wondered if he had only gotten a look at her daughters when she drove by. It was then that she doubted that her unbuckled seat belt had anything to do with her being pulled over, though it was definitely on her now since the cop had taken his sweet time getting out of his car and getting over to hers.

He asked to see her license and registration, but he kept looking in the back seat at Emma and Madison, two little black girls. The three-year-olds were being very quiet and still, and this bothered Deborah since they were usually so talkative and active, such good girls, and Deborah smiled at them in the rearview mirror, hoping they weren't scared. But the cop kept looking at them, and that ticked Deborah off.

"You've got a problem with my daughters?" Deborah said.

"Your daughters?" He frowned.

Deborah handed him her license and registration.

He glanced at the papers then said, "How old are your daughters, Mrs. Donnelly?"

"Where do you get *Mrs.* from?"

He looked at the papers again as if they would have the answer.

"I'll be right back," he said but not before glancing once more at the girls.

Deborah watched him in the rearview mirror, and she guessed he was in his late thirties, as she was, but Deborah wasn't that good at guessing people's ages. She watched him amble back to his car, settle in, and start tapping away at his computer. He was decent-looking, though blond and not usually her type, and Deborah wondered what that computer would tell him about herself and especially about her twin daughters.

Perhaps he would discover that twins run in Deborah's family. Plenty of twins. It was what Deborah's mother had told her, reminded her since she was a teenager, but it was not simply that she was told or reminded, but warned over and over. "They're not on my side," her mother would say. "They're on your father's side. Many sets of twins, too many to keep track of."

Deborah rolled her eyes, for her mother was prone to exaggerating. Besides, Deborah had never met any of those too many sets of twins since she hardly ever saw any of her father's family. But when Deborah found out about Emma and Madison, her mother only said, "I told you so." And she only said that after first screaming how wretched a daughter she was after Deborah told her that she wasn't marrying their father.

After that reaction, Deborah wasn't about to tell her mother that their father was already married with two children and that Deborah hadn't told him that she had become pregnant though he could have easily afforded to support two more children since he was a surgeon. But there was no point in telling that to her mother, at least not right away, because there was no point in making her mother even more angry about news that Deborah considered very, very good.

What she did tell her mother a few months before Emma and Madison were born was that they were black and white, and just as Deborah suspected about the cop that pulled her over, Deborah's mother only saw black.

"No one would ever know you're their mother," Deborah's mother said in a disapproving tone of voice after her granddaughters celebrated their first birthday.

"Why would you say that to me?" Deborah said.

"People automatically know we're mother and daughter."

"Why is that so important?"

"You and I look so much alike that sometimes people think we're sisters, don't they? Our hair color is the same shade of brown. Our eyes are hazel."

"Actually." Deborah interrupted her mother. "Maybe my daughters do look like me. Unfortunately."

"Unfortunately?" Deborah's mother laughed.

Deborah was silent and hoped her mother would hear her own laughter, and Deborah knew there was no good reason her mother was laughing but supposed it was better to listen to her mother's unnerving laughter than her screaming.

"I don't think it's a big deal if mothers and daughters resemble each other or not," Deborah said. "But sometimes I do think it's unfortunate that a daughter or daughters look like their mother."

"If you didn't have a mother you wouldn't dare say that."

"You had a mother. She just wasn't a good mother."

"Having a bad mother is like not having a mother at all."

"I'm so tired of arguing with you."

"If you weren't so selfish this wouldn't happen."

"Do you like me?" Deborah immediately regretted saying that, knowing there was a good chance that her question would only upset her mother.

"What?"

“You heard me.”

“You betrayed me.”

Deborah was silent, not prepared for what her mother had just said.

“Again,” her mother said. “You betrayed me again.”

Silence.

“Don’t look at me like that,” her mother said.

“Like what?” Deborah whispered.

“Surprised.”

“I am surprised.”

“I’m not surprised by you anymore.”

Deborah wondered if her mother remembered that Deborah was thirty-five years old, but Deborah didn’t think that her age really mattered to her mother, for Deborah didn’t think that her mother realized that Deborah was, in fact, in her mid-thirties and the difference it should make in their relationship. And that was when Deborah decided to move far away from her mother, even though she loved her very much, of course, and probably too much. She decided to find a little midwest town that could become her family’s new home and where the cop was now busy at his computer trying to find out whatever he could about Deborah Donnelly and her daughters.

Perhaps he would discover that Deborah gave birth to her daughters in her best friend’s spa tub in a luxurious dream bathroom that Bonnie won in a raffle at her nearby home improvement store. Earth tones, mosaics, tumbled stone, teak, and vessel sinks accompanied that huge spa tub, the centerpiece of Bonnie’s television-inspired eleven by twenty room that Deborah’s blood made even more dramatic. It was just Bonnie, Dolores the midwife, and Pamela the doula who were with Deborah when she gave birth. Less is more was what Deborah said to Bonnie when they were discussing Deborah’s birth plan halfway through her pregnancy.

“Do you ever wish he could be there?” Bonnie said.

“Not even if we were married,” Deborah said.

“A doctor could be helpful,” Bonnie said.

“He yanks out appendixes and gall bladders and tonsils and whatever other little thing that has gotten fucked up, and that has nothing to do with having babies.”

“What if there’s an emergency?”

“Are you getting cold feet?”

“I’m only saying that something could happen, and my bathroom isn’t equipped with, you know, medical stuff.”

Deborah raised her eyebrows.

“It’s not a hospital,” Bonnie said as if making this clear to Deborah for the first time.

“Which is exactly why I love it.”

"I love it too, but."

"I've said this a million times. Hospitals are for sick people, and I'm not sick. I'm pregnant."

Not only that, Deborah didn't want any men to be there when she gave birth. Men were never meant to be there, she told Bonnie, and so Deborah only wanted to be surrounded by women when she brought her daughters into this world, a world that Deborah knew would be unfair and unkind to them because of what they looked like.

But Deborah also knew it was more than that, and she told Bonnie how afraid she was that her daughters would be treated horribly because of our resilient, greedy history, a history filled with lies. Deborah confided in Bonnie about how much she struggled with that and how much she was trying to accept that she wouldn't always be able to protect her daughters from many of those lies.

The cop tapped on Deborah's window.

Deborah lowered it halfway.

"How old are your daughters, ma'am?" he said.

"Three almost four."

"Both of them?"

"They're twins."

The cop leaned down and looked at them in the back seat.

When Deborah thought he had looked long enough she said, "Don't give yourself eyestrain. They're fraternal."

"You have the guts to adopt twins."

"They're not adopted."

Silence.

"C-section?" the cop said.

"I don't believe you," Deborah said. "Are you giving me a ticket or what?"

"A couple of little girls have been reported missing."

"I bet there are thousands of missing girls in this country."

"Yes, too many."

"Perhaps there are thousands missing even here in Iowa, but mine aren't two of them, and what kind of question is that to ask me?"

"Excuse me, ma'am?"

"C-section?"

"My sister-in-law opted for one when she had twins."

"Opted? Don't get me started on that."

"Her doctor convinced her that it'd be better for her and the babies."

"Did her doctor also tell her that he'd make more money that way, too?"

"She," the cop said. "The doctor is she."

"Can I have my license and registration?"

"I told Nicole that I'd deliver her babies, but she didn't trust me, or maybe it was my brother who didn't."

Taken aback, Deborah said, "You don't think it's messy?"

"Many of my colleagues think it is, even the women."

"You don't?"

"Car accidents can be messy."

"I suppose they can be."

"Gunshot wounds are messy."

"I don't know anything about that."

"I'm glad you don't."

Silence.

Deborah rolled the window down completely. "Do you know what my fancy, big city ob-gyn said when I told her I wanted to give birth at home?"

The cop shook his head.

"She crinkled her nose in disgust and asked me why I would want to do that since it's so *messy*."

"What did you say?"

"You're fired."

The cop laughed.

"I really did." Deborah smiled, remembering how quickly she got dressed and left that doctor's office but not before requesting that a copy of her medical records be mailed immediately to her home.

"I've delivered three babies, each separately," the cop said. "None were born in a hospital, and they were all perfect."

Deborah detected pride in the cop's voice, and she supposed it was something to be proud of, since his services were probably performed under extenuating circumstances, but she wondered if this cop had somehow discovered while searching on his computer that Deborah's twins could have been her third delivery too. She hadn't been ready those two other times, but it was more than not being ready, because Deborah could never imagine herself actually being *ready* to be a mother. It was that she hadn't been particularly impressed by the men whose sperm her body had chosen on those two occasions. The guys were cute and fun, but simply having sex with cute, fun guys was different from allowing their DNA to commingle with hers and remain in her body. With Peter, Emma's and Madison's father, it was different.

"You have an unpaid parking ticket." The cop handed Deborah her license and registration.

"When did I get that?"

"Six months ago on Gilbert Street."

"I don't remember that. Do you have a copy of the ticket?"

"Would you like me to print another one?"

"Can I put it on a credit card?"

"I'll take care of it if you go to dinner with me."

"How much is it?" Deborah was not going to go for that deal.

"Two hundred."

"Two hundred for a parking violation?"

"It's been six months."

Deborah dug through her purse and found a grocery store receipt, and on the back she jotted down her telephone number. This baby-delivering cop was suddenly in the cute and fun category, and their dinner date was set for tomorrow. "If you can't make it call me because I'll need to cancel the sitter." Deborah handed him the slip of paper. "Wait. I forgot to write down my address."

"I've got that covered," the cop said. "Your phone number too, but thanks for it anyway."

"Of course," Deborah said. "Your computer knows everything."

"Not everything, but it does know the basics," the cop said.

"Does it know what I do for a living?" Deborah said.

"Middle school art teacher."

"How about where I lived before?"

"Brookline, Massachusetts."

"You already knew how old my daughters are, didn't you?"

The cop shrugged.

"You have an unfair advantage because of what your nifty computer knows," Deborah said.

"It doesn't know anything that really matters."

"Sometimes I prefer not to know about things that supposedly matter."

"You prefer ignorance?" the cop said.

"There's a difference between ignorance and not needing to know about something."

"Mommy," Emma said. "I have to go to the bathroom."

Deborah smiled. Emma's timing couldn't have been better, and Deborah turned to look at her daughter. "We're on our way home right now."

Once at home, after making sure Emma's needs were taken care of, Deborah went through her mail. It was mostly catalogues and fliers from local stores advertising their weekly sales, but there was a pink postcard from her most recent ob-gyn informing her that it had been over a year since her last check-up. Deborah had fired that doctor, too, because she, like so many of the others, had very poor bedside manners, and this doctor, also like so many of the others, apparently refused to believe that she could, in fact, be fired. But Deborah made it very clear that morning of her last gynecological exam that she had indeed fired Dr. Carol Wilson.

Wearing only the flimsiest white paper gown, Deborah was sitting on the edge of the examination table waiting for Dr. Wilson. The nurse had already been in, about fifteen or twenty minutes ago, and gathered the usual data: blood pressure, temperature, weight, and date of last period. Everything was just about the same as the last time Deborah was examined in Boston before she moved away. Except she was one year older, which didn't phase Deborah until Dr. Wilson brought it to her attention when she finally made it to Deborah's room.

After glancing at Deborah's chart and without saying a word to Deborah, Dr. Wilson drew a line on a piece of paper. It was a diagonal line that began in the upper left hand corner of the paper and ended in the lower right hand corner. At the top of the left side of the paper she wrote 35. Towards the middle of the left margin of the paper she wrote 38, and at the bottom of the left margin she wrote 40.

"Your age," Dr. Wilson said while running her finger down the left edge of the paper. "Your fertility." She ran her finger along the diagonal line.

"I'm only thirty-six," Deborah said.

"You're about there," Dr. Wilson said pointing to a spot on the diagonal line that corresponded closer to 38 than 35.

"I had twins just a couple of years ago."

"Statistically your chances of getting pregnant have dropped significantly since then."

"Are you an actuary or a doctor?"

"I would get pregnant sooner rather than later if I were you."

"I'm done having children."

"That's what you say now."

"Many women in their forties are having babies." Deborah was starting to get annoyed.

"Not without lots of help," Dr. Wilson said cheerfully.

"If I try to get pregnant at forty-four and I can't then it just wasn't meant to happen."

"Your quest for a baby doesn't have to end because you can't get pregnant."

"Quest?" Deborah paused. "You're right. I can adopt."

"That's one route, but there are several ways to treat infertility."

"Why do you think I'm infertile?"

"I didn't say that."

"I don't want to go on a quest for a Frankenbaby."

"My patients' babies aren't monsters."

"Dr. Frankenstein's baby wasn't a monster either."

"Hollywood must have gotten it wrong."

"Have you read the book?"

"I'll have to put it on my summer reading list."

"It's a classic." But Deborah couldn't stop herself. "It's a classic horror story written by a pregnant, unmarried teenager who had a really famous mother who died because of complications with the birth."

Deborah paused for a moment as she curiously watched Dr. Wilson take notes. "And so this teenager writes a scary story about an egotistical scientist who wants to come up with a way to give birth to a human being without needing a woman's body." Deborah paused. "I'd think it would be on your top ten list of your all time favorite books."

Dr. Wilson kept scribbling.

"I bet you were one of those students who took notes furiously during class and didn't really hear anything the teacher was saying," Deborah said.

Dr. Wilson laughed.

Disgusted, Deborah got off the table and began getting dressed. She didn't want this business person masquerading as a doctor touching her.

"I haven't examined you yet," Dr. Wilson said.

"I don't want you to," Deborah said.

"Would you like to reschedule? I'm free in a few weeks."

"No, I'm firing you."

Dr. Wilson shook her head. "I'm just doing my job. I'm telling you what I think you need to know."

"Thanks but no thanks," Deborah said and left, and left for good. No more gynecologists for her. This decision was a relief, and Deborah wondered whether she should decide no more cute and fun guys, wondering if this decision would bring her relief, and she wondered this while waiting for the arrival of her dinner date, the decent-looking blond cop.

When Deborah called Bonnie the night before to tell her what she was doing for two hundred dollars, Bonnie told her to wake up and realize she wasn't really going out with this guy for the money because even though she was just a middle school art teacher she wasn't that desperate for money.

"Face it," Bonnie said. "He'll never be Peter."

"How do you know?" Deborah said. "I might fall in love with him."

"Before you go doing that you better make sure he falls in love with you."

"I can't make sure of that."

"Just have a good time."

"Uh huh," Deborah said while remembering Peter's words: What they had was only physical, nothing more.

"Mommy, mommy," Madison said. "Flashing lights are outside."

Deborah glanced out of the living room window and, seeing a police car, cursed quietly. She ushered her daughters away from

the window when she saw her date get out of the car, her date whose name she still didn't know.

"Be good for Kathryn," Deborah told her daughters when the doorbell rang.

"I like men in uniform," Kathryn said as she gently pulled the girls away from their mother.

Deborah looked at the teenage sitter and felt foolish. "I didn't know he'd be showing up in blue."

"Is he going to be our daddy?" Emma said.

"Will he live with us?" Madison said.

"Why don't you two show Kathryn your new toys, okay?" Deborah said as she opened the door.

"I can't double park for too long," the cop said, smiling.

"I didn't realize this was going to be an official visit," Deborah said.

"It's my dinner break." He held the front door open and motioned for Deborah to step outside.

As Deborah walked down the slate path toward the street, she looked around her neighborhood and hoped nobody noticed the flashing red and blue lights, and then she turned around to see her daughters waving to her from the living room window. Deborah blew them a kiss and wondered what she was doing and kept wondering this as she settled into the front passenger seat of the police car.

"Are you going to turn off those crazy lights?" Deborah said.

"My name's Matthew," he said and turned off the lights and started the car. "I thought you'd like them."

"They attract too much attention," Deborah said.

Silence.

"Please put on your seat belt," Matthew said as the car idled.

Deborah wrapped the belt around her and clicked the buckle into place.

Renée E. D'Aoust

Compagnie Maguy Marin: *Umwelt* & Repetitive Living

When I was a teenager, my older brother used to go to the dump on Friday afternoon. He'd take family trash with him and come back with stuff, which he sold for profit at a garage sale on Saturday morning.

In Maguy Marin's *Umwelt*, the vast center stage is not reserved for dancing. It is a dump.

Far upstage, the performers walk around rows of mirrors. This is the mundane repetition called living. We eat an apple, hug a teddy bear, take a piss. We put on a lab coat, put on a wedding dress, fasten blue coveralls. We do it all again. Life is a repetitive problem.

In Maguy Marin's *Umwelt*, the first apple is eaten by a woman. Next, a man. The apple core is thrown into the dump.

Far upstage, the performers walk around rows of mirrors. This is the mundane repetition called living. We deliver cake, slap a man, take a piss. We pull up our pants, put on a party dress, fasten blue coveralls. Such are the days of our lives.

Far downstage, three electric guitars flat on their backs. A taut rope stretched between two boxes. Rope winds between the two winches and across the guitar strings, causing sound, serving the same function as an hourglass. The end of the rope across the guitar is the last sound of *Umwelt*.

Mirrored panels far upstage become reflections of a wasteland. Dancers walk or run around those mirrors, performing daily actions, skewed rituals. Eating an apple takes a long time.

I feel numb

Until I see a performer carrying a tree.

I think that is the tree where the serpent lives.

I feel numb

Until I see three performers wearing bunny ears
and chewing carrots.

I think I like the Burger King party hats better.

I feel numb

Until I catch myself praying.
I think the babies are already in the dump, but
please don't throw the teddy bears in there, too.

Man standing still.

Lights change.

Whooshing is a repetitive noise—the
problem of the subway, the walking
dead, the wind tunnel.

Far upstage, the performers run around rows of mirrors. This is
the mundane repetition called living. They begin throwing gravel
into the dump. Almost an afterthought of touch, there are twirl-
ing penises. Such are the days of our lives.

An audience member scurries across the front of the theatre to
the exit. Other audience members join the dance—to leave.
Proves art still moves. We are the sitting dead.

Now we have soldiers dragging bodies. Trash is a repetitive problem.

*My brother took the stuff he didn't sell back to the dump
on Friday. I've become numb to death yet am still startled
by stillness.*

Apprenticeship

For William O'Rourke

"Come with me into the field of sunflowers."² There we will learn "[w]e live here by touch, the dim blue light of the nearly blind."³ Newly blind, learning by words, by the work of sunflowers, of dogs: "Oh Rex, Forget. Forget."⁴ All you knew. Begin. Sit. Begin (again). "I am not the hero of this piece."⁵ I am the humility. This time around, I know "my grandmother knew what to do."⁶ I know "to be let out of school is a revolution."⁷

² Oliver, Mary. *Dream Work*. New York: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986. "The Sunflowers" (88).

³ Defrees, Madeline. *When Sky Lets Go*. New York: George Braziller, 1978. "At Xavier Hall with Residents from the State School for the Handicapped" (51).

⁴ Strand, Mark. *Blizzard of One*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998. "Five Dogs 2" (36).

⁵ Eady, Cornelius. *Brutal Imagination*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 2001. "Composite" (21).

⁶ Young, Kevin. *Most Way Home*. New York: Quill/William Morrow, 1995. "The Dry Spell" (7).

⁷ Dao, Bei. *Unlock*. New York: A New Directions Book, 2000. "Teacher's Manual" (51).

Melanie Cotter

Chocolate Percent

The Native kid said I was so white, snapping the banana clip in my hair, scratching it on my skull. We were on the school bus, and I tried to read, but threw up the milk I drank for breakfast, as my head rocked on my neck with the motion of the wheels and road. What was inside was outside, and everyone else departing had to step over it. I thought of coffee and dilution, about money and how the Native kid stole small cartons of chocolate 2% from the crate at the end of the lunch line, one in each pocket. He drank them one after the other, pounding them down his throat, like a catapult slinging fire at the enemy.

Northern Belle

from a case study in Tourist Attraction Trauma

On the outskirts of Hanna, Indiana, where U.S. Highway 30 and County Road 450 West meet, stands an old white farmhouse with peeling paint, a sagging roof, worn-out wiring, and broken windows. This was my childhood home. Even so, I did not sleep here. Instead, from infancy to age twelve, I slept in the Belle Guinness exhibit of the LaPorte County Historical Museum.

Both my parents worked nights. We had no extended family in the area to take me in, so while my father drove to Gary to work in the steel mills, my mother drove twenty miles to LaPorte to work as a cleaning lady at the museum, taking me with her each night.

The closest thing the museum had to a house was the Belle Guinness “Lady Bluebeard of LaPorte” exhibit. Actually, this isn’t quite true, as the museum did have a Victorian living room exhibit. But somehow, my mother thought Belle Guinness’s shed looked more like the house we lived in than the plush velvety Victorian couches. And, in truth, it was. Constructed out of wood siding from a shed on Belle’s original property, my nightly home had an antique meat grinder, a window to look out of, and a plump Belle standing guard, watching out for Norwegian suitors and watching over me. My mother tells me that when I was a baby, she would hear me cry from distant corners of the museum, but by the time she reached me with a bottle of formula, I would have quieted down, my eyes fixed on Belle’s solid, unmoving figure. My mother knew only what she could see: that Belle was a stiff, lifeless, inhuman thing, and that I never took the bottle. I knew only what I experienced: that my belly had been filled at Belle’s breast. Psychologists say that first memories are important, and to honor that theory, my first memory is this: A gnawing in my belly, a groping of hands and mouth into darkness, a latching onto flesh like rocks, a filling of mouth and belly with a milk so bitter and so sweet that I cannot stop suckling, a softening of that flesh in my hands, a gripping ever tighter so that even when the milk has stopped flowing, she will stay with me.

As I began to grow and walk, I worked my way out of my crib during the night and wandered around Belle’s cramped quarters. A sliced finger taught me not to touch the red-tinted axe leaning against the wall. A splinter in my heel reminded me to step around the sharp bone fragments littering the dirt floor. But nothing stopped me from crawling inside the garden cart, which I

often did, awaking in the morning to find a gunnysack draped over my body and knowing that Belle had draped it over me. Often I felt Belle's rough lips brush my cheek, her warm breath smelling like boiled cabbage and tapioca pudding, smelling like the taste of her milk.

Five days after my fifth birthday, I began kindergarten at South Central Community School Corporation, a rural school for the children of Hanna and Union Mills. The night before my first day, my mother gave me a bath at our house on the corner of U.S. 30 and 450 West before we went to the museum, and she dressed me early in the morning when her shift ended. As I was leaving, I hugged Belle goodbye and she whispered in my ear, "Be nice to the boys, and they'll give you their milk money." I buried my face in Belle's skirts and cried as my mom pulled me away and out to the car for the drive to school.

I remember my first day of kindergarten well. The teacher asked us what our bedrooms were like, and I listened as my classmates described walls painted with balloons or dragons or racecars or Barbies. When I said my bedroom was made of old shed siding and that a woman with hips like armchairs who smelled like cabbage and tapioca whispered to me in the night, my teacher ended sharing time and sent a note home for my mother which I gave to Belle instead. At recess, the Barbie girls and the racecar boys clustered at the base of the curly slide to whisper and point at me. Only one boy, Duane, whose bedroom was wallpapered with earthworms dressed in baseball uniforms, played with me, but since he could only talk about earthworms, he really wasn't much fun to be around. But I was nice to him like Belle told me to be, and Duane did give me his milk money. Unfortunately, during milk and cookies, the teacher noticed I had two chocolate milks instead of one and made me give one to Duane.

We talked at night, Belle and I, and sometimes I stayed awake all night, nestled into the garden cart, just to listen to her stories. Often Belle told me about growing up in Selbu, Norway, gathering spruce twigs for the family fire which burned quickly and gave little warmth. Townspeople teased her, called her "Snurkvistpåla," meaning "Paul's daughter spruce twigs," and she hated them for it.

She told me about one little girl in particular, Brynhild, a pretty girl with yellow curls and rosy cheeks loved by everyone who knew her, except Belle. Belle told me Brynhild was cruel to her, that Brynhild used to invite Belle over to play with her dollies but would never let her touch them without wearing gloves, and would only let her play with one doll, Mollie, who was missing an eye and had a splintered face. Belle told me how Brynhild would hand her a grubby pair of gardening gloves and say, "You

can play with Mollie, only you have to wear these over your hands, and you can't kiss her." Belle told me how mad this made her, how one day when Brynhild had left the room, she yanked off the gloves, tore off Mollie's clothes, ran her hands up and down her body, and kissed her all over. "And then," Belle said, a thin smile cracking her face, "I ran into the kitchen and found the biggest butcher knife. I hacked off Mollie's head, arms, and legs and put all of Mollie's pieces in a gunnysack on the kitchen table."

I was enthralled. I thought about the Barbies the girls in my class brought to school each day and wondered where I could get a butcher knife, wondered if a butcher knife could cut through their plastic bodies as well as through Mollie's wood and stuffing, for even though I never had a desire to play with Barbies, I liked the idea of chopping them into pieces. "What did you do when Brynhild found out?" I asked.

"When Brynhild came back in the room," Belle continued, "I was wearing the gloves and told her, 'Mollie just got up and walked away.' Brynhild believed me, of course, because I 'would never lie to the best friend I had in the whole world.' How she screamed when she opened the gunnysack and saw Mollie all in pieces! And I screamed and cried and carried on even more than she did. 'The troll,' I cried, 'the troll that lives under the bridge, he's the one that must have done it,' I said through my sobs. And she believed me because she had no reason not to."

Making close friends at school was hard, perhaps because I loved Belle too much, needed her too much. Sometimes I told Belle about my day at school, about how the other kids teased me for sleeping at the museum and not at home. And how they made fun of me because my parents worked nights instead of days, unlike all their parents who were farmers and farmers' wives. "Dawn's a stupid name," they'd taunt, "for a night girl like you. Your name should be Dusk instead." And when I told them about Belle who talked to me during the night, they called me a liar. And when I drew a picture of my family with Belle holding my hand and my parents standing behind us, they laughed, and the teacher gave my picture a "Messy Duck" stamp for the bold colors that broke through my own carefully drawn lines. I had tried to keep the color contained, tried to stay within my own lines, but "red and blue and green and yellow just had their own idea" I told my teacher who could only frown down upon me.

Then one day in second grade, Alan, whose mother had taken him to the museum, came to school and started saying bad things about Belle, just ranting until he had gotten everything out, even though what he said wasn't very coherent. "She's just a big fat stuffed doll and her face is all cracked and she stinks and she wrote letters to lonely men and then she killed them and she probably wasn't even a woman anyway just a man

dressed like a woman who could lift a hog off a cart all by herself and could kill that hog all by herself and her kids were really stolen from other women she killed and fed to her hogs like lots of those stupid men except for the ones she buried in her back lot and she never died in that house fire and she's probably still alive!" Alan called her names too, names that he said he had read in the museum. "Bluebeard in Skirts," "Hell's Belle," "The Guinness Monster," "The Butchering Widow," "The Mistress of Murder Hill."

But I had never seen any of these things Alan spoke of, if they even existed, for I always entered Belle's shed from the side and had never wandered around the front to see what else might be on display. So I called Alan a liar and defended Belle, saying how wonderful she was, how she was my best friend, how she told the greatest stories, but I really couldn't explain away why there was an axe and bone fragments where I slept. To be honest, until Alan made the axe and bones sound like part of some evil event, I had never even thought about why they were there. Alan didn't believe the good things I said about Belle, and he really didn't understand—nobody did.

So after that day, I just stopped telling my "stories" about Belle, even denied her for the sake of having friends, and my classmates gradually stopped avoiding me. Some of them even let me play hide-and-seek, even though I was always "it." During all this, Belle never gave up on me. When I told her one night what I had done, how I had denied her to my classmates, Belle stroked my hair and said, "You are very clever, Dawn, for the only way to get what you want from people is to pretend that you aren't who you really are, that you don't know what you really know, that you don't do what you really do."

I told Belle all the things Alan had said about her and asked if they were true. She wrapped her arms around me, kissed my forehead, and said, "Not all of it, my darling Dawn. And not the way they tell it. Sleep well tonight, and tomorrow night I shall tell you more."

Now, for as long as I can remember, I have had dreams I could not explain, dreams which may have been dark but were never frightening beyond what I could handle. Before I could verbalize it, I always felt that I was, in some small way, invincible in my dreams, regardless of how vulnerable I might have felt in waking life. Perhaps it had something to do with Belle's breast milk, some immunity to fear that she had transmitted. Regardless of what horrid things happened in the dreams, I was always in control, even when I was being chased or hacked to death. The night, after Alan said all those horrible things about Belle, I had the following dream:

I was on the green hills of Norway, leading a lamb home to my family who lived in the valley. Though the lamb looked healthy and plump with its woolly and well-combed coat, when I reached down to pet it, I felt only brittle bones that crumpled under the weight of my hand. I looked down to where the lamb had been, but instead of the lamb, I saw only a pile of gray bones and a few tufts of wool that clung tightly to the bones so the wind would not blow them away.

Panic. Sheer panic. For the first time in a dream, I was not in control. The air grew cold and the wind picked up, scattering the bones across grass that was no longer green but red, the most brilliant shade of red. I looked down into the valley and saw smoke billowing from the chimney of my house and remembered why it was that I was bringing the lamb home. We were celebrating Dad's good fortune of finding oak to burn rather than the spindly spruce, and the lamb was to cook over the fire. But now, there was no lamb.

What could I do? I had promised to buy the lamb and bring it home for Dad to butcher, but what would happen if I came home without it? I didn't even want to consider that. But what if, instead of a live lamb, I brought home a dead one? Chopped into pieces and wrapped in paper? What if that thing I brought home wasn't even a lamb? Would they know? How could they? I thought of Brynhild, headed towards her house in the valley. I had control.

In the next instant, I was sitting at the long wooden table, eating dinner with my family. Dad was telling me how thoughtful I had been to prepare the lamb myself, to save him from the messy job of slaughter. "What a fine butcher you are," he said, carving up Brynhild's leg, then putting some on Mom's plate and on his own. When he offered me a slice, I declined, saying I wanted only boiled cabbage for dinner. My pockets bulged with coins, and I thought that, tomorrow, I would buy us a proper lamb.

The night following my dream, Belle—just as she had promised—began to share the truth of her story with me. I had no need to ask questions, no need to prompt her, for she controlled both her telling and my understanding.

"Nothing," she began as she tucked me into bed, "hurt my heart more than to see the suffering of my fellow Norwegian countrymen. To see them arrive in America, alone, only to be tempted by American women and American ways. I met and married Mads in Chicago when I was twenty-five, more than three times your age," she said, brushing my cheek with her fingertips, "not because I loved him but because he needed me, a strong Norwegian woman of reputable character, a link back to Norway. How he longed for the old country, for the green grass

and shimmering blue lakes. He spoke endlessly of Norway, all the while making all the American money he could to ease the ache inside of him. But it didn't," she sighed, bending low to kiss my forehead, the odor of tapioca sweet and creamy on her breath. "He even gave me four babes, four plump, blonde, Norwegian babes. But not even they could ease his ache, and when two of them died, well," she paused, as if choosing not to tell me how even though I wanted to know, "that made his ache all the worse.

"All the time he used to talk about Norway, and for seventeen years I did my best to make him feel at home, to make him feel he was back in Norway, but it did no good. 'Belle,' he would say to me, 'if only I could be back on those green hills of Norway. I would give anything.' Well," Belle went on, smoothing her skirts out over her knees, "Not even I could give him that, and all the Norwegian puddings and marzipan I fed him could not return him to those green hills. So one night I said to him, 'Mads, you will never be happy here, here in America. I will take you back to Norway the only way I know how.' He was such a gentle man, but in such anguish that he said, 'Belle, you do what you have to do. I am a brave man, and I cannot stand this life any longer.' And so it was that I told our two children to kiss Papa goodbye, told them that he was going to take a trip back to Norway. And then I brought Mads a mug of hot eggnog with a little something extra and wished him well.

"That Mads was well insured was of no concern to me, for I had no desire for my own gain. Yet, why should I not keep the money? He would have wanted me to live well, for though I never truly loved him, he had certainly loved and needed me, wanted the best for me. He wouldn't have minded."

Belle went on to tell me about buying the farm on McClure road in LaPorte with the insurance money left from Mads, and about marrying Peter Gunness. And she told me how Peter was not so much a lonely Norwegian as an angry one, a man with a violent temper that flared up when he drank. "One night," she said, "I was dusting a shelf while Peter, in a sober moment, sat reading in his favorite chair. On this shelf sat a sausage grinder, and as Peter sat and read, it struck me that, like Mads, he also missed Norway, though he didn't speak of his longing as such but drowned it with drink. And as I was thinking this, my hand brushed up against the grinder. Now, I'll confess I made no move to stop the grinder as it fell, but I did not directly hit him with it. And anyway, it was all for the best. The children and I were better off without him, and he had such a wealth of insurance that we were able to live well for quite some time."

As for the other men, Belle blushed when she spoke of them. I told her about a letter Alan had mentioned, one she had written

to Andrew Helgelien, and she recited several lines from memory. "I went to the post office this morning and had the great pleasure of receiving one of your very welcome letters. Many thousand thanks for them all—I keep them all as I would a great treasure. You truly do not know how highly I prize them as I have not found anything so genuine Norwegian and real in all the twenty years I have been in America. I do not think a queen could be good enough for you and in my thoughts you stand highest above all high and I will not let anything stand in the way of my doing anything for you or so that we can meet each other." Then she paused and shrugged. "Well," she said, "what else did he have in his life?"

"Those letters I wrote, to Andrew and to the others, brought them fond memories of Norway, gave them something to look forward to when they finally made the trip (most from the Dakotas) to Indiana. Why," she said, grinning at me, "even you know how much fun it is to keep secrets from people, or to believe something or someone better is waiting for you. But then when you actually see that thing, get that thing, all the joy goes out of you, for what you expect is never as good as what you end up getting."

As Belle talked, I curled up on my side and burrowed under my blanket of burlap, all but my head, warming to the truth of her. I thought back to all I had desired and been disappointed by—my first bicycle with busted tires that Dad brought home from the dump, the birthday slumber party nobody came to—and I understood. Belle was right, and what's more, Belle was everything I had always known her to be, everything Alan had said she wasn't. Belle, keeper of my nights, was good, true, and wise. As much as I knew the warmth and softness of burlap in the night, I knew I had made no mistake in letting her love me.

"I gave these men hope," Belle continued, "and I loved them through words. I made them believe, each one of them, that they could have a better life if they came to live with me. I kept them from suffering disappointment by releasing them from life at the height of their joy. And you should have seen them, too. Especially Andrew.

"When Andrew arrived at the farm, I had a feast prepared of all those things he most loved and best remembered from Norway, ending the meal with cream pudding, Andrew's favorite. Afterwards, we went to the bank together, and he added his funds to mine, as true a marriage as any ordained by church and state. And then we had one night of passion, true bliss for Andrew—of course, you're too young to understand all of that, but you will someday—and I closed our night by kissing him on the forehead and giving him a mug of hot eggnog with nutmeg... and a little something extra. He passed over happily, a smile on

his face, all his earthly needs met in me. I fell asleep beside him and awoke only when his body grew cold.”

“And then what did you do?” I asked.

“Well,” Belle said, patting my leg, “what I did with his body is not really important, but I did have to hide it, to preserve the sanctity of his memory. For though our time together was brief, I gave Andrew something special, something he needed. His money was but a token of what he owed.”

Over the course of Belle’s telling, I heard the museum clock toll the hour five times, first ten tolls, then eleven, then twelve, then back around to one and two. I did not understand everything Belle told me, and I don’t think she expected that I would, but I understood enough. And certainly what I did not, could not yet, understand, I simply trusted. And somewhere in the space between the tolling of two and three, I fell asleep in the lap of my true mother, my hair fanned out across her broad skirts. I slept well that night and for many nights after.

Two uneventful years followed Belle’s night of full disclosure. At school, I did not mention Belle, nor did my classmates. I did not mention her until fourth grade. Until *Gnista*, the high school play for that year.

I remember only bits of *Gnista* now, for I confess I did not pay it much attention at the time, knowing “the truth” as Belle had told it. I do remember a high school girl with smoother skin and a much slimmer build than Belle’s dressed in turn-of-the-century garb. My classmates thought she looked convincing, but she only made me laugh. I do remember the fake Belle holding a sausage grinder above her unsuspecting fake husband Peter’s head, bringing it down with great force, and the fake Peter falling dead to the floor, so very different from the truth as Belle had told it to me.

Perhaps *Gnista* could have faded into the background. Certainly, it should have. But after the play, our fourth grade teacher spent the rest of the afternoon sharing the “facts” of the Belle Guinness story, showing slides of black and white photographs—the scarred and bloated head of Ole Budsberg, the twisted and decaying body of Andrew Helgelien in the garden cart, men with shovels and pickaxes looking for the bodies of Belle and her three children in the burned basement remains while curious onlookers peered down at them. Not only did our teacher not tell the truth as Belle had told it, he also spiced up her stories with rumors nobody has ever confirmed, including the one that had everybody talking at lunch.

“Little did the townspeople of LaPorte know,” our teacher said in a near whisper, “but in their morning sausage, they were eating the bodies of Belle’s victims, for Belle’s sausage was famous in LaPorte.” Laura, a student new to my class that very

day, called the hamburgers we had for lunch Guinness Burgers and the name stuck, not only for that week, but for all our school years.

If I had an ally at school, it was Laura. Yet she was a peculiar one. After *Gnista*, she began hanging around, asking me questions about Belle, even wanting to meet her. At recess, we hung upside-down from the spider bars (which she insisted were cages in a medieval dungeon), and watched as wind whipped the sand below (which she insisted was a cauldron of boiling oil). When we walked the low balance beam at the boundary between the playground and the soybean field, she insisted that each time one of us lost her balance and fell, a crocodile chomped off a limb (arms first, then legs). And when I talked about Belle, Laura didn't want to know Belle's noble motives, she only wanted to hear gory details. Even so, Laura was as close a thing to a friend that I had, and we spent all our time at school together.

"I want to meet her," Laura demanded one recess in sixth grade as we played Klutzy Derby, the goal of which was to kick the legs out from beneath the other person. She had just succeeded in making me the klutz for the fourth time in ten minutes, and I was more concerned with wiping the gravel off my skinned leg than in listening to her.

As I watched little dots of blood rise to my skin's surface, Laura said, "Come on, Dawn. I want to meet her. Why don't you see if I can stay over at your place?" We had a peculiar understanding, Laura and I. When Laura said, "your place," she meant the museum, Belle's place, which was more my place than that house on the corner of U.S. 30 and 450 West. She, of all the people at school, was the only one who ever got it right.

Don't get me wrong. I was pleased by Laura's interest, the only interest that had ever truly been shown in me and in Belle, don't get me wrong. Yet I was also frightened. Frightened about sharing Belle, frightened that Belle might somehow love Laura more, because by sixth grade, Belle and I were beginning to have some differences.

My first period came early in sixth grade during the night, and Belle, not me, had been the first to notice. She smelled the blood. When I awoke, I panicked about the blood that seeped through my underwear and smeared my thighs while Belle congratulated me on becoming a woman. "You can fuck boys now," she said, "and if you get in trouble, I know what to do. I've helped many girls in trouble in my time." And she told me of the "many girls in trouble" who had come to her to rid themselves of boys' unwanted seed. "The two kinds of people I helped the most in my time were lonely bachelor farmers and desperate girls in trouble."

The central piece of furniture in Belle's house and throughout her life, as she told me on my first morning of being a

woman, had been her long oak kitchen table. Indeed, she performed her most important services on that table. As I wiped the blood from my thighs and dressed for school, Belle told me of one poor soul who came to her on a night in January, 1908. "Well, I was taking care of Andrew that night there on the kitchen table and had forgotten this girl had made an appointment. What could I do?" she asked, shrugging her shoulders, "I used my kitchen table for both tasks.

"This girl, Annie I believe her name was, must have come first to my front door and knocked, but I couldn't hear her knocking for all the wind that night, and so she came in the back door and saw me with Andrew before I knew she was even there. I heard the back door slam, heard Annie shout to whomever had driven her to the house, 'She's got a man in there on the table! And she's hacking him to pieces with an axe!' I chased after her, of course, not to hurt her but to explain, but she was gone with the driver, horses kicking up field dirt in the moon's half-light. Had I thought to put down the axe, perhaps she would have stopped running and returned." Belle sighed, threw up her hands, continued. "When I returned through the back door, I nearly tripped over the bag of money Annie had brought to pay for the removal of the unwanted seed—\$27.50, all coins. All the money she must have had in the world."

Because I didn't plan to get into "trouble," Belle's story about Annie didn't have much effect on me, nor did her promise to "help me." Even though Belle gave me permission to "fuck boys" at the age of eleven, it wasn't something that particularly appealed to me. And I suppose this was when the distance between Belle and me began to grow. She wanted me to follow in her footsteps and help the sad lonely men of the world while making a living for myself, but I wasn't ready for that and didn't know if I ever would be.

At first, I tried doing what she wanted, and I fucked boys. Or perhaps I should say, I was fucked by boys. Or perhaps I should say, fucked by one boy. Or perhaps I should say, and this is the most accurate, was kissed and mildly fondled by one boy, Duane, who even in sixth grade had earthworms dressed in baseball uniforms on his bedroom walls. Even so, I told Belle that I fucked boys, but when she asked for proof in the form of money and bodies, I had nothing to show. So she got angry and yelled at me, "You'll never amount to anything! I'm ashamed to call you my daughter!" At that, we both paused, and at first my eyes started to well up with tears. But then, overcome with rage, I thoughtlessly yelled, "I'm not your daughter. I only sleep here."

"Only sleep here." What simple words they are to say now, but acknowledging that fact for the first time was the most difficult thing I had ever done, and admitting I was not Belle's

daughter was only the beginning, for after those words slipped from my mouth, I desired all the more desperately to be Belle's daughter though I was incapable of doing what she required.

I was hesitant to invite her to spend the night. I worried that Belle might claim a new daughter for herself, that I wouldn't be the one. Even so, I couldn't help but give Belle what she wanted, believing somehow that if Laura could do what Belle most wanted, then Belle would thank me for bringing Laura to her. So desperately did I need to remain Belle's daughter that I believed I could secure my own place with Belle alongside Laura. I was right about Laura becoming Belle's new daughter; I was wrong about securing my own place.

I remember well the first night Laura spent with Belle and me. Laura and I walked out of school that late October day into a new world, everything having changed since morning. Air which had been warm and sweet was now cold and bitter; leaves which had pulsed green with life were now the color of dried blood. As I slipped my arms into my blue nylon jacket and hunched over against the wind, Laura pulled off her sweatshirt and raised her face to the sky. And the wind shrieked, in a voice I knew but did not know, "not my daughter, not my daughter, not my daughter."

Laura and Belle hit it off from the start, and I could tell Belle loved Laura, but in a different way than she had ever loved me.

"I hear you killed a lot of people," Laura said straight out when she met Belle.

"That I did," Belle replied, nodding.

"I hear you stole their money," Laura said.

"That I did," Belle replied, grinning.

"I hear you even killed your own children, some for insurance money, some just to make people think you'd died in that fire," Laura said.

"That, too, I did." Belle replied, and extended her hand to Laura.

I was deflated. There was no talk of helping lonely Norwegian men, no explanation or justification. Laura didn't require the soft sell, and I could tell Belle was no longer interested in what I would or would not do for her. That night, Laura stole a carom board set from one museum display and a leather belt from another, and in the confines of Belle's shed (which was just the right size for two but too small for three), we played Punishment Pool, a game of Laura's invention which resulted in ten blows from the leather strap for every shot missed. Between Belle and Laura, I ended the evening with burning red welts across my legs, butt, and back. In that one evening, I had fallen completely out of Belle's favor, and when I awoke the next morning, I saw Belle not as my living, breathing mother, but as a stiff stuffed doll with a cracked smile across her papier-mâché face. And then

I saw Laura, completely entranced, talking to Belle as I had the previous night and for all my nights before, pausing to listen and laughing every so often at Belle's stories. I did not doubt that Belle was speaking, though I could no longer hear her.

Within a week of Laura's first night at the museum, her parents died in a fire that bore such strong resemblance to the fire at Belle's house decades before, I was surprised nobody else noticed. As I was seen to be her only friend, my parents accepted my suggestion that she live with us. At night, Laura slept under Belle's watchful gaze and I, no longer welcome, began sleeping in the Victorian living room. The velvet couches were so plush, so comfortable compared to my cot in Belle's shed, but I could not sleep. The sound of Laura's voice and the memory of Belle's kept me ever awake. I could not help but miss them both. Sometimes I thought I even heard Belle's voice, but when I went to the shed and looked inside, hoping to be welcomed back with open arms, Laura turned her back to me and Belle refused to be anything more than a stuffed and lifeless doll.

One night I did sleep, but my head was full of terrible nightmares. I had become Brynhild's doll Mollie, and I knew my fate before I saw a figure, Belle's figure, appear, looking down at me, shaking her head, a butcher knife in one hand and a gunnysack in the other. When I awoke, Belle was standing over me, the axe from her shed at her feet, but she was looking straight ahead as she could only do, stuffed thing that she was. My mother, coming to get me at the end of her shift, asked how Belle had gotten all the way over to the Victorian exhibit, but I could not explain. "Well, she's got to go back," my mother said, and I couldn't agree more. My mother left me with Belle while she went to find a moving dolly. Belle's silence was more hateful than her anger.

Months went by, and on the morning of August 15, 1985, my twelfth birthday, my mother woke me from the Victorian living room couch—at last, I was sleeping through the night—and stated that I was old enough to sleep on my own at home while she and my father went to work at night. "But Laura wants to stay," I said, knowing how close she had become to Belle.

"Whatever Laura wants to do, she can do," my mother said firmly, "but you, my daughter, seem at last to have outgrown Belle." Then she laughed as she said, "Why, until a few months ago, I thought the curator would have to build a separate exhibit just for you."

And then I laughed too. I hugged my mother, my flesh and blood mother who smelled of bleach and nicotine, and for the first time felt strangely loved.

I suppose, too, that I gained control in a physical sense. I no longer slept in the Belle Guinness exhibit, and I never went to the museum, even requesting exemptions from the occasional school

field trip. I wallpapered my bedroom with bright yellow daisies and daffodils, making up for that day in kindergarten when everybody but I could talk about their beautiful bedrooms with their beautiful wallpaper. The only problem was, nobody had cause to ask me about my wallpaper, and I didn't feel easy within such beautiful walls. Neither did Belle become a thing of the past so quickly. At school, sitting beside me at our shared desk, Laura talked about Belle so incessantly that I couldn't help but envy their closeness, even as the boys in our class began disappearing one by one—first the blonde Norwegian-looking ones, then all the rest. Of course, this alarmed the teachers, and police were alerted, but Laura could pass so easily for normal that no one ever suspected.

Ben Folkert's disappearance had been sloppy. Anybody would tell you that. Usually the boys went missing in the nighttime, coin banks shaped like He-Man and Gizmo the Gremlin absent from their bed stands or bookcase headboards. Nobody could say whether the boys had been stolen away or left on their own; they were just gone. But not Ben. Not Ben who had come to school with twelve crumpled dollar bills in his pocket, birthday money from his snow bird grandmother living the high life in some Florida trailer park. Not Ben who went outside with the rest of us for morning recess but did not come back.

We were a week into March, three days into spring thaw. Laredo, still wearing her envied pink moon boots and Care Bears scarf when the rest of us had shed our winter gear, had gone looking for Ben who had just that morning checked the "YES" box on her "Will you be my boyfriend?" note, then forgot to wait for her at recess. That day I played our crocodile game alone as Laura said she had to stay inside to practice fractions, so when Miss Lesion blew her recess whistle, I lined up along the boundary between sidewalk and mud with my classmates, all of us orderly and contained. All of us but Ben who did not return and Laredo who ran screaming from the far woods, Ben's beloved Chicago Cubs cap dripping blood onto her moon boots. Our orderly line fell apart as my class ran to the security of our room, shrieking about murder. As if waiting for us all, Laura sat hunched over our desk, chopping whole numbers into fractions. I eased in beside her and rested my head on the desk's fake wood surface, liking its coolness against my flushed cheeks. Laura looked over at me but said nothing, as if she had done nothing more than chop up boring old numbers all recess. I didn't say a word to her about Ben. She knew. We both knew. And besides, there was mud on her boots.

My stomach in knots, I waited for the principal to pass between our desks with Miss Lesion, for them to ask questions about Ben, to rifle through random desks for clues, then dismiss us. I tidied the contents of my half of our desk, stacking text-

books neatly in one pile, papers in another, loose crayons and pencils in my blue crayon box. But I could do nothing about Laura's tangled half of our desk, and so worried about what might be found. Her bloodied pocketknife? Twelve crumpled dollar bills? I both wanted Laura to be found out so I could be done with her, be done with Belle, but even more I knew that I could not afford to lose Laura, to lose them both. I didn't need to worry. Laura passed so easily for normal that no one ever suspected her or thought to search her half of our desk, and people had long ago forgotten to ask me about anything. The principal and Miss Lesion made their rounds, and soon enough school was dismissed and we walked outside, Laura linking her arm in mine.

Junior high came and went, then high school, and increasingly I found myself alone. When Laura wasn't busy mauling some guy up against his locker, she still talked to me, but I grew tired of hearing about her boyfriends and about how dumb and old-fashioned Belle was, how Belle stunk like cabbage all the time and how she preached at Laura what she should do with her life when Belle hadn't a "fucking clue about the world since 1908," how after graduation Laura was "getting the hell out of that museum" to do her own thing, something bigger and better than even Belle had done. I listened but didn't listen, and when I opened my mouth and spoke, Laura didn't hear me. But then, nobody could.

On an early day in June 1991, dressed in robes as red as blood that tastes first air, Laura and I stood facing each other, pressed close amidst a crowd of jumping, shouting classmates. Laura had done her share of jumping and shouting, mixing in as only she could do, me standing awkward and shifting in her shadow. We knew this was it, the time to say goodbye and to walk our separate ways, the time to move out into the world and on to better things than South Central, bigger places than Hanna and Union Mills. We had never been ones to embrace, but we had no choice, here on graduation day when the only thing for anyone to do was to clutch each other so tightly that only the letting go would bring relief. Her body in my arms felt like I always imagined mine to feel to Belle—sharp and bony, delicate in the way of bones too old for one's flesh. I smelled in her the cabbage she hated, the tapioca she thought so old-fashioned, and I smelled too her cheap perfume and the cologne of many boys. In me I feared she smelled blood and so I shrunk into myself remembering Belle's long-forsaken command: "*You can fuck boys now.*" Laura and I pulled away then, our robes separating like velvet curtains until we stood separate and alone, a dark and empty stage between us. Laura told me something as she turned back into the crowd, but I could no longer hear her voice.

Daniel Citro

Rail and Air

The bag ripped.
The bottles rolled one by one down Berglenstrasse.
I felt the bag ripping.
I felt the plastic stretching against the fleshy inner of my finger.
I did nothing to stop its ripping.
A tendon in my wrist pulled wire tight.
I felt the plastic stretching into a knifeblade aiming to cry out

O no, my peach!

As our girl stood with her hand clenched on the rail,
the flesh of her knuckles pulled white in damp cool air
and the ship set out; slate-colored water roiled in its wake,
into white foam.

The bottles rolled by one.
This is the past.

I have an appointment.
What is your name?
When I was born they gave me a name.
You are a father's son
and I am a runner.
Before this.
A mountain rises above the woods behind the house.
I have an appointment.
I need to.
The number is there.

Zurich sits in a bowl.
Trees spread out in thumbprint batches along the stream like
dark spots of mold.
This from above.
A leaden string cuts under the grand arch.
Water shines in the places without shadow;
in the places without light lies shadow.
This is not Zurich.
At least it hadn't been.
Nothing is certain.
The Alps.
Yes. They stretch out.
No matter.
I have an appointment.
I am here now.

A fog of spores sits in the drawer three weeks.
When I see it I am disgusted;
when it's in the drawer I am undisgusted.
When I look I see a fog of trees spread across the milky surface of
a bowl.
I see the lights along Long Island glowing like thumbs,
crawling over indefinite space, along water wide, coalblack, still.

I caught a cold.
I walked along Berglenstrasse under the ghost of a brown tower,
heard benthic bells.
I went to the pharmacy, pointed to my deathache congestion.
She handed me a box of blue eggs.

The tram blew out.
A pickaxe crew carved gashes in the street.
The sun sank in sinew, the gashes became holes.
It rained, the gashes became sodden bodies.

Berglenstrasse drei, drei, drei.
A child's song.
I sang as well.

The song became rivers.
The bag ripped.
The bottles rolled by one.

Lynne Y. Chien

While You Are Out Making a Living and I Am Snooping Around Because You Said You Had Nothing to Hide

Finding Astroglide
beneath the bathroom sink
is a bit of a shock.

Here you shower,
shit, dry your hair.
In the next room you sleep,
dress, work on your core with Gunnar Peterson.

This bottle and the third
that remains is some kind of relic,
proof you are an animal
not just the image of a man
and his smoking jacket.

A Brief History of the Suburban

starter home

fat cat

wedded bliss

wonder bread

miscarriage

new car

marbled floor

love affairs

lawn parties

wonder bread

clean break

new condo

classic car

girlfriend

some young thing.

Tips for the Unwed: on Gesture

One should not walk around like a peacock
aimlessly wandering within the confines of a graveled pen
preparing for the appearance of a mate—
feathers plumed
up, then down
in listless daily exercise
to lure one who can appreciate,
who will, in the event of an opened gate,
with you elope.

Daniel Casey

Such Discretion Is Common

Public radio often fills private homes
around quiet occupants who strain to
hear what others might mumble, allude, or moan
in rooms next door, who justly curse fumbling
neighbors as they drag heavy stumps across
the ceiling/floor thwarting each and every
scene of lament, sex, or argument.

Shade

I don't doubt
what happens
or demand;
I stand within
winter woods
dormant, blank,
only contour.

Robert Archambeau

Working the Piano

for John Matthias

“One does not work the piano,
or the violin. One does not create a body

of play.” I read this
in another poet’s poem, and think of you. Not

when I first knew you, in those classes that you thought of
as your work, your job, not later

when you supervised (such work!) my work,
my PhD—I thought of you at nine

or twelve years old, Republican Ohio, say, in 1950
or in 1953. In

costume, all the sticks and staves,
the plumed hat, fencing foil, your cape, your cousin

dressed the same, the world you opened
every summer, lovely and legitimate,

that world of play.
And if it is your work

my book is all about,
then you have worked the piano thirty years and more,

have worked the violin,
have worked with sticks and staves and fencing foil

to build a world both lovely and legitimate:
a jeweled box, or a field of wrens

where, while you don’t know it,
I and others wander and return.

About the Authors

Sami Schalk is a feminist-activist-poet from Southgate, Kentucky, who teaches community writing workshops in both the South Bend and Greater Cincinnati areas. She is a current poetry student of the Notre Dame MFA program, due to graduate in 2010. Afterward, she intends to either pursue her PhD or return home to Kentucky to teach writing, mainly in community and nonprofit settings.

Ann Palazzo teaches Fiction, Creative Writing, American Literature, and Creative Nonfiction at Columbus State Community College in Columbus, Ohio. She is not, nor will she ever be, on Facebook. She is not, nor will she ever be, a Buckeye.

Grant Osborn hails from the Northeastern states and graduated magna cum laude from the University of Notre Dame with a BS in Biological Sciences in 2006. He is the author of *The Human Market* (Luapatir Press 2007) and winner of the 2005 Long Reach for African American Poetics Competition. He is a lover of soul and thinks everyone should have at least a couple of vices; some of his favorites are whiskey, women, wine, and song.

William McGee, Jr. has published fiction in the *Notre Dame Review*.

Jessica Maich is a 1997 graduate of the Notre Dame Creative Writing program. She lives in South Bend, Indiana, and teaches at St. Mary's College.

Alan Lindsay teaches literature and creative writing at NHTI—Concord's Community College (yes, that's the real name of the place; the letters used to mean something). There he also oversees semi-annual performances by Stage Lynx Productions. He's a member of Granite Playwrights, Ink (playwrights ink.blogspot.com), and he occasionally muses on language at the unnecessarily serious blog *Good Words Unlimited* (goodwordsunlimited.blogspot.com).

Iris Law will graduate from Notre Dame with her MFA in Creative Writing (Poetry) in 2010. She grew up in southern New Jersey and received a BA in English from Stanford University in 2008.

C. Kubasta, MFA 2002, teaches too many sections of freshman comp at Marian University in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin. She tries to write, and most often falls asleep while marking pronoun agreement issues.

Desmond Kon Zhicheng-Mingdé has edited or co-produced over ten books and three audio books. His work in journalism led him to Australia, Cambodia, France, Hong Kong, and Spain to write numerous stories, including features on Madonna and Björk. Trained in book publishing at Stanford University, he also holds a theology Masters

from Harvard University (2006) and soon a Creative Writing Masters from the University of Notre Dame. He recently received a grant to launch the anthology *For the Love of God* at the Prague International Poetry Festival. His poetry and prose have appeared in *Agni*, *Confrontation*, *Faultline*, *Gulf Coast*, *Harvard Review*, *Seneca Review*, *Sonora Review*, and *Versal*, among others.

Cecile Kandl was raised on the Greek island of Aegina. Her fiction is rooted in this magical place that will not let hold of her imagination. She graduated from Notre Dame's Creative Writing program in 2005. Since then, she has earned a PhD in Victorian Literature from Lehigh University. She is now happily settled in a tenure-track position at Bucks County Community College, where she teaches composition and literature. She lives with her husband and three boys in Pipersville, Pennsylvania.

Kelly Russell Jaques graduated from Notre Dame's MA program in May of 1993. She worked in publishing for many years and has been staying home to raise her three children, Emma, Chloe, and Dylan.

Kathryn Hunter is the recipient of the 2004 Academy of American Poets Prize. She is a technical editor for the Pipeline Renewal Program in Alaska.

Sean Keith Henry, MFA 1996, was born on a beautiful island in the Caribbean. His stories have been published in *Callaloo*, *Salamander*, and *Obsidian II*. His novel *LIMBO* was published by Akashic Books, New York, in 2004. He lives in Southern California but also divides his time between Trinidad and Norway. His second novel is forthcoming.

Jarrett Haley's fiction has been awarded by Playboy and was a finalist for the Barry Hannah Prize in 2008. His work has been featured in the *Notre Dame Review*. He lives in northern Indiana with his wife and his son, who is due this June. He is founder and editor of *BULL*, the journal of Men's Fiction.

Nate Gunsch received his MFA from Notre Dame in 2006 and then hung around South Bend for football season (i.e., Brady Quinn). After leaving the Bend, he stopped to write for three months in Cleveland before continuing east. He currently writes for a homeless services nonprofit in New York and lives in Brooklyn.

Esteban I. V. Galindo, MFA 1997, lives in Southern California but really wants to live in New Mexico. His wife is blonde, but he prefers her as a brunette. He likes his day job but isn't crazy about it. But he still likes to write and, in the end, that's the important thing.

David Ewald lives in Denver, Colorado, and teaches at Front Range Community College. This August his full-length play, *Mormania*, will be given a staged reading at the Crossroads Theater as part of Paragon Theatre's 2009 season of *The Trench*. More Information about David and his published and forthcoming works can be found at davidmichaelewald.com.

Jessica Martinez English received a BA in English and a BA in Spanish from Armstrong Atlantic State University in Savannah, Georgia, where she was awarded The Wesleyan Writers Award for her poetry. Her poems have been published or are forthcoming in *Calliope* and *Helix*. She will be awarded an MFA from Notre Dame's creative writing program this spring.

Kevin Ducey graduated from the MFA program in 2004. He lives in Madison, Wisconsin.

Lisa De Niscia was born in St. Mary's Hospital in a New Jersey slum. Now she lives in Southern California in a section of Los Angeles that overlooks the port and the ocean and is mostly populated by descendants of those who came from Italy, Croatia, and Mexico. Here, Mary is everywhere, in nooks and crannies, smiling because the weather in San Pedro is so darn good year-round.

A.F. De Betta received her Masters in Creative Writing from Notre Dame in 1998. She lives in the deserts of New Mexico and works in a corporate position that bores her to the extent of always. She does, however, have a fine Swingline stapler that never jams.

Renée E. D'Aoust's essay "Graham Crackers" was recently published in Robert Gottlieb's anthology *Reading Dance* (Pantheon Books). Her publications in 2009 include *Brooklyn Rail*, *Dance International*, *Explore Dance*, *Idaho Farm Bureau Quarterly Magazine*, *Keyhole*, *Northern Journeys*, *Redwood Coast Review*, *Under the Sun*, *wordriver*, and elsewhere. D'Aoust holds degrees from Columbia University (BA, '01) and Notre Dame (MFA, '06).

Melanie Cotter is a student in the MFA program at the University of Notre Dame (class of 2010), where she will work on her thesis under the direction of Steve Tomasula. Previously, she earned Bachelor's and Master's degrees, both with an emphasis in creative writing, at Central Michigan University under the tutelage of Matthew Roberson and Kim Chinquee. Her work has appeared in *Temenos*, *Word Riot*, *ken*again*, *JMWW*, and *Helix*. She is an assistant editor for the *Notre Dame Review* and loves side projects that involve reading impending works.

Dawn Comer's life doesn't change much. She is a native of Hanna, Indiana, and she grew up with an intimate connection to Belle Gunness and so was destined someday to write "Northern Belle." She is still married, still has two kids and one cat, and is still living in Ohio, where she edits occasionally and teaches creative writing every so often at Defiance College. About the only thing that has changed for Dawn is a shift in creative focus from her long-term short story collection about tourist attractions to a new project, memoir this time, which so far has a decisive-sounding title (*Fella with an Umbrella: Discovering Joy on the Autism Spectrum*) but not much substance.

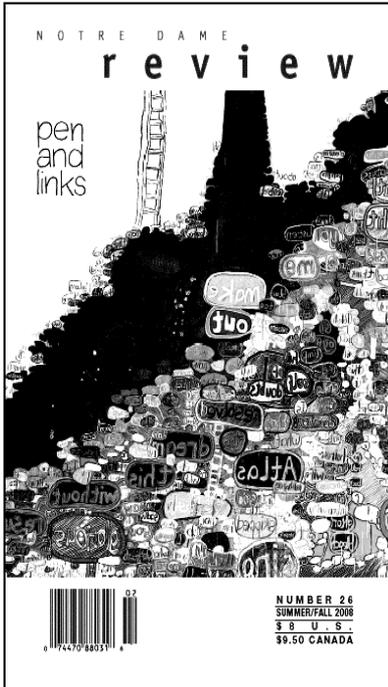
Daniel Citro was born on the banks of the Mississippi River and grew up on golf courses. He has studied English at Quincy University and at Western Illinois University. He began writing in order to have something to illustrate. Now, he assembles poems, plucking words from various places and pinning them to the page. He is at times a student, train passenger, remover of light bulbs, and writer of biographies, but he is a failure on the harmonica.

Lynne Yu-Ling Chien was made in Taipei, Taiwan, and currently lives in sunny California. She is a die-hard Vancouver Canucks fan and will say two words about the 2008 – 09 season: Alex. Burrows. She graduated from the program in 2007 and has a relatively bright future ahead of her.

Daniel Casey earned his MFA in Poetry from the University of Notre Dame in 2003 and currently lives in New Haven, Connecticut. He edits the online journal *Gently Read Literature*, which exclusively features review-essays on contemporary poetry and literary fiction.

Robert Archambeau's books include *Word Play Place* (Ohio) and *Home and Variations* (Salt). A book of literary criticism, *Laureates and Heretics*, will appear from the University of Notre Dame Press next year. His work has appeared in *Poetry*, *Chicago Review*, *Boston Review*, *Pleiades*, and other journals, and he has won awards from the Illinois Arts Council and the Academy of American poets. He teaches at Lake Forest College, and he is co-director of their new press. He blogs at www.samizdatblog.blogspot.com.

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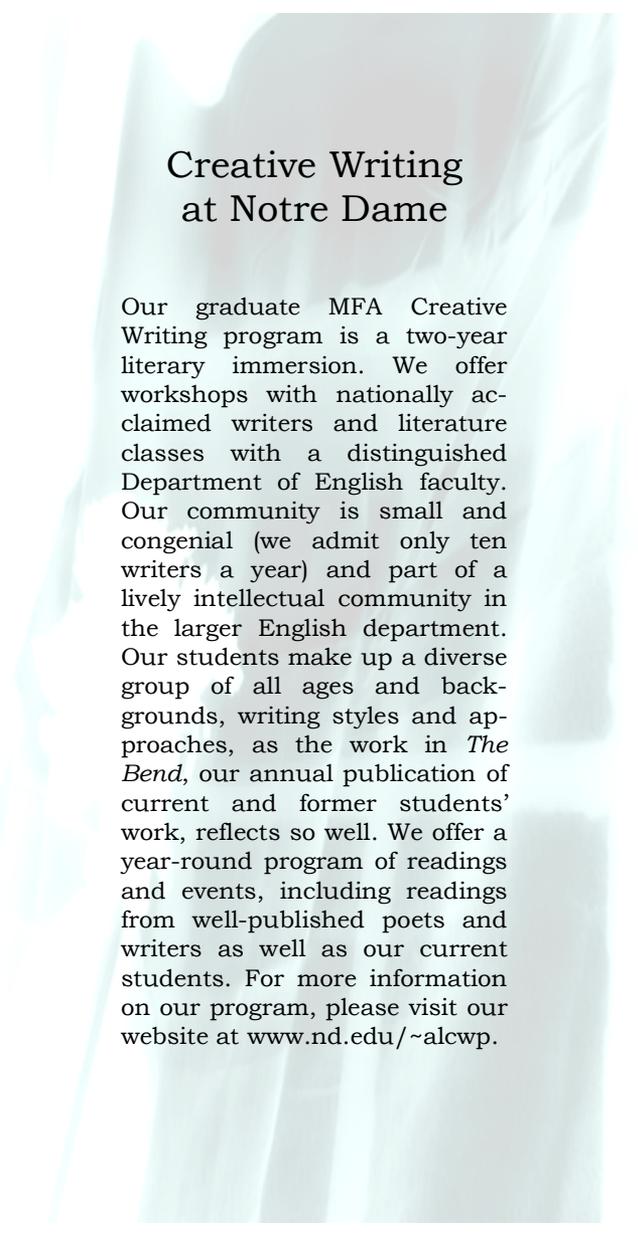


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