

THE BEND

**THIS IS THE 2011
INSTALLMENT
OF THE SHOWCASE FOR
THE WORK OF
STUDENTS,
ALUMNI, AND FRIENDS
OF THE CREATIVE
WRITING PROGRAM
AT THE UNIVERSITY
OF NOTRE DAME --
THE JOURNAL KNOWN
IN PREVIOUS
INCARNATIONS AS
DANTA,
LA RUE BARBARIAN,
AND
THE RHUBARBARIAN**

ISSUE 8

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welcome to haloed eyes dried on torn sweater cuff.
here lies the flower. remove my. triple all the things you
heard said today. take a polaroid of your fashionable
outfit and make a dramatic gesture towards the other
side of boring. ok here is my glandular cancer held
taut. defecating killswitch. a law against aught !

pollution is kind of perfect, dreary lace slash/gash punk
rock gash. you just dont care well renew. you hardon
w/ the flick of a lighter. when we see something as
stupid as the supposed death drive all of our shadow-
puppets begin to vomit simultaneously. what are we
supposed to do, walk around smelling like aquanet left
over from the 80s??

what done
try it
that arm again
let me in

if unfurled then umbilical dreary gossip unfurled now
never. breakheartspeakoutforthesirencoming --

off worklights offstage making out in front of your
poem(s)tory like a locker whore. drape that sweater
over those shoulders.

who is that guy?

EDITORS

SETH

ELBAAN

booties [elizabethan sonnet]

mummy, you are as slutty as a slut:
as a holler-slot who'll monkey for spoons.
stop this all and minivan us to trucks.
you know what? there's 15 ovens in bloom
at burn-now's – so move! move on, 3k yell-
stars! your un-christmas tree chants won't do shoot.
yet... the truth... teddy and i wanna smell
slimy mud, bloody blood. but would our boot-
ies (black) still shine like saps or could you see
the stupe that's 21st c.? k, we'll pray
so mummy and boyfriend won't... shh -- sick! – sleep.
you! stay crib and prepare pb&j,
for no part is as presh as our tummies,
except that place that disinfects dummies.

glamour [elizabethan sonnet]

you're so fine, sep. 1st 1939,
punching pole-flicks. (pee-you -- you gob horsies!)
nay! teddy and i... 2k10... jail-time!
what to do but gulp apple juice. relief?
no! demock's "clowns of modern ideas" oh!
if only we could fire, like right-drag.
but mummy minivan's to fast food slow,
so french fry, lil' cola, hamburg, toy lag –
always lag behind times.... mummy! oven!
banana bread! (plus cellie): "oh... ha-ha."
why laugh? why sigh? whatev... telly's lovin'
glamour music vid: "ooh la ga-ga-ga."
cry... telly won't go ah-wits I, II, III,
though we gift it charge cards and scream, "please -- please!"

risk [elizabethan sonnet]

mummy maintains that i stink worse than pork
bits. so lukewarm water fills up tub – it's
clean time! but teddy and i aren't cheap forks:
we're chunks of dead horsie meat. yes, a ritz
of blondi blue eye blitzes – that is us.
we order exhaustive exercises
and hang a pole-flick or two... but so what?
mummy squeezes shampoo – she'll burn my eyes.
teddy bear – all stuffing – can't get wetness.
he sits on toilet seat, sick from grilled cheese.
no, mummy can't cook: she only makes risk.
if this was that place, there'd be zyklon-b.
but soap isn't a yell-star... gossip -- darn!
splish-splash, flip this bath: burn us in a barn.

teeth [elizabethan sonnet]

we – teddy and i – immured in weewee
room for 12 telly shows programming our-
selves not to weewee 'cause there's a chancy
long journey starring cuddly cattle cars.
but then mummy pounds door – she's at wits' ends.
she screams, "k... that's enough!" well... heck to her.
she can't consider blondi blue eye sends
the right ones to heaven. so mummy furs,
gloves, scarves -- she needs "air," a pound of lunchmeat.
all alone are teddy and i. we search
for beards to burn, grass to tear with our teeth.
but there's no reich-rule -- modern c.'s a twerp.
so we march to comfy couch, stare at show
where laguna boy brands 'guna girl "ho!"

no flower [elizabethan sonnet]

mummy, your skills are worthless while teddy
and i injun-style in whim room with
reich-rule... he craves cream cakes, "are they ready?"
no. mummy can't fix fab treats: you'll get sick
chewing her choc. chip squares. so let's sippy
peppermint tea, but no flower chatter:
telly shows are tops -- they're not for hippies.
ooh! epps of kiss-booth boys, hers-frenching-hers.
mummy sees dancing celebs in her bed,
and over covers she cellies... um? eww.
reich-rule, have you movie'd about red-head
mermaid? she collects people items too.
though not tattoos or tresses or wool knits,
'course, you're yay: so who cares if so-so pits?

M O N I C A

M O N I

scrambled matter

dog vomits greasy gutter. sounds flutter. i pat it. howl. i hit it. howl. hunkers on my heel.

i a wavered fool schooled to tricks of throat & heart. i hug it. i hug it. i slip into its

cuticles. its motor skills. in order. in schemer satire. its bite a mud an arbitrary sig-

nal. it qualifies my tough respond. i idolize your mama your grandma

kiss kiss kiss kiss your crisp paws. dog you a skillful scoundrel.

A.F.

WESTT A

committed

I'm sitting on a curb next to another guy who calls himself "Whatever" while drinking a beer from the committee for **Imbibe It**. This guy is clearly a member of the **Kill the Referents** committee because he doesn't appear to be wearing a badge at all. Whatever. These days, you do your best not to look up but that doesn't stop a member from the **Look Your Best Society** from approaching and enthusiastically, without permission or even introduction, diving in with hair styling shears to cut Whatever's extraneous shirt thread while happily diving into his fanny pack exclaiming "Ooh! I have that missing button! Just one sec...." That's what they do; always with the endless supply of buttons in any possible size, color or style. Amazing, really.

"'Button' is a referent. You and your general semantics bullshit," he says, swatting the guy away and leaving me there as the member licks his fingers in preparation of fixing my eyebrows. The tweezers are inevitably next. I get lucky on this one. I lean back covering my face and instead of insisting on making me "shine," a cat runs passed prompting him to scream, "OOOOH! Pussy!" and take off after it. These people are so fixated on grooming they go after pets and strays. Of course this only titillates a pink badge, (**SSS**), otherwise known as committee of **Sexual Services and Sciences** supposedly founded by a guy who simply said, "Well, I'm not getting any is all." Nathaniel Ariolos. He's called me at least twice confirming my appointment to which I insist, "Uh... I don't have an appointment."

"Yes. Yes you do. 9:30 AM. Sharp. Will we be seeing you or shall we send the security guards to give you a ride in one of our sleek yellow Camaros?"

Since the earth turned into an official harmonious commune it's become progressively impossible to just walk a street. Driving on a highway isn't so bad though since the Committee of **Get in That Lane** instituted the barricaded lane

reserved for drunk drivers and whatnot. This shut up the legalization committees since they can get as high as they want, so long as they use the Autobahn lane with the seventeen foot concrete walls on either side. Turns out, they don't actually drive better high.

"I'm sorry," this woman says, "But I... I lost the button off this coat. It's new. Is it near you? Do you see it?" she asks, looking around herself scared to death the Look Your Best People will attack her with a needle and thread. The hand with an "X" through it patch on her sleeve tells me she's from Touchy-Feely-Free.

"No. Sorry," I mutter. She scampers off, no doubt rushing to a phone so she can call the operators standing by at **Who Moved My Stuff?**

Those people are nothing but the middle man. They don't have the resources or the psychics to tell you where you left your keys or where you parked, so they're a puppet head for other organizations. You call and ask them where the hell you left your check book and they tell you it's been stolen by a Black, a Jew, a Muslim... etc. as most of them actually work for the **Hell is the Matter with the Klan** who argue that it can't be utopia with minorities in it, despite the fact that this is a global commune. They have a rough time recruiting, what with their tendency to cover their faces in actual mask badges, white of course, and run like hell when someone thinks they recognize them. They really have no choice but to infiltrate other committees like that increasing number of them in the **What Are We Talking About**. Those people feel the need to redirect your conversation if you're crazy enough to engage in conversation publicly. God forbid you're talking to two or more people at once, you're just asking for a question mark to approach you, stand there, nod, smile, decipher whether it's a quality topic and asserting that conversation is a vital resource not to be wasted on discussions about episodes of Jersey Shore or the Kardashians.

Even the ones who aren't undercover racists will drive you

insane with their constant, “Hey! What about that Smoker’s **F-Yourself: I Choose to Die** committee! I hear they’re doing great things!” You know these were the ones who headed The Sunshine Club in your office; Head of the Party planning committee types who came up with such exciting games as “let’s all post a picture of ourselves as babies and then guess who the person is!” or “Sign this birthday card for this guy who may or may not like you, you’ve likely never met, probably doesn’t like you or even know your name and while you’re at it... \$3.00 for his cake, please.”

I have no choice but to get up and start walking when an earlobe patch sits down next to me. This signifies membership in **Full Transparency**. There is no TMI with these people. They want to know everything and they’ll ask you anything at all. When was your last bowel movement? What’s your income? How many sexual partners have you had? How often do you masturbate? The thing is, though they always carry a myriad of their own personal files from pap smears to tax records dating 20 years back, I’ve never met a one of them with a single interesting or dishonest thing in their file. These may be the most boring, uptight, self-righteous people on the planet.

“Where are you going? Toilet paper! Under or over?” tapers off beneath the desperate cries of the group wearing the sandwich boards that read: “Why can’t I break up with my telecom provider?” They stand there, often weeping, yelling “Roll over! Roll over!” People tend to just approach them without them doing much active recruiting.

I don’t even get thirty feet before some guy wearing the ‘Urp’ patch grabs me by the coat collar and screams into my face, “It’s not a fucking Vente! This is America! This is still America! I just... want... a goddamn... large coffee!” Spit flying everywhere.

“Mm-hm,” I say and he quickly turns on his heels then violently slams himself face first into the Starbuck’s store front window. Yeah. He’s gonna go through it for sure. This is just

how a new committee begins. I'll see this guy next week, his face all stitched up, wearing a brown badge with Juan Valdez on it. He probably has a winner here. This is how people transition. His "Urp" badge tells me he's currently a member of the **MBAH (My Boss is an Asshole)**. The thing with these guys is they assert this fact by drinking from logo mugs, which they turn, of course, when their boss walks into the office because after all, they don't want to actually lose their jobs. "The boss is now approaching" is signalled by a round of forced burps.

In fact, if I cared, I'd recommend he get the backing of **CYPH (Close Your Pie Hole)**. These guys are equally aggressive about condemning those who chew with their mouths open. They're prone to reaching across tables to grab throats while screaming, "Why should I be subjected to seeing what you're eating? Are you an orphan? Is that it? You just don't know any better?" If the offender gets spooked enough, he or she will find themselves in the "clinic" where they "overcome" through both counsel and the insertion of a feeding tube down their throat. I hardly flinch anymore when I see the members wearing the Pie Badge with the strike mark through it using their battery powered blenders to liquefy their ham, their cake... whatever, and shove that tube down their own throats. They have croissants in that coffee place, right? Yeah. It'd make a good alliance.

At least the firearm fatalities are at an all time low. Weapons were confiscated and buried in a land fill before the **Clean Slates** opened the gates of every prison and really started the fun. Wasn't long after that the pedophiles started the **IALAC (I am Loving and Capable)** who spend the entire day and night freely giving what they call "super hugs." They all carry hand held mirrors and accost you till you do a few self-affirming phrases in it. Just watch out for the wandering hands as well as your kids, if yours is somehow still left.

Of course there was a strong out cry about the prison release, so the **Darwinians** started their round up. It's not all

that hard to spot a man or woman wearing shackles, an orange jump suit and a big grin. Once they got a few hundred fenced in they figured let them just sort themselves out. **The Clean Slates** leapt to their side, or rather, to the other side of the electric fence and instituted the toss. Carrots, stalks of celery.... They have pretty good pitching arms. Wasn't long at all before the prisoners started shanking one another with carefully chewed vegetables and finding other, less savory uses for tightly rolled copies of The New Yorker.

Once the **Holistics** decided to do us all a favor and burn the pharmacies to the ground, the infant mortality rate sky rocketed, depression soared and the lack of birth control? Well, abstinence never made a heart grow fonder so they are arriving almost as fast as they are disappearing. Course you have multiple memberships everywhere. All it takes is an infiltrated **IALAC** pedophile to join the **Get Me Out of This** (an opposition to the entire system thinly veiled as a Day Care) and you see that moving van with "ice cream" spray painted on the side.

"You like ice cream, kid? Everybody does! What's your poison? Strawberry? Ah! You look like a vanilla man! Common! Let's go to Day Care!" and you never see that kid again. The purist **IALACS** know this of course, but perpetually forgive their offenders for fear of looking like hypocrites. Besides, they're pretty busy circulating e-mails and texts telling you they love you and how special you are and to send this to 10 friends or you'll be cursed with the clap.

The well-intentioned members of the **Get Me Out of This** opposition have taken to teaching the children the evil of this let's-all-get-along living and, though they don't want an actual return to organized government of any sort, they have no actual proposal for change. They just enjoy being disgruntled and teaching the children to never support any possibility. While asserting the mantra of "think for yourself!" they tend to speak in metered, calm tones using your name a lot and often carrying metronomes with them.

Some committees rely more heavily on visuals...and incoherent guttural groans often punctuated with drooling as best seen through the efforts of the **Get a Real Problem** members. Relatively innocuous, yet hard to ignore, their members drag themselves through the streets, some limping, others crawling on their bellies, either dressed as the dying or literally, fatally ill. They seem to have an understanding of some greater dilemma which we might understand if only they'd do something other than point out to you that you do not have brain cancer and so your mediocrity is a piss in an ocean you don't even deserve to swim in. They are mainly seen crawling around where pharmacies once stood. Method actors are welcome as are Off Broadway actors. Not to mention street performers, those who did Pippin in their high school drama club and generally, anyone who likes Halloween.

I have to cross the street with the rest of the terrified crowd to escape the wrath of the **TAMS (These Are Mine)**: Violent Feminists with ovaries on their arm bands. Strangely they have no problem hurling boxes of tampons at your head while screaming that feminine products should not be taxed. When reminded that there are no taxes anymore, (just Committee dues), they'll tell you, "That's not the point". They happily embraced the irritated housewives but were forced to stop burning the clothing their husbands had left on the floor when the newly released pyros started publicly masturbating at the first sign of flames. The **IALACS** didn't seem to really mind.

At first they just wanted equal pay when the **What Are We Talking Abouters** deemed that trivial, they merged with the **Blunt Objects** who of course oppose both the **Clean Slates** and the **No Pointy Objects** (Strange pacifists who attempt to man the artillery landfills while asserting that forks, butter knives, sticks and so forth are of equal danger to society). You'll never see a screaming **TAM** without seeing the **Blunt Objector** ten feet away. They sing "If I had a Hammer" at the

top of their lungs. All morning. All night.

It's possible to dodge a box of dry weaves raining overhead unless **God forbid the You Had That Coming** committee passes them by. (You see that, you run like hell.) Among their repertoire pieces: "Why were you driving if you didn't know how to change your own tire? Did you really think sexting wasn't going to come back and kick you in the ass? Who told you to drink and dial?" They walk the slippery slope of "Why'd you wear that short skirt?" and pointy object or not, they will never escape a crowd of **TAMS** without being both bloodied and gimped. Then they hobble off to the Holistics who will wag a crystal at them and suggest their blood loss was due to the lack of feng shui in their battle formation.

Unfortunately, in the jay walking rush to escape this, I bump into an older gentleman and give him the obligatory, "I'm sorry. Are you alright?" Bad move. He's got on the stitched lip armband signifying his alliance with the **Mind Your Own Damn Business** people. Largely comprised of the elderly, sociopaths released from prison and devout haters of the **What Are We Talking Abouters**, they'll eat you alive for asking rhetorical questions. Notoriously paranoid, they are apt to have loud outbursts when a checker comments on a grocery purchase. "MMM! Ho-hos! Someone's treating themselves!" could put a clerk in the Holistic hospital.

"Oh? Oh you care?" he screams, as I try to bob and weave. "Then why are you walking away?!"

Actually, he has a point. Unfortunate part about it is that **Animal Cruelty** committee members are often beaten to death by these folks when they accidentally choose the wrong fence to peak over. **Holistics** have had little success sealing gushing head wounds with seaweed though **Look Your Best** can really dress a corpse quite nicely.

It used to be a lot easier to get down the street and buy myself some Cherry Mash and Pez. Before my own arm band expired, that is. Now members need to have the red middle finger badge and anyone can see my version is green. The

Non-Joiners were almost perfect for me. Recovering punks, college kids who finally realized they were in fact not going to change the world, the ones who never got picked for a team and those who had been unemployed long before and for all too long prior to this global change. No use trying to recruit someone who's passionate about not belonging while simultaneously lacking the initiative to actively not join. Thing was, you had to call into the hotline, sit through that recording, choose a language from a list of 600 plus, deal with the voice recognition that never recognized "Yes" or "No" in its first three attempts and finally transferred you over to a rep, who didn't feel like joining in answering a phone. You'd be there all day. I finally said to hell with it two seasons ago. If I had it in me, I'd join up with the **I Don't Want to See Pictures of Your Ugly Baby** committee, but the Feminists increasingly support that by chanting "Ever think maybe I'm barren? Ever think that's RUDE?"

Seems like the only thing everyone can agree on is the Mother of this New World Order has officially gone underground. I think she used to run elections. If she ever existed at all, they called her Oprah. No more billboards as they were used for bonfires. Some sort of **Literary Outrage** Committee who took issue with her book club's attempt at a self-proclaimed discovery of Maya Angelou, Faulkner and Toni Morrison. Rumor has it, she discovered The Bible. Who knows? The "OWN" channel has been nothing but static for years and her First Officer, Gail, reportedly hasn't been seen bringing the feeding tube into that cave since 2015.

I get back to my own tenement, sit down on the stoop, reach into my pocket and pull out my last warm beer. Crack it open, take a sip. Make the mistake of running my hand through my hair just as the suit from the third floor walks out stammering, "I am no less a man than you!" Great. **The Easter Islands** committee: men with receding hairlines who never seem to get anyone to understand what they're on board with because inevitably they become too self-con-

scious and nervous around hair to even explain their cause.

A dog comes right up to me looking freshly bathed and combed, smells like berries and baby powder. I pat him on the head and ask him if he wants to come on in. Have supper with me.

“You just stay right there, buddy.” I tell him. “Stay right there.” Tail all wagging. I Pick up a rock and wait a second for the traffic to clear a little.

I look both ways, smile at the dog and chuck it across the street right at the **IALAC** who’s wearing the Dairy Queen uniform and hugging a pudgy kid. Guy stumbles back clutching his eye and takes off running passed his own moving van. Kid turns around and tells me I’m a shit pie. Shit Pie. Tomorrow, we’ll be seeing him rallying for a Good Humor Man on every street corner. A little ice cream cone logo wrapped around his fat arm and a **Look Your Bester** showing him how to jog in place.

KEVIN

POST

content agility

I'm going to crawl
your data, but not all of it.
For instance, I'm not
going to crawl your head
and I'm not going
to crawl your body.

Nonesuch

There's no such thing
as such, nor, if you
think about it, thing.
Why curry favor
with the tooth paste
when the fairy
brings the sugar?

Dr Caligari

Come back, Dr. Caligari,
Theodor Adorno loves you.

KIM

KOSA

There are ways that two bodies touch resemble [blowups/question]. I am [slope] and you are [y-intercept]. This is the way we have related for years - I [slope] - he [intercept]. Forcing the interception. You pick me up from Milwaukee and drive me to the co-op. I am not sure you want me there [blowup/interruption] but you agreed to this. Not being able to take care of yourself. You know what a messy person I am he. Your room is small - your window faces windows. We walked around naked. You never do your laundry. Ever since you arrived in Madison. Your crunchy stinky socks. I pretend not to notice how absolutely rank they were. The wooden floor is covered in clothes - a bed for yourself. You turn the guitar and push back your uncontrolled hair. You are timeless. You put down more jackets for me [time]. I think you're trying to warm me. You make a to-do list I had some come this side of you before. Things "we" needed - how I am going to take care of you while I am here. We hit a co-op grocery. We buy a bed for you to sleep on. This item is [point/slope] we don't know where the other point is. We still don't. I test the bed. He purchases a full sized black six inch thick futon. You choose sheets. You asked my opinion on shirts - I choose blue because your eyes are blue, especially in the morning when you wake up and your eyes have been closed for hours. I teach you how to take a door off its hinges. The piano bench faces east. The bed goes into the closet after doors come off. The floor swept and sheets on bed. I folded you told me what was dirty. Our [coordinates] never collided. In Ames you asked why I walked a little bit behind - if we walked two abreast the equation would shift. Our plans culminated in the dead deer on the side of the highway near Dubuque. The Mississippi [time] had shown me where I stood. On which side of the map I would make my home. I belonged in the first and second. You were a three/four. I believed in [—] but you wanted more [—].



SEAT 14A

A short play

Setting: The interior of a small commercial airplane—the kind that makes forty-five minute trips between same-state cities. This setting may certainly be implied. The only absolutely necessary staging consists of three chairs lined in a row facing the audience, and a fourth chair set apart, off to the side.

Cast: Sister Socorro, a nun, 50s
Elaine, 60s
Tom, Elaine's husband, 60s
Madge, a medium, 40s
Alanna, a flight attendant, 20s
Agent Bradford of the FBI, 40s
Agent Kieve of the FBI, 30s

Darkness. Sounds of people moving, conversing, etc. A BING is heard.

ALANNA (*voice-over*): Ladies and gentlemen, in a few moments we will open the cabin door so that all passengers can disembark. Thank you for flying with us today.

Lights up on an isolated portion of the plane: a one-row section of three consecutive seats. In the leftmost seat is SISTER SOCORRO, looking pious. Next to her is ELAINE, and beside Elaine is her husband TOM. The couple gets up and stretches, and Tom reaches for the bags.

TOM: Good flight.

Moving, fidgeting underneath Sister Socorro's robe. The other two passengers don't notice. Suddenly, smoke begins to seep out of openings in the robe. Sparks fly.

ELAINE: Oh my God! What's going on? You're on fire!

Part of the robe has indeed caught on fire. Elaine and Tom are panicking, but Sister Socorro remains calm. Her eyes are closed and she is humming some tune. She smiles.

ELAINE: What in God's name?

Sister Socorro, her eyes still closed, cries out joyously.

SISTER SOCORRO: At last! Yes!

TOM: Terrorist attack! She's going to blow up the plane!

Sounds of passengers screaming, shouting, general chaos, etc. Elaine grabs a magazine and smacks the nun in an attempt to put out the fire.

ELAINE: Help! Stop her!

Tom throws himself across Elaine and grabs Sister Socorro by the throat. He throttles the nun with both hands. Sounds of chaos continue. ALANNA emerges holding a fire extinguisher. She unleashes its contents on all three passengers.

ELAINE: Ah! My eyes!

TOM (to Sister Socorro): Who are you?

SISTER SOCORRO: Noooooo!

The flames have been put out entirely. Sister Socorro sobs. Tom drags her to her feet and brings her into the aisle. Sound of a cabin door opening. Commotion continues as two FBI agents, BRADFORD (a man in his 40s) and KIEVE (a woman in her 30s) enter.

ALANNA: That's her.

KIEVE: The nun?

Agents grab Sister Socorro. Kieve gets out handcuffs.

SISTER SOCORRO: I'm not to blame! It's they who've interfered with the Lord's work!

BRADFORD: These wackos'll do anything. Dressing up as a nun....

SISTER SOCORRO: I am a nun! And an American citizen. I love doughnuts!

ELAINE: You may be American, but what did you think—

you'd just light a bomb under your robe and we wouldn't do something about it? We watch the news!

SISTER SOCORRO: It's not a bomb. It was His divine plan!

Handcuffs are secured and agents begin to lead Sister Socorro off-stage. As they leave:

KIEVE: I advise you not to say anything else.

SISTER SOCORRO: But I speak the truth when I say this is the Lord's doing, not mine! I didn't start myself on fire—He did!

KIEVE: Spontaneous combustion, huh. Let's go.

MADGE: Wait!

Lights up on a nearby section of the stage, revealing MADGE, seated. She rises and points at Bradford and Kieve.

MADGE: These past few moments I have been in contact with your long-deceased boss, J. Edgar Hoover, the most famous—or infamous—FBI director America has ever known.

KIEVE: Don't tell me we're going to have to take you in too.

MADGE: Like the nun, I'm telling the truth here. I'm not surprised you doubt my abilities as a medium, but you'll see. I have J.E. himself here, ready to speak out on this poor woman's behalf.

Kieve glances at Bradford then goes for Madge. The medium raises her hand.

MADGE: Halt! Watch.

Bradford falls to his knees and clutches his head. He moans and groans then writhes on the floor in agony. Kieve draws her gun and aims it at Madge.

KIEVE: Whatever you're doing, stop it or I will drop you!

Bradford's moans, groans and cries cease. When next he speaks it is in the voice of J. Edgar Hoover.

BRADFORD (*as J. Edgar Hoover*): There'll be no need for that, Agent Kieve.

KIEVE: Gary?

Bradford stands.

BRADFORD (*as J. Edgar Hoover*): Gary? My name is J. Edgar Hoover, founder of the organization you work for, Agent Kieve. Forty-eight years I directed the agency, forty-eight years of keeping subversives off the shores and out of the establishments of our great country. I might not have gotten all the respect I deserved when I was alive, but, damnit, as your superiorest of superiors I demand that respect now! Put away your weapon or face demotion!

Kieve turns her gun on Bradford.

KIEVE: Stop messing around, Gary!

BRADFORD (*as J. Edgar Hoover*): You doubt that it's me, your superiorest of superiors!? How dare you!

Bradford draws his gun so quickly it seems to materialize in his hand. Kieve makes as if to shoot but backs down. She continues training her weapon on Bradford, who does the

same to her.

KIEVE: What's going on here?

MADGE: He's possessed, don't you see? J. Edgar Hoover has inhabited his body! I promise you he'll leave as soon as this is resolved.

KIEVE: I can resolve this just fine.

MADGE: He's only helping!

BRADFORD (*as J. Edgar Hoover*): Agent Kieve, for the last time stand down and listen!

Kieve tenses, seems about to shoot, then with a cry of frustration lowers her gun. Bradford does the same.

BRADFORD (*as J. Edgar Hoover*): Very wise. You have averted a catastrophe, Agent Kieve, and for that you are to be commended. But let's not pat ourselves too quickly here. There's still the question of the nun: was she or wasn't she attempting to bomb this aircraft? For the answer let us go to the source herself....

SISTER SOCORRO: You mean I get to explain? That's a new one. All right....As a child I knew this would happen. I'd been waiting for this moment for so long! When I was young I saw a member of our church, a man, burst into flames during the offering of the sacrament. We didn't put out the flames. He wouldn't have wanted that. And I knew then that when I entered the church to do His work I too would be taken that way, in the blazing arms of the Lord! Of course I didn't know when it would happen, only that it would happen. In the last year I've been praying each morning, afternoon and evening, sensing, and just the other day the Lord answered me: soon.

(to Kieve) I'm sorry—I didn't think He would take me here. It was such a short flight and, well, it really was an innocent mistake.

Kieve heaves a sigh, shakes her head.

SISTER SOCORRO *(to Elaine and Tom)*: Do you believe me?

ELAINE: Heck, sister. If Hoover can take over his body, I'll believe God can blow up yours.

TOM: Do you have a spare rosary?

SISTER SOCORRO *(to Alanna)*: And you? You who did what was necessary, a heroine in this world but a meddler in the next?

ALANNA *(sheepish)*: Maybe you'll, you know, get another chance?

BRADFORD *(as J. Edgar Hoover)*: What we need is democracy in action. Put it to a vote. All those in favor of believing that the nun was about to be taken by the Lord in a fiery self-contained eruption, say aye!

Alanna, Madge, Tom and Elaine simultaneously shout aye.

BRADFORD *(as J. Edgar Hoover)*: The ayes have it. Release the nun!

Kieve, dumbfounded, releases Sister Socorro who proceeds to shake and smooth out her burnt robe.

BRADFORD *(as J. Edgar Hoover)*: Truth has triumphed over the subversive elements at

work in—

Bradford as Hoover cries out and falls to the floor, writhes, etc. The others watch as the fit passes and Bradford is again himself.

BRADFORD: What happened?

KIEVE: Come on. You don't need to know.

BRADFORD: But the blackout—

KIEVE: I'm writing the report on this one.

The agents exit. Alanna ushers the others in the same direction.

ALANNA: Everyone, please depart. And remember: what you've just seen is of national importance, so by all means keep it a secret!

Lights dim. Commotion, people moving, etc.

PATRICK
CONNOR

Uncle Wiggly's

done w/
the public

& sitting
on convent steps

as the frogs & cicadas
compliment

themselves for rising
above the river

rushes thru doors
shutting wars

w/ the Eskimos once
I was,

I was a nice
girl, wasn't
I?

Pretty Little

inch over
the twigs
early November
I forget

gloves & you're
warm like
Salinger

the straight closet
black hair
triangular
sideburns

hint
you're not all
business

suit dark &
pressed white
shirt tie

@ 5
arms tied
& it's never
anything

sexual
like bananafish
outside

Warriors Run

the bus stops once
in Sligo just
near enough
to lunch

a rock for Maeve
sipping crocheted
strawberry shakes

her slate face
north to Ulster
& Donegal

walking the mound
down as
seaweed strands

between toes &
our bodies
next to stone

enthroned the tide,
sand like
a fire, a little

B&B, a bath
before afternoon tea
reading Teddy

up the coast
come
a hard 30 miles

her people came
from fog & rain
& black devil bogs
of Donegal

whisper
for her—for you
for whom—for whom
with love & squalor

you are
off to camp
her peoples land

w/ a see
you
@ breakfast

Seymour & cigarettes
blacken the page
yellow

doesn't know I'm
on a bus
to Dublin, the hotel

bath drawn
I rip & rip ends
from Nine Stories

underwater they
no longer
individuate

your eyes—the hills
blue w/ heather
& moss grown rock

locks ash blond
your face slate
splinters
my fingertips

ESTERNA

QUALITÀ

126.5 feet

After bobbing back to the surface, my only thought was Shit, I can't believe she actually did it. Then I tasted copper, retched, and cried out in pain. I rose and fell, tumbling, the water turning me over and over. I faintly remember hitting the reef and feeling flesh being peeled away. I have a vague memory of crawling ashore. I coughed up water for what seemed like hours. Something poked at my ribs. It could have been a bird. I was feverish and mumbling, bleeding and blacking out, and I knew I was dying. But more than anything else, I was pissed off.

Wendy Duerphmann and I were married on Saturday, June 19, 1999. It was, by all accounts, an unremarkable wedding and quickly forgotten by everyone in attendance. In fact, just two years later, Gerald Yin, who had been my best man, asked me what our colors had been. He and his wife to be wanted to avoid wearing them. I was not his best man. I wasn't even invited to be in the wedding party. Wendy and I spent Gerald's reception at a far back table, surrounded by his wife's still single sorority sisters, in stony angry silence.

Wendy played softball in college. When we met, two years after I had already graduated and she still a year away from her's, she was the hard hitting first baseman. She had learned at an early age to use her thighs to power the bat through its arc. She would hold her bat loosely, as if she didn't trust her hands, but she had a keen eye and a powerful, if not always pretty, swing that could open up close games. She'd been husky, sure, but very proud of her graceless athleticism. My attraction to her was instant and amazingly strong. Uncharacteristically, I introduced myself to her and started a conversation.

She kept in shape during our courtship after college. It was easy for her then. I was away a lot and she still had access to the University's fitness center. In fact, once we were engaged, she hit the gym hard for six months and got herself down to her "prom weight". Unfortunately, her grandmother's wedding dress, which she wore over my objections, covered up, hid, and/or reversed any and all improvements she had made. In the first year we were married, she had gained back all, plus fifteen pounds more, of what she had lost. I was angry about that but I bit my tongue and convinced myself that I loved her and not just her body.

The Old Woman found me early the next morning. The beach was silent, the gulls still floating through their dreams when, thinking me dead, she went through my pockets. Only when I moaned and tried to roll away did she stop. She'd found bodies before, but I was the first live one. After binding my wounds and pouring fresh water down my throat, the Old Woman dragged me as best she could to a shady spot under a palm. She sang to me, in a husky whisper, until the sun passed noon then she told me that she would return with help.

It was nearly dark when the Old Woman returned with her granddaughters and a wagon. Together they moved me off the beach and to their home. They nursed me for the better part of three weeks. I was an infant again. I couldn't move. When I tried, they bound my arms to the canopied bed. They cleaned me, dressed me, and fed me. They dutifully changed the homespun bandages and, with a sharpened quill and ink pressed from bulbous stems and roots, they painted my body with symbols of healing. They sang without stopping. At night, the granddaughters would sleep with me for warmth. In my sleep, The Song became colors that danced and weaved, bent and refracted, calming me as best it could.

At Wendy's request, we started seeing a marriage counselor after four years of marriage. One of the first questions asked of me was who, in my opinion, was to blame for the problems in our marriage. After noting the bias of the word "blame", I told the counselor that both of us were. Wendy was domineering and could be mean-spirited in her criticisms. I was too complacent but unwilling to accept change. Jointly, we were not fully active participants in our own relationship. In fact, I told the counselor, whole weeks would go by without one of us saying a word to the other. We would simply carry out our traditionally mandated tasks all the while moving around each other without a sound for fear of igniting a fight. If I wasn't afraid, I was angry. If I was angry, it was because I had been afraid.

After three weeks, the Old Woman allowed me to sit upright. I guess I was a good student because in another week, I was chasing her granddaughters through the jungle like a child. They were ageless. Their feet never touched the ground. The Granddaughters could approach a tree full of jungle parrots, singing in low whispers the entire time, and never disturb them. They taught me to hunt. They taught me to forage.

One day, trying to keep up with them, I happened across a jaguar sipping from a stream. The cat simply lifted its eyes to glare at me. I stopped in my tracks, terrified. I was facing certain death. I couldn't outrun it. I wouldn't be able to fight it off. Then, without a sound, the Granddaughters were there, on either side of the cat. They sung to it and it answered them with a low indignant growl. They cajoled the beast with more song and after awhile it finished its drink and went silently about its way. The Granddaughters song had become a constant hum and I stood still; not of fright or weakness but utter fascination.

After an eight week cycle of therapy, our marriage was

declared fixed. That first week after therapy we made love three times. We hadn't done that since our honeymoon. In another week, I caught Wendy looking at herself in the mirror. She was smiling broadly, holding the waistband of her jeans out from her body. I asked the obvious question. She told me that, yes, in fact, she had been watching what she ate and wanted to know if it was okay if she joined a new gym. I was honestly glad to see her take a renewed interest in herself and told her that yes, of course, she could join a gym. I told her I was looking forward to seeing her get back down to her prom weight. We both laughed and made love again that night.

After six weeks, seeing another human being besides the Old Woman or her Granddaughters was a rude shock. The poaching crew, five men in all, wearing jeans, boots, and sweat stained straw hats, looked unimaginably alien to me. They stomped through the jungle carelessly, shedding cigarette butts and plastic water bottles as they went. The Granddaughters and I followed them for two days. On the third, they checked a map and turned back toward the beach. Their traps and nets were empty. The magazines of their rifles were still fully loaded. The jungle had beaten them without us.

Wendy surprised me at the office on a Thursday. The results of her new gym membership were already showing. She took me out to lunch and, between the chips and salsa and our sandwiches, broached the subject that would end up changing both of our lives forever.

"Look. You know," she said, trying a little too hard to sound casual. "The counselor suggested we try a second honeymoon."

"Yeah. I know. It's too bad we really can't afford it right now."

“Well. Yeah. But, I mean, what if we could? What if we could afford it? Would you want to go?”

I looked at her over the rim of my coffee cup. She readjusted herself and tucked an errant lock behind an ear.

“Look. What if. I mean, what if I told you that I had some money saved up. Saved from before. You know, before we fixed things. Not a lot. But some. We could use that to take a trip. You know. A real honeymoon. Then we’d be fixed for good and forever.” She reached out and stroked my hand.

The shot echoed through the jungle. I bolted to my feet. The Granddaughters were already at the window. Their song had stopped. I dressed quickly and moved toward the door. The Old Woman was already outside, just at the edge of the house-light. She was holding the bowl and quill that she had used to paint over my wounds all those weeks before.

“*Manos*,” she whispered. Her voice was thick with anger.
“*Damelo*.”

I held my hands out to her and she painted them with quick deft strokes from forearm to each fingertip.

“*Poder para mi Muerto. Si. Eres my Muerto*.”

“*Encontrarlos*,” she instructed me. “*Matarlos a todos*.”

I nodded and started my walk into the jungle but she reached out and grabbed my hand. “*Esta enojado ahora. Mas enjado que nunca!*”

I caught up with them just before dawn. As instructed, I killed them all. I hummed The Song the entire time. That made it

easy. I was The Dead One. That's what the Old Woman had called me. That's what I had become. It took me the rest of the morning to bury the bodies. I returned to the Old Woman with their rifles, ammunition, cellular phones, GPS devices and the body of the jaguar. The Old Woman nodded her thanks and motioned me to the stream behind her house. The Granddaughters took their time cleaning me. When they were finished, and I smelled of wild flowers, I knew it was time for me to go home.

"A cruise?" was all I could say when Wendy told me. "Really?"

"Yeah. I mean. What's wrong with that? The counselor said we should challenge ourselves. You know. Stretch our boundaries."

I was still processing. "Yes. That's true. But. Wow. A cruise? On a ship? To the Yucatan?"

"It'll be great," she said. "It's not like I'm going to toss you overboard or something."

It took me nearly a month and a half to walk, hitchhike, or steal my way to Mexico City. I had kept the poachers phones so I knew who they had known. I only killed those who really deserved it: other poachers, their sales contacts, their money launderers, their cartel contacts, the soldiers, and, finally, their captains.

As it turned out, most of those people also happened to have cash on hand and lots of it. I walked into Mexico City wearing second hand clothing given to me by a church group from Wisconsin. I drove north out of Mexico City wearing tailored clothes behind the wheel of a factory new Dodge Ram. The Song ran through me.

It was when I slept that The Song would leave me. I would start awake, my will weak and my hands shaking. I would yearn for the safety and the isolation of the jungle. But that's when the Granddaughters' song always returned to me and I was made strong again. With The Song I was back in the jungle. I was standing over the body of the jaguar. Its soul was gone, wasted and defiled, and I was angry all over again.

My wife had cracked my skull open with a pipe fitter's wrench and tossed me off the deck of a cruise liner on Wednesday, September 16th, 2002. I reached our house on Thursday, December 19, 2002. A "For Sale" sign stood vigil near the sidewalk. The house lights were on, but the shadows looked different to me. I parked the Dodge across the street and walked up the drive, around the garage, and to the side of the house. As usual, the gate was unlocked. The kitchen door was shut against the cold of the night, but its lights blazed brightly inside. I went into the garage, turned on the lights, and went to my tool cabinet. The dryer droned uncaringly on. I grabbed my father's sledgehammer, tested its weight, found it to be much lighter than I remembered, and moved across the patio to the backyard. Wendy had let all my potted plants wither and die. I turned the corner and walked along the rear of the house to the family room. The blinds were cracked open just enough to see inside. I rested the head of the hammer next to my foot and edged in for a better look.

Wendy was on the couch we had special ordered, in her usual spot, reading a paperback book. On the opposite corner, sat a man watching television. He was someone I didn't know. My leather recliner was gone. As was my bookshelf. That didn't surprise me. The man laughed at something and Wendy looked at him. She smiled broadly, without holding

anything back, the kind of smile I had seen on her face in the early years. It was the kind of smile made by someone who is truly, deeply, and amazingly in love with another person.

My will weakened. My hands shook. My grip on the hammer slacked. Then The Song came to me and I was back in the jungle and the poachers were standing over the body of the jaguar and I was good and pissed off. I brought the hammer to my shoulder, walked back to the kitchen door, and announced my homecoming.

ANTHIA

VANDEE

VEN

The Circus Strong Man Moustache Mystique

For seven months—as one by one the hoarded moments you'd collected and appraised like shiny little objects from those who loved you and those who said they loved you oblivioned behind the one good pupil of your right eye—you hid behind that Circus Strong Man moustache. In your senility

[the dimensions of which Benny pushes against like a mime, anxious to test its validity]

you allowed, as you never did when you had your wits about you, brushes as thick and stiff as a manicurists's dream to spike like magic from your upper lip. They'd last for several days, and then you'd answer the door, clean shaven, arguing you'd had no facial hair since WWII. But this last one. In no time it was broomish and deep red, like you'd ordered it, like it was some sign from God.

You were impossible, you know. Eighty-eight years old and still driving the endless maze of one-way Baltimore City, leaning into the dashboard like a ship's captain lashed to the wheel, careening over the cement barriers at the Inner Harbor and down into the paddle boat dragons; luckily the grinning flotilla was enough to float your Avalon or they'd still be dragging the harbor for you. Then there was Patterson Park where you nearly ran to ground four tourists from Platte, Nebraska, before sliding to a stop on the slope just shy of the pagoda. That would've been an historic incident; not even the British conquered that hill. Why didn't they take your license then? The coups de grace, however, was when you hummed down

Charles Street through Mt. Vernon and severing the Prayer Garden's wrought iron fence, rammed the base of what you liked to call Pope Paul II's "pedophilic statue," nearly tipping it onto the ground. I'd like to think it wasn't intentional given the lifetime of anti-papist junk mail that flooded your mailbox, Pontiffs or Cardinals sporting hideous grins and forked tails. Before the police arrived, you called me from the cell phone I'd bought you for emergencies, the orange one with the über large numbers. When the tow truck hauled your second brand-new, paid-for-with-cash Avalon back through the fence and the ambulance pulled away toward Mercy, I made a call myself and served up a piece of my mind like a Japanese Hibachi chef—chop-chop-flip—to the lawyer who'd told me in a flat voice,

You can't imprison someone in his own house by taking his keys away.

So I took your keys away, and as I shifted your once overly-opulent furniture from one corner to another in the spanking new assisted living apartment where I forced you to move

[this "facility" rivaled the finest resort in any large city in the U.S. or abroad and included a marble reception desk, a Concierge service, a swimming pool with jacuzzi, a three-shift menued dining experience, a Bistro, a gym that would swallow up any retail concern, a movie theater, a miniature golf course, a ballroom with grand pi-

ano, etc., serving only to make Mom's forty-year-old, Mediterranean-style furniture look dog-eared and sad. Benny took one look at the place online, declared it "Pimpin'," and said that Dad's apartment, by comparison, must look like an "Old Hookah Hooker's pad"]

in an attempt to lower the number of your terrorist attacks on Baltimore City, you waved your fist with its shiny, arthritic knobs toward the manager who was trying her best to complete her "orientation," your squeezebox voice wheezing the old incantation more lucidly than in months as you followed her, "They'll get—my keys—over my—dead body!" Nearly. There you were, the exiled king, tucked away neatly into his new domain. As I left you framed by a door that already puzzled you, in a hallway stretching endlessly in both directions with identical doors, I clutched the fallen standard of your keyring—full of more keys than houses you'd lived in or cars you'd driven. I didn't say goodbye. I turned away before the words stirred, unable to leap from the edge of looming childhood. Reaching out beyond the limits of your grasp, you managed to hit me on the ass, an insolent, insulting slap, really. I turned and told you flatly, in a voice my lawyer would've used,

Dad, don't ever touch me again.

My therapist would've been proud; she's been saying for years that I need to learn boundary setting. But my question is always the same: what good comes of setting boundaries

with mindless men? Even as I spoke, each word spun away into the fear now fixed in your right pupil, where everything miserable and anything good we'd all been whirled more rapidly each day, beyond your reach, just as I could tell by the way you looked at me from the passenger's seat or across a doctor's waiting room that life assembled and disassembled itself like the jigsaw puzzles Mom and I worked a hundred times in our living room under your watch, and I knew that piece by piece not only my words, but even I would be dismantled. I could've turned back to you a hundred times and said it. I could've grabbed your hand to make my point, slapped you back. But there was no point; you wouldn't have remembered it the next day, the next hour perhaps.

[Benny said you would]

Your keys were just one of many robberies I committed, mostly when you weren't looking, although after awhile it didn't matter; I wrote reimbursement checks to myself for supplies I'd buy you and sign your name right under your nose, feeling like a thief, though I left the receipts in the checkbook. And there was the identity theft, of course. You ordered every pitch that came in the mail from cookbooks to sex manuals that you didn't need and would normally be mortified to have and then call up the companies after taking delivery to yell at some poor Customer Service Rep in your broken way, refusing to pay, swearing you'd have her or him arrested for mailing such trash using the U.S. Postal Service. All these things required deciphering, returning, sorting out the multiple billings, making multiple phone calls. Finally I had your mail forwarded to my house to cure

your impulse ordering, but to do this I had to fill out a form swearing I was you on threat of prosecution. Talk about irony. Me pretending to be you. Of all the people I'd think about impersonating. That's what I would've told Judge Judy or Judge John if the Mail Police had arrested me. That and some stories either might've liked to hear.

But mainly I learned acquiescence. You just don't reason with a guy who asks you five times in a half-hour conversation, "So, did you ever decide to marry Joe Blow? He was the best one of your beaux, you know." when you married Mr. Blow twenty-five years prior, the guy stood up with Mr. Blow, you had Mr. Blow's kids who are now grown, and Mr. Blow has changed the guy's Depends. No, you just go with whatever the guy says, never disagree, or offer an opinion.

All Democrats are liberal, thieving mongrels trying to hand our country over to the Socialists? The Communists? The Nazis? You betcha.

And I learned to lie like a teenager again, with a baseless faith in adult naivete and a retreat to cliché. "No, I was here yesterday—you don't remember? Time flies when you're having fun!" "I'm sure Benny was here recently, and I'm sure he calls you." "He does love you—in his own way."

[Just how does Benny love? And why doesn't he see the ratio of anger to comedy in his unbalanced tilting at your dilapidated windmill change as the measure of time between you diminishes?]

“Your car is at our house, safe and sound. Really.” At each pat answer, your face flushed, the redness stippling what I remembered as full flesh from an unremembered time but hollow now, tiny boats of skin curling to crest and float on the stubble you left for days. Rubbing your chin as if pondering great meaning sifted the skin to powder onto your shirtfront, the dark tablecloths in the cavernous dining room where walkers and scooters bellied up to a rail like Old West horses, even onto Obadiah--Mom’s parti-colored Persian you abused while she was alive but wouldn’t part with in her death. Your eyelids had tightened with time as if sealing off your eyes, though the faded blue of the left, swimming in its milky cataract, peered out larger than the right. You rarely ever smiled and certainly didn’t then, so the rare attempt when I fed you this information, to which you’d raise your knobby fist and call out “This is—my Baby! She’s going—to take care—of me—when I—get old!” produced a one-sided, stroke-like grimace. Communication was only slightly different than when I was fifteen. I was still as frightened of you now.

It was after the ultimate robbery, when I stole Obadiah and took him to a vet where the doctor and I made the decision not to do surgery on the stomach tumor he found

[which, by the way, was the real reason Obe threw up nineteen times a day on your Italiene Frieze-colored carpet, although Benny said it was God’s vengeance for your cruelty to the poor Persian since you couldn’t bend to clean up the messes, and your prized floor turned to Tuna-

mottled Italiene Vomite]

but to make him comfortable, and when I drove you to say good-bye, made you sit by his miniature bed of pain until you announced it was too much like the scene when Mom died, that you couldn't bear it and so walked out on Obe, threw up in the parking lot, and sat crying in the car, yes, that's when you changed. I picked you up for lunch a few days later and you'd grown another one of those manicure brushes on your upper lip. I assumed it was another Quick-Pick, a spur of the moment choice that would be gone in the next day or so, but this one stayed. And stayed. Through your continued disappearing act. A month--the usual musty color of your shorter-lived brushes gone and a reddish hue appearing as it gained heft. Through the hiccougning deaths of your buddies at the assisted living home, friendships that you renewed each day by necessity. Two months. Three. It turned like a season, amazingly deep and rusty red laced with strands that glinted like ice. Taking on bulk, character, the moustache became your renewable source of energy, quickening your shuffle-step and widening the broad arc of your good right arm as you walked. At its peak, the ends curled in large loops like the Strong Man's in an old-time circus ad—minus the bulging musculature, of course. You smiled near to bursting. You actually liked yourself. I'd forgotten, in taking care of all the busyness for you and Mom, how you hid the insecurities of childhood poverty behind your vanity. How you never went barefoot, even around the house, buying kid leather slippers from Britain, even when the rest of us wore second-hand shoes. How none of us were allowed to wear ubiquitous blue jeans, and how you always wore brimmed hats—imported Panama straws in warm sea-

sons and sewn-edged felts in cold, both dressed with leather and exotic feathers.

When the moustache celebrated six months, you'd been cordial for so long, and it became so good to visit you and have you actually hand out your peppermints instead of having to steal a handful under your nose upon my exit, that when you began asking me to "come and get" you, I didn't know what to make of it. I'd arrive after a panicky call the Concierge would make for you on your orange Phoney-Fone as you'd dubbed it, and you'd have your two suitcases packed and sitting by the door. Stooping to open them, you hovering over my shoulder, I'd find them full of your books on coming economic disasters, the Democrat's ruination of democracy, all manner of apocalyptic predictions, your King James Version of the Bible, your razor, your toothbrush, and a container of toothpicks.

[Benny said I should handle Dad's funeral arrangements because if he were in charge, Dad would, for sure, be buried with a toothpick in his mouth and his fist raised in the air]

For all the convivial smiles, hugs, nods and parrot-like phrases you kept in repertoire, our conversations had been reduced to theater where I played my part to a deader-than-usual first night audience. "Where are you going, Dad?" I asked in the flat lawyer voice. This was serious business. You laughed that fake little laugh you have when things don't quite add up, "Home!" I had to at least try to make you understand that you really were home. You sat down

heavily in your recliner, dressed in your best suit

[the one you wore to my first wedding, mallard green silk, thin-laped, shiny with age and too small, the button of the pants not meeting, the zipper half-unzipped]

and a Panama straw hat, tufted here and there with broken straw and only one brazen, black-speckled feather. You must've been dehydrated; your flesh seemed collapsed into deeper folds, a labyrinth of skin. Your feet didn't touch the floor. When I was a child, you gave me a one-volume Children's Encyclopedia, and in it, I was forever fascinated by the page on Borneo and the fuzzy picture of a cannibal, face painted and nose pierced with bone, holding up a shrunken head. I always wondered how he felt, that moment when he looked his victim in the eye and stole his life, hollowed it out. You, Mom, Benny, we once looked fleshy and promising in our black-and-white youth. "Where's home, Dad?" I asked, but I was already in some other room or city, a voice removed. And watching you look through me--a look only slightly different than when I was fifteen--I understood that it's what we do to life, not the reverse, that hollows us out as surely as anything that painted man from my lost book did to his victim.

I forget how many times we blink per day, but every blink might represent—what?—say, twenty memories, ten people you knew, maybe. For every day you sat in your recliner, staring into the TV, years became entwined with the day before. You knocked on neighbor's doors wondering where they'd moved your office. Overnight you were

un-retired and back to work. You even mentioned Mom less and less, telescoping her existence down to the day you met her. You said your mind “worked like maggots” but it had become a series of unending, nonintersecting paths; you no sooner traveled one than you abruptly turned onto another. The last time you packed your suitcase and had the Concierge call me, your doctor said I had to move you to a lockdown facility. I said I was taking you home because that was where you wanted to be.

[Benny worried about whether I was up to the task. I said I didn’t want our father locked up with drooling, non-conversational idiots while he was still interested in those same idiots on FOX News and could somewhat articulate what was going on in the world if you reminded him there was still a world out there. Regularly. Benny said he couldn’t visit. I told him he could call. He wouldn’t call]

And so you moved into our row house, doing the stairs admirably, though you were constantly wandering and lost in our three floors of halls and rooms, believing we all lived in a boarding house together and that there would be staff fixing meals at regular times. “What time do they serve breakfast here?” At dinnertime, you watched your food like you watched Fox News ten hours a day, as if the water might turn to wine, like the existence of miracles might be disproved if you averted your gaze for a moment. Perhaps your periphery was just too terrifying. One night, as I watched

you lean into the fried catfish and turnip greens you'd come to embrace from M & J's Soul Food, I realized, simply, that I liked you with that crazy red moustache. It blurred you, somehow, like an out-of-focus photo. You could say horrible things to me, and I could laugh them off. I could tell the people closest to me who knew my delicate mental condition that I'd invited my father to come and live with me (that father?) and feel good about it. I could actually look at you with love. I could take you out to eat, to the doctor, anywhere, and have utmost patience. Even to your church where all the women have to wear hats. And everywhere I took you, people complimented you on your fabulous moustache.

[Benny saw the Facebook photos I posted of you and said your moustache made him think of Stalin the Butcher]

You asked for scissors everyday for a month, but I just cajoled you, thinking you just wanted flattery, to be told you looked good. Vanity of the Moustaches. You kept saying, "It's in my way!" right after I'd trim it neatly for you, taking care to clip even stray nose hairs. Just in case, I kept the scissors hidden away.

On a sleet-sheened Thursday afternoon in January, I was emptying the trash next to your recliner where you held court in your huge bedroom like a king, tamping down my revulsion and impatience at your airing used Depends on the radiator, creating a nursing home stench that crept into the hallway. I was babbling nervously and looked up at you in your silence. I tried for my flat, lawyer's voice, but it was off a pitch, "Oh, my gosh. You finally did it," and

you laughed your little laugh. I put the trash can down and
walked out, my heart

[involuntary throwback to teenaged
cliché]

in my throat.

I couldn't look at you. In seven months, I'd allowed myself to forget how the mind can crumple at the mere suggestion of an image. The consistency of childish nightmares—what the child thinks she sees: rocking shadows that consume her in the large night. A man with a black knit hat whose eyes have no color. Hands that pluck at her like anonymous birds in a crowd. But the red Circus Man moustache had been like a spell. Maybe I leaned into it because the periphery was too terrifying. I mean, how could a little facial hair so thoroughly disguise a persona, especially when the personality you adopted behind it was so patently someone else? You, my darling Daddy, have never been Circus-like unless you count the roaring lion, always in center ring. Maybe the bigger question should've been,

Who was the one hiding on which side of the moustache, for God's sake?

When Lot's wife, Idis, looked back to her past to see what she'd lost, God, seeing symmetry in the local mineral deposits, turned her into a pillar of salt. A bargain being a bargain, when anxiety-ridden Orpheus looked back to check on Eurydice, Hades consigned his wife forever to hell. So I know that looking back isn't particular to women; Benny has suffered, too. But this choice was mine.

[to push against the dimensions of
my own fragile mind and test it by

not merely looking back, but going
back]

Or, were you conscious behind that pinpointed pupil from where you still observe the world that you pulled me back with you, into you, where this hollowed out flesh would help you barely cling to your own? I have no idea how long humans can live mindless, uncaring of all that goes on around them in the heart-world, but we sit in this huge old house, FOX News blaring, and wait. Not for a sign from God but for who will dare the periphery first, and whether either of us will look back and be lost. I grip the chair arms. I squint my eyes and see the beginning of a new manicurist's brush.

USA

DEFENSE

Long and Short Vowels

Sarah asked Peter to repeat the words. Human, computer, huge, use, and amuse. Sarah smiled as Peter read the words. Peter was getting it, the long u sound. The long u as in music. She wondered if he had gotten the other long vowel sounds. A as in paper, day, paint, and cake. E as in we, see, eat, and key. I as in I, my, night, time, and tie. O as in boat, snow, go, and home. Sarah supposed she'd find out what he could and couldn't read as they went along. The thing was, Peter didn't want to start at the beginning with Sarah. I can read pretty good was what he told her.

"I read those in prison," Peter said, pointing to skill books one, two, and three that were lying on the table where Peter and Sarah sat in the library. "I got a certificate for each book I done, but I don't have them with me." Peter grabbed book two and opened to a page with a story and began to read. He read one word at a time and ran his index finger beneath each word as he read it. He ignored commas and periods. "See, I can read," Peter said. "But I can't spell good. That's what I want you to help me with. But I done these books." He pushed the three books away.

Sarah started him on the fourth book in the reading series though she didn't think he was ready, but she was also concerned that he'd be bored and drop out of the program. So that day they began their first lesson, the one that began with the long u sound, u as in music.

The trouble began with the short vowels. When he read the stories in book four he couldn't read the words with the short vowels. "Do you remember learning the short vowel sounds?" Sarah said gently during their third lesson. Peter just stared at Sarah, and she knew he had no idea what she was asking him. "The short vowel a," Sarah said softly. "A as in apple." Then Peter nodded yes and told Sarah that he learned that already. He could read the word apple. "Can you spell apple?" Sarah said. Peter grabbed his number

two pencil and gripped it like a child. He held it poised over the paper for a few seconds. He bit his lip and then printed epel, pressing lightly on the paper. The lightness with which he wrote surprised Sarah, and it took her a moment to react to his finished word. Sarah corrected his spelling, but Sarah didn't really know how to help him. She was new to this, new to teaching an adult how to read. And she'd only flipped through book two once at their first lesson. She had no idea how to teach short vowels without the teacher's manual for book two in front of her, for she wasn't a teacher, just a library volunteer and an unemployed realtor.

"I need easy words to spell," Peter said.

"Not words from book four?" Sarah said.

"They're too hard."

"You want to read from book four but learn to spell words from book one?"

Peter nodded.

"Book one was what they assigned you. Maybe they were right."

"I know that book already. I know all the stories in it."

"But you don't know how to spell the words from book one."

"I can read them."

"But this program is about reading and writing, learning to spell. You said that's one thing you want to learn."

"Just give me a list of ten easy words to learn to spell. You don't need the first book."

Sarah thought for a moment and spoke each word as she wrote each down: Bird, cup, dish.

Peter interrupted Sarah. "Not those words."

"What ten words would you like to learn to spell?" Sarah was trying to be patient.

Peter sat back in his chair. He touched his curly blond hair and pulled his fingers through it. His fingers got caught in his tangled mess, and he tugged until he gave up. He pushed his glasses high up on the bridge of his nose,

glasses that made his blue eyes small and squinty. He licked his lips then pressed them together. They caved in on themselves since he had no teeth. His neck was covered in tattoos. Compton was written in cursive with the p on his Adam's apple.

"Write these down," Peter said and leaned forward.

Sarah picked up a pencil and tried not to breath deeply. Peter smelled as he had each time they met, not quite homeless. And she tried to ignore his filthy hands and fingernails though she may have been mistaking parts of his cloudy looking tattoos for dirt.

"Bat."

Sarah wrote bat, printing it carefully.

"Mouse."

While writing, Sarah felt Peter staring at her. She didn't look up when she finished.

"Gun."

"Was that word really in book one?" Sarah put down her pencil and looked at Peter.

Peter shrugged. "It's an easy word, ain't it?"

"It's an easy word," Sarah said and wrote it down.

"Kill."

Sarah looked up.

"You can spell that, can't you?" Peter said.

"Isn't there another word you want to learn to spell?"

"Go on and write it down." Peter made a motion with his hand. "I see you holding the pencil real fancy when you write."

Sarah wrote it down.

"I know you got your GED," Peter said.

"What's the next word?"

"You didn't even notice my new tennis shoes."

Sarah glanced at them. They were shiny red with a silver stripe. She wanted to ask him if he wanted to go to Kansas or maybe back to Ohio where he was born forty-seven years ago.

"Like'm?"

"They're cool. Very cool." Sarah paused. "What's the next word?"

"Cash." The next were bank, cat, amigo.

"We're only learning English words."

"You're teaching me to spell words, ain't you?"

"Words in English."

"You have something against amigo?"

"You want to learn amigo?"

"I wouldn't've said it if I didn't."

Sarah wrote amigo.

"Susan."

"Look, Peter."

"How do you spell Susan?"

Sarah wrote it, and without thinking, she wrote it in cursive.

"That's not an s." Peter grabbed the pencil from Sarah. "This is how you write s."

Sarah sat back and watched him bite his lower lip as she slowly printed an s, pressing lightly on the paper, the number two pencil producing faint letters. Again, the lightness with which he wrote took Sarah by surprise.

"There," Peter said after he had written Susan several times. "That's my mother's name."

"That's a nice name," Sarah said.

"She never let me go to school."

"I'm sorry," Sarah said and didn't know what else to say and couldn't bring herself to suggest getting back to practicing long u.

"I'd run away to my grandmother, but my mother would call the cops and tell them my grandmother kidnapped me."

"That's terrible," Sarah said, thinking that whatever she said would sound lame to Peter.

"No matter what my mother did to me, I'd always end up back with her."

Sarah looked at the three Susans that Peter wrote, each

one spelled correctly, written legibly and tentatively.

Peter started collecting his belongings, putting his textbook, spiral notebook, and pencil into his pseudo black leather briefcase. "I wanna show you something," Peter said and pushed his chair back, making a scraping sound.

Sarah looked around her at the library patrons at other tables. Most were staring at computer screens, and none of them seemed to notice the scraping chair.

"What about your lesson?" Sarah said.

Peter waved to Sarah as he slowly headed to the front door, and Sarah watched him for a moment, watched his short, stocky body pitch slightly forward, his limp more noticeable today. She grabbed her purse as she followed him outside.

"Can you read this?" Peter pointed to graffiti on top of the low wall in front of the library.

Sarah looked at it, what she thought were letters with a line drawn through them, and tried to read it. Finally, she shrugged her shoulders. "I can't."

"Sure you can." He grabbed her arm and took Sarah around to the other side of the wall. He pointed left to right. "You can read that."

No big deal, Sarah thought. So what that she was trying to read something left to right that was upside down. But now looking at it the right way she still couldn't read it.

Peter shook his head and began to trace the letters as he read then: c o m p t o n. "Get it?"

"I do," Sarah said.

"Ya know what that line means?"

"No."

"They're gonna kill whoever wrote that."

"Oh," Sarah barely said, trying to sound as if she had just heard him tell her it's a sunny day in Los Angeles. Then she heard herself say to Peter, "How about the long u in music?"

"What?"

"Or how about short vowels?" Sarah said.

“What short vowels?” Peter said.

“I, for instance. I as in in.”

Sarah paused. “I as in fix.”

Pause.

“U as in up,” Sarah said.

Pause.

“E as in egg,” Sarah said.

Pause.

“A as in apple,” Sarah said.

“There’s something I wanna talk about,” Peter said. He sat down on the wall, avoiding the graffiti, and patted the wall, patted the graffiti scrawled concrete next to where he sat.

“I prefer to stand,” Sarah said.

“Whatever,” Peter said.

Sarah looked at her watch. There was half an hour left before his lesson was supposed to end.

“I saw you pull into the parking lot.”

“Uh huh.”

“You came from that way.” Peter pointed south on Avalon.

“I did.”

“See, I seen you.”

“Uh huh.”

“You parked under that tree in the lot.”

“Yes.”

“You stayed in your car.”

“I got here early.”

“I know.”

“The library wasn’t open yet.”

“You should’ve stood with me and waited.”

“I had to make a telephone call.” Sarah hated lying and got mad at herself, told herself that she didn’t need to explain or justify her actions to him.

“That just means you aren’t really interested in helping me. You don’t really care.”

“That’s not true.”

"I seen all the other people with their tutors waiting together in front of the library, but you were in your car."

Sarah knew there weren't any other tutors tutoring at that time but didn't say anything to Peter.

"How else can I get to know you?" Peter said.

"Excuse me?"

"If we don't talk before my lesson starts, how will I get to know you?"

"You want me to get here early so we can talk?"

"How else can I vent?"

Sarah looked at her watch and was glad they were outside.

"Like that."

"Like what?"

"You don't really care about me."

Sarah sighed.

"If we don't talk, how would I know if you've ever committed armed robbery?"

"I've never committed armed robbery."

"How do I know if your purse isn't wired?"

"This? Wired?" Sarah clutched it closer to her body.

"I'm just saying," Peter said.

Sarah quickly glanced towards Pacific Coast Highway.

"Know what my parole officer did?"

"What did he do?"

"He came to see me the other day and made me come downstairs to him in his car. Can you believe that?"

"No," Sarah said though she had no idea what the protocol was with parole officers and their parolees.

"It's his job to see where I live, to come up to my apartment," Peter said. "How else would he know if I have a .357?"

"I guess he wouldn't know," Sarah said.

"That's right," Peter said.

"Did you say something to him?"

"What do you think?" Peter said. "I don't want to wear no

handcuffs.”

“I don’t blame you.”

“How would you know?”

“I’m imagining that I wouldn’t like to...”

Peter interrupted her. “I got this paper from the clinic for you to fill out. It’s in here.” He shook his briefcase. “Let’s go in the library to fill it out.”

“I can look at it out here,” Sarah said.

“We don’t have nothing to write on,” Peter said and began to walk to the library entrance.

Sarah didn’t move as she watched Peter walk to the door, watched as he motioned her to follow him. It was the afternoon, she thought, and there were plenty of people around.

“I need this so they can give me something for my pneumonia,” Peter said to Sarah as she met up with him inside the library’s lobby.

Wonderful, Sarah thought, he’s walking around with pneumonia.

“Also, my leg,” Peter said. “They’ll look at it.”

You’re a fucking mess, Sarah thought.

In the library, they sat at the table that they’d occupied before. Peter smoothed out the clinic’s form in front of Sarah.

Sarah took out a pen and turned the form over.

“What’s wrong with the other side?” Peter said tapping the paper with his index finger.

“It’s in Spanish,” Sarah said and took a look at the English side. The form was simple enough, and she went through it with him: Name, address, social security number, marital status, parents’ names.

“This says place of birth,” Sarah said, pointing to the words with the tip of her pen. “How do you spell Ohio?”

“You’re wrong,” Peter said, scrunching his eyes.

“You told me you were born in Ohio,” Sarah said.

“That’s where you’re wrong.” Peter sat back, licking his lips.

You even spelled it for me, Sarah thought and remem-

bered how proud he looked while spelling it: O-h-i-o.

Peter shook his head. "I was born in West Virginia."

Sarah sighed as she wrote West Virginia in the space and then immediately hoped Peter didn't hear her sigh. She looked up from the form. He was staring at her. Sarah cleared her throat. "The last bit of information they need is an emergency contact. This says emergency contact." She pointed at the words. "Whose name do you want me to write down?"

Peter shrugged.

"Your mother or father?"

"I don't know where they are."

"Your brother or sister?"

"I don't have a brother or sister."

This time Sarah didn't bother reminding him that he had told her he had a brother and a sister. Didn't bother reminding him that he wrote his brother's name, something she couldn't read, on his notebook though he wouldn't tell her what name he had written. Didn't bother reminding him that last week he had called to tell her he couldn't make it to the library that day because he was at his sister's place, making sure she was eating.

"I don't know no one," Peter said, sitting back and crossing his arms.

"Not anyone?" Sarah said.

"I only know you." Peter uncrossed his arms.

Sarah didn't say anything.

"Write your name." Peter leaned forward and tapped his index finger on the health clinic's form.

"No," Sarah said and handed the form to Peter.

"I won thirty-two out of thirty-five basketball games when I was in prison," Peter said as he slipped the health clinic form into his briefcase. "And that was against black guys."

"Basketball is fun to watch," Sarah said after hesitating, after thinking to herself that she was definitely not going to compliment him.

"I don't watch basketball," Peter said. "I play it."

"You don't watch the Lakers?"

"I could beat most of the Lakers if I played 'm one on one."

Sarah stifled a laugh.

"I watch SmackDown."

Sarah had no idea what that was and refused to ask.

Instead, she took out a piece of paper and wrote music. With the eraser end of the pencil, she pointed to the u in music.

"What letter is this?"

Peter stared at Sarah. He sat back in his chair and folded his arms. "I like SmackDown."

"I don't know what that is, and I don't care."

"See, you don't care."

"What letter is this?"

Peter unfolded his arms and leaned forward; he looked at the paper and tapped it with his index finger. "U," he said.

"What is this word?" Sarah pointed to music.

"Music."

"What is the sound of this long vowel in music?"

"U."

"Good," Sarah said. "You're getting it, the long u sound. U as in music."

ELIZABETH

FRANKLIN

That view is mine. That view is not mine.
Hi rise balconies ought to be caged.
In my dream you had a killer arm,
threw a shiny in an easy arc & stop-landed it on a department store riser.
I kissed you on both cheeks and lips and you were still a girl with after-market parts.
In the morning I was really dreading the warm raw chicken piles.
So I analgesed it through a killer shot
I Hemorrhaged it through a saw
I Just cut it out
I Cut it the fuck out
I was the narcotic & the necrotic
I Strafed it like a lawn shot
I Mowed it on the lowest blade
I Put digs to it
I Stretched those fibrous piles, pried em
I Put em in a wooden horse
Undid the pangea
Those redundancies ought to be judged swift
Ladies, stack those calcium cords, put em in a pyre stack &
put it on a cold floe
Honey,
I'm the ignoramus,
Honey, this is all just hastening, I
To take pleasure in your knowledge holes
Everyone has all these tricks
I mean, I'm literally unpreserving here
Slower than the slowethst slowth,
I couldn't look America in its mall eye:
This whole poem was a delivery system for that one line
Concentrate on it all you want
That wood grain and that telephone pole in middle distance aren't going
to save you from your dog incest anymore.

S A N A H

B O N A N

The Oak Spirit

By halves we cannot live.

—Edwin Muir

I. The years without summer

to the cold, wasps slow
and the world, barely old
seems so white at dusk

the solstice turns
to sleet newly on this place

meadow salt leaches in
to fog the dampened tree flesh

through a cavern of roots
the wind comes in

through the marsh's ice skim
a stone falls

such is winter—
breath settling into sleep

neither the ground or air or I
give much attention
to its immediacy

I have forgotten how
it threatens
the seven junctions of my tent

the oxford nylon rip-stop
a reflective web

territorial
too close to others
and not the mess a raccoon makes

another bird
a collision in mid air

she made it back
her young were hatched

I could not feel her
in my awkward outstretched hand

no weight
no feather against my skin
stillness

and a scale that needs
fine-tuning and more
that I have missed

I learned to pray
no, I learned to want to pray

so I prayed
to the green a hawthorn makes
its red varnished thorns
glancing and mean

to roots
coming out through rock

and I walked
to the edge of the world
where trees had grown

and one now stands

so slight of color
the cliffs and birds
and eggs and shit

the sky already
low and dropping
a granite vein
run through

I gathered
a leathery oak leaf
and fit my fingers
to its lobes

palm against palm
some reassurance of

all before and all before
and so on and so on
in the same way
here

and at last I found a human habit
going through my life

II. The church of the oak

a storm sky in winter is pearl
I follow, instead of men, birds
beyond which I can go no further than

for nine years
your fingers
in the margins

kept the pages
slow turning

until I
a spear turned
plucked out my heart
and set it in the ground
and walked from the place
of its beating

even now and today
I am hollow

a great tree has grown
through me

its roots draw
at the moon's wobbling
the suggestion of a tide

I have spied myself
in the oak's scoring
and when the season's last
acorn falls

I have brought to the great oak
the failings of my life
and set them down

I understand
how the heart resides
in the singleness of a sorrow

how fruit that never ripens
turns to ink

and in this instant, man
I break from you

the nameless trees
the broad rivers
the birds in mid-flight
wounded

the dark surviving eyes

my two good wings
my false starts

great oak
I have been wrong

for nine years
I sent out prayers
on the night wind
to a godless world

I lived aside
an imagined life
when the folded wings
of a hen blackened in a flare up
her quills unplucked
fluted steam

nothing belled the loss
and I a coward
kept to the hedges
cataloguing my life
in wren and nettle
in bleating I could not answer

to disentwine my life from yours

is not purpose

heart but when I turn to search for my wild

I find an entire world
pitched between our leaning frames

III. Undoing the spell

a sound
a human sound insisting
I turn to seek it
I turn to spring

tumbling from the brush
deep of the earth's clay
waking

want of the masculine
I

my lips unconfined
my hips and ribs searching
for a lover kept in the presence of his sex

this is who I am
this is who I am

until the prairie grass parts a narrowing trail
and offers to us the ocean

IV. A-Maying

was I awake
was I dreaming

on that day
even the sun
returned to her womb

I walked to clear my head
& overheard
the bees whispering to the oak
one two
and knew
I was not alone

a body within a body
a body within my body
as simple as that
your first fluttering, son

I was afraid to move

& then I saw
a white-gray bird
the flight gone out of her

little bird
I have spent my life
mending such spaces

our myths are filled with sacred rivers
& ensnaring

life so easily coming
and going

I expected her to answer
the way birds in stories
do

greedy
I wanted her to be
my compass

but whatever she was
was gone

so I returned her to the ground
for her ghost to find her
and the spring storms

and turned my attention back to you

and didn't know what to say

this was the first of many times
I've wondered of your animal shape

and of our becoming

son—

you will not remember this
but once half-hidden
we found a copse from which we watched
a pair of birds

if excess can be offered
take their wing snap
the sheen of dark forms falling
briefly claret
headlong through a clearing

and know
here, too, you will find

-for Niall

STON

LEE

my casual project

lacks common sense

the collective unity

the kind of cosmic

relief that has

not been invented

& my idea of causality

transcends the

unitary state

sanitation

my station has not been

cleansed with the holy water

that never was blessed

at its urination

there is nothing uncommon

about

unrectified underefined

rarity O such novelty

Fuck off this is mine

my depasteurized pestilence

my Kopymachine lacks

the Instant gratification

prerequisite for the

Grand Entrance

my delayed

slomo demonstration

my delayed

pro-mo protestation

my slow-mo voice-overs

My dear-adorned-crutch

My-faultsy-grand-jeté-

My--gilded--tricycle--

My—fallsy—fallacy----

My darling audience,

I want you to be generous

I want you to be generative

I want you to be generative of voids

I want you to be generative of voice

I hope to be generous

I hope to be generative

I hope to be generative of

and I

This is my relayed demonstration

I want to be your harmful noise

I want to be your hateful note

On that note I want to be your incorrigible corpse

My delayed demonstrosity

is yet to

my project lacks the

common ground

breaking elements

that react

ionary collaboration

requires

I will learn to love your

I am a good student

s-t-u-d-e-n-t

r-o-d-e-n-t

