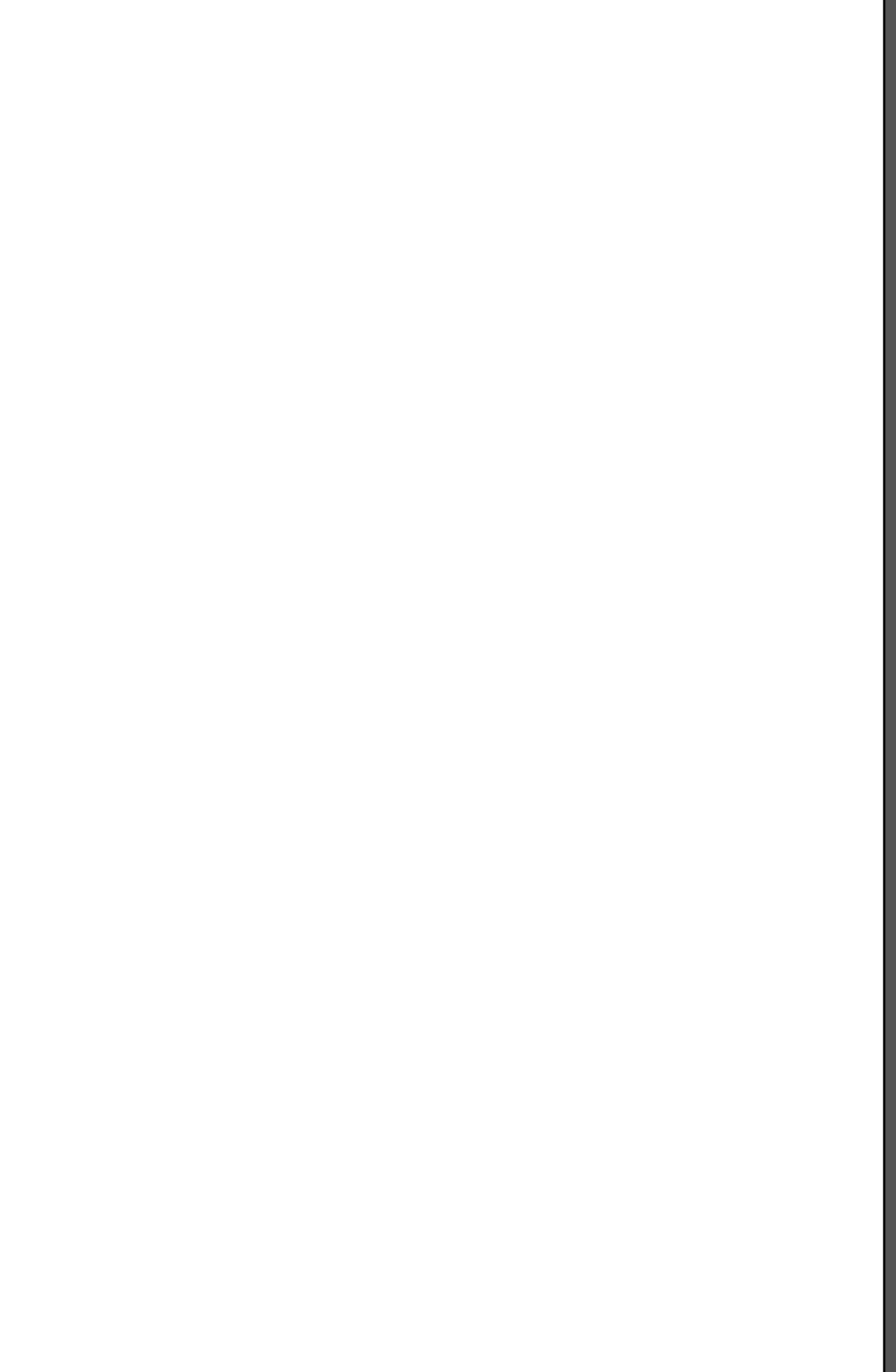


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COBALT

(prose)

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MITCHELL GRABOIS

GODFATHER

When he is four months old, the boy has become the four corners of his family's corn field. When the girl is three months old, she is the three stones of the hearth. I give the boy a machete, though it will be a while before he can use it. I put it in a special closet and nail the door shut with a square headed nail to keep it safe until then. I give the girl a pestle and a pot. She can play with the pot until the day comes when she will use it, but the boy cannot play with the machete. We do not want his young blood spilled. There is plenty of time for him to anoint the four corners of his corn field, plenty of time to give himself to the land, plenty of time for his rain to fall, for crops to grow. Now I have done my small part. They are prepared for the future. The Virgin's robe is blue with gold stars, and the Earth is fertile.

Someone in our town mailed me a mug shot of my wife. It came in a brown envelope, my name scrawled across the front, no return address. What did I ever do to him (or her)? I've never harmed anyone. I'm careful not to. I'm almost like a Hindu who won't walk on the path for fear of stepping on a bug.

I got the mug shot after I came home from work at the sawmill, old and exhausted, sweaty and dirty. I tore open the envelope and saw that corrupted face frozen in time, held it in my two hands. What could I do but sink deeper into the pit of defeat and depression?

Gengulphus of Burgundy, Saint of Difficult Marriages, help me.

I have a picture of Gengulphus stuck in the corner of my bathroom mirror where I can see it when I pull the razor across my face. Then I go pull lumber off the conveyer and stack it all day, and I pray to Saint Gengulphus for help. I shave because I don't want to look like a bum, especially now that my wife looks so bad. We're separated, but I see her around town when she's not in jail. She was a beautiful woman once, but meth destroyed her looks. Gengulphus had so much trouble with his wife that he left town and sought a life of solitude in his castle in Avallon. They called it a castle, but it was just a heap of cold dim rooms, and there he was murdered by his

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wife's lover, something that won't happen to me because my wife's looks are destroyed, and no one will ever feel as passionate about her as I once did, not even close.

Even if there's a miracle and she stops doing meth, she'll never get her looks back. She's too far gone. It doesn't matter how much I pray to Gengulphus, the Saint of Difficult Marriages. Saint Gengulphus, help me, I pray as I pull the razor across my face, as I pull lumber off the Green Chain. Gengulphus, tormented by woman, murdered by your wife's lover, you know how life works, you know what my life is, you know how much I need a miracle, you know how much I need your help. You know I've given up. So why do I still pray to you?

All the passion I had for her, all the love I gave her—it was like pouring used motor oil into a 55 gallon drum, something that once kept an engine clean and running strong, the engine of my love for her, now just dirty sludge, and the engine's no good anymore. Human life, human effort, it all goes for naught, even the life of Saint Gengulphus, except that, with his help, some Difficult Marriages are saved. But some marriages are too Difficult, even for Saint Gengulphus's intervention. No one in the olden days foresaw the scourge of meth, foresaw my wife smoking it.

Saint Gengulphus, take the day off. Then come back and give your aid to some couple that might be redeemable. Because the train has left the station for us. And I'm coming apart like a meteor entering Earth's atmosphere. My top hat flies off my head and bursts into flame, but only for a moment, not even a moment. The moon is my heart, full and blank. The craters have been erased. All these rocks that used to be my shoulders—now they're just rocks.

SARAH KAHN

BLUE

Her sister is always the person she calls first. Cole has left her again, just for a moment, he said, and come back a quarter of an hour later, his eyes making her think of the sheets he draped over his windows as curtains. She'd come to his new apartment for the first time last week, had said, "you need light in here," and pulled over a chair—the only piece of furniture he had—to pop out the thumb tacks holding the sheet into the window frame. And the light had washed in, too much light for the little room, making the twin mattress on his floor look dingier, glinting in the scuffs and dents pocking the floor. She'd stood in the window holding the navy blue sheets, light illuminating the tiny holes where the tacks had pierced the fabric. And now, as he drifts back into the room, his eyes on the bar, on the couple sweating onto each other at the edge of the room, on the girl drunk and pushing back piles of hair as she rests her chin on her boyfriend's shoulder and bounces to his rocking dance, his eyes on the ceiling, then on her, she thinks of those little holes, the way they are tiny portals to an entire world, a world held apart from this one.

"Cole," she says.

"Baby." He laughs with only part of his mouth, a habit he has that makes him seem arrogant, which she knows he is not, and she watches his draped eyelids linger at half-mast.

She doesn't want to hate him, but she does. She knows that it isn't his fault. That he wants to be all the things he promises he will be. But he could have waited until she wasn't here.

"Were you ever sober?"

"What do you mean?" he asks, and she sees it pass through him, the bewildered look, and then the angry denial, and then the—is it guilt?—she feels it desperately. All of a sudden she wants him to try to explain, to lie to her, she thinks he still has time, she wants to be wrong, but she knows.

"I was, I swear, 32 days, baby, nothing, I mean weed, a little, and some drinks, you know, but just to help me kick—I told you, I took the suboxone

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you gave me, it was helping, but I just saw Butter,” —her eyes flick to the door, scan, find Butter, an impulse she can’t control—”you know, come in with this chick, and I mean, it’s just one night, not like before, I’m sorry, baby—Listen, listen,” Cole says, and he looks right into her eyes, and he puts her hands together between his own, and he says, “baby, I made a mistake. But it’s done. It doesn’t take away the month clean. I wasn’t going to. It’s Butter. Blame Butter.”

She can’t help it. She laughs a little half laugh. They met Butter in a dry spell—had erased Jay from their phones, sworn not to go back, and no one was answering, so she swung by Haight asking around and this guy says, “Yeah, I could hook you up, baby” average guy, wife beater, low-hung, light washed jeans, and when he gave her his number he told her his name was Butter. She’d gone home with a decent score, a little pricey but good, and she and Cole had fallen all over themselves laughing. She remembers clutching a baggie of heroin to her stomach, sputtering out his name: butter, butter, butter.

When she’d gotten back from Southern California—three months in rehab and three months living with her ex-boyfriend turned out to be five and a half more months than she could stand in SoCal—she’d told Cole she couldn’t see him. She’d told her sponsor that it was hard, but she was doing the right thing. But she had lied. It wasn’t hard. She wanted to hurt him. To hurt him, but not to leave him. When she finally called—she had convinced her sponsor that she owed him an amends—and his number was disconnected, she had lain on the floor and sobbed like a twelve year old, those sobs that make your throat raw and feel like they are ripping up your organs. And then she’d seen him at a meeting.

Now Cole takes her head in his palm, his fingers slicing through her thick hair, and pulls her to him, kisses her neck and then her cheek with theatrical fervor, decrying his fate into her skin, “I was tricked, I was distracted, it was Butter, the great Buddah, I couldn’t resist.” He lets her go. “Come on. Let’s forget about it. I didn’t buy any more. Let’s just have fun.”

Her sister is always the person she calls first and her fingers are running over the edges of her phone in her pocket but Cole says, “Lighten up. How many mistakes have we made? And we’re still here.”

SARAH KAHN

The music is loud and someone bumps her elbow as Cole leads her by the hand to the back of the bar. There's a group of people sliding out of a booth—a miracle in Elbow Room on a Saturday—and he falls in, drags her after him.

“So how was your day?”

“Ugh,” Rebecca says. “Opened. I’m exhausted.” She feels entitled to this: the chaperone reminding the kids that it’s late and the car doesn’t drive itself.

“Fuck that coffee job. When are you going to quit?”

“Hah. Tomorrow. I don’t know. When I get a real job.”

“Who needs a real job with eyes like that?”

“Shut up.”

“Have a drink.”

She doesn’t want to say, I don’t. She’s sick of sounding like she’s telling him what to do. She hates the girls who get sober and turn around to preach the way ten days later. Almost a year and she’s not sure she won’t start drinking again, not sure she shouldn’t, and not too sober to remember that it wasn’t such a simple choice when she couldn’t stop. She’s sick of being the one who isn’t having a good time. She’s sick of being boring.

“I work in the morning,” she says instead.

“Coffee slave,” Cole says, picking up the drink someone left behind—something blond, probably a whiskey in melting ice—and swallowing the last of. “Why I love being a free man.”

“Free to take anything that’s free,” she says. She doesn’t mean to be cruel, but she’s so sick of being on the edge of his wave—how many times has she been quiet beside him while he was drunk or high. She can’t stop thinking how good it would feel to find another forgotten drink, how good she is at being the girl at the bar ordering one more, make it three. She can’t stop thinking that if he were sober, she still wouldn’t be having any fun, but if she were drunk—if she found Butter—Cole puts a hand on her waist.

“I have what I want,” he says, and she hates him for meaning it, because she has absolutely nothing that she wants. He smiles.

“You’re wearing the heroin melt,” she says, a name they have for the smile they are supposed to sharpen when they pass cops, or family, or anyone

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whose judgment they need to avoid. Why is she jealous of something she worked so hard to extract from her life?

“It suits me,” he says, but too slowly.

“Oh, fuck, Cole, how much did you do?”

“It’s ok, it’s ok,” he slurs. “Butter has coke. You can still do that, right? I’ll wake right up. We’ll have a good night. Promise.”

“I’m taking you home,” Rebecca says, and turns her shoulder to him.

“Fine, whatever,” he says, slumping back into the booth.

She calls her sister first, and then a cab. She tells Rae only that she is taking Cole home, to his new place, the housing by the civic center. She doesn’t want to explain the whole thing, hear the pause of her sister withholding the I-told-you-so, doesn’t want to be convinced, again, that she shouldn’t give him another chance when she knows she will. She just wants to hear her sister’s voice.

When they get to Cole’s she walks him in. He slept the whole way home, and now he staggers out, one arm over her shoulder.

“Did a little more than you thought, huh?”

“A nug, beb, a nug, ‘sit,” he says.

At least she knows he really stopped for a while. When they used to fix together, Cole could take an elephant’s dose of anything, opiates especially. They once shared a 30 bottle of Vicodin and forgot they’d taken it, they felt so little.

“Lost your tolerance?” she says, and leans down under Cole’s weight to hand the taxi driver a bill. This week’s tip money from the stupid coffee shop.

She stops at his door, but Cole goes right to the bed, drops onto the edge of it and sits with his head in his hands. “Wait,” he says. She feels it like swallowing warm water. In the morning they’ll start over. How many times did she almost slip up? How many times have her friends bounced in and out of the rooms, a newcomer again, and again? It isn’t as if she’s finding him in the bushes three days later. Nothing permanent has been done.

“Baby, I’m sorry, I don’t mean to be like this,” he says, and his voice catches. “I love you. I’m so sorry.” She can see the bones of his back through

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his shirt. She wants to go to him and she doesn't.

Behind him, the slats of the wood venetians they bought at the thrift store in the mission last week let in slivers of grainy city light.

"Babe, it's ok," she laughs. "Blame Buddah. You won't even remember this in the morning."

Then she does go to him, rubs his shoulder, a quick, reassuring gesture. It scares her how cold it is, how efficient. As if he isn't anything to her. A loser on a mattress in some SRO near the Civic Center. "Go to sleep. Fresh start in the morning," she says. Then she backs away, smooths down the creased navy pleats of her dress, puts her gold clutch into her other hand—"too gaudy?" She'd asked Rae, who had said, "you're asking me?"—and walks out the door. The hall is long, the carpet either red or brown, mottled with layers of stains. It's dim. She wishes it didn't but it makes her nervous walking down this hall. A man comes out of his room, a wet, sweet scent like rotting banana rising from his skin. She presses her back to the wall as he moves towards her, his shoulder glancing her in the narrow hallway. He turns his gaze to her for a moment and she feels fear corkscrew up her esophagus, but he passes her and goes into the shared bathroom at the end of the hall. Stupid, she thinks. He's just a guy.

She pulls open the heavy metal door at the top of the stairs and the cold air springs into her skin like a flash of relief. She feels as if whatever was clinging to her is being flung away. Her heels make sharp cracking noises on the cement stairs. At the bottom, Rae is standing, a black, fading Amoeba sweatshirt hanging over her plaid pajama bottoms, her hair twisted into a lopsided bun, her Toyota's blinkers flashing in the street behind her.

"Need a ride?" she asks, and Rebecca sprints the last two stairs and locks her arms around her sister's neck.

"It's ok," Rae says, "it's ok." And it is. There's nothing wrong but she can't let go.

AMY KENYON

MARRIAGE, DIVORCE, AND A SEASON OF BASEBALL

Born in Detroit in 1892, my grandfather was a Tiger fan all his life. For more than half of the twentieth century, decade after decade, from Cobb to Kaline, he saw the great players. By the late forties, before I was born, he was known to say, “Get me a seat on the third base line. I want to smell George Kell’s sweat.”

I was born in 1954, into the era of transistor radios, when Granddad would sit at the backyard picnic table with his radio and a Drewrys Beer, the one with the Canadian Mountie on the can. I thought the Mountie must be listening too, as the tinny little radio crackled with the play of the game, delivering it into hot, late summer afternoons. I remember Tiger Stadium, the 1968 season and Granddad fighting back tears that same year, when my parents told him he had grown too frail to sit through a game downtown. He died two years later. For several seasons, I continued to commune with him, whispering the results after games and glancing up at the sky, the way we sometimes do with dead people.

From girlhood then, the Detroit Tigers were my team but I did not prove as faithful as my grandfather. I didn’t mean to be unfaithful. It’s just that thirty years ago, I married a Brit and moved from Michigan to London, after which first the Tigers, and gradually baseball itself faded from my thoughts.

At the start of 2012, before the old year’s Christmas decorations had been put away, unfaithfulness finally knocked at my door, bringing my already ailing marriage to a crashing end. Lies, cheating, bitter words. Indoor fireworks to match Fourth of July at the ballpark. Followed by the back and forth of futile phone calls, then when those dwindled, by pacing the kitchen floor late into the night, lights out, pausing only to stare out the back window at our empty yard. Sometimes I sat down beside the dog on her mat, burying my face in her big furry neck, hoping for some kind of comfort there.

Eventually the pacing slowed, giving way to hours on the sofa, silent tears, grief, sleepless nights, wondering, and regret. Yogi Berra said, “It ain’t over

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‘til it’s over.” This may be true of baseball, but in matters of love, sometimes it’s over before it’s over. We got together too young and it has to be said, stayed together too long. And so we parted badly and in pain. In the end, there was no ninth inning rally, no effort, no belief; only the slamming of doors.

But I’m not here to talk about all that. Not really. In time, we may be kinder to one another, but our story will never turn to anything better than sad. No, I’m here to tell you something about baseball, about what happened later, during the spring and summer that followed, as I began to look for respite in the world outside my dead marriage. I concentrated on work. I tried to kindle new friendships and rekindle some old ones. These efforts were tentative at first, and results were uneven. You’re up by a game or two, but then you’re down. It’s a long season.

Some evenings, I came home tipsy on cocktails and fully convinced I was having a ball as a single woman; other evenings, I came home to a cold house, played old Sinatra ballads about broken hearts and sat down beside the dog. She showed concern and licked my face. At one point, I subscribed to an online dating site, but as soon as I began receiving responses from other members, I recoiled in terror and closed the account. “I think the online dating experiment showed me I’m not really interested in a relationship,” I told a friend. “You’re just not ready,” she answered. As though readiness were a natural, expected progression. I tried to believe, but decided any ‘dating’ would have to occur as part of ordinary daily encounters, so when I met a nice fellow at a party, I stepped up bravely. We agreed to meet for dinner a week later. There followed seven days of dread, followed by an evening that had all the charm of a dentist appointment. I dated two or three others after that, less enthusiastically, and well, let’s just say that I really ought to apologize to the guys involved for wasting their time.

It didn’t matter where or how they turned up, clearly there were men out there. All shapes and sizes and characters of men. They were out there, all right. But I began to see that my reaction had little to do with who they were or might be. I realized that I didn’t want them, didn’t need them at all. It reminded me of my best Christmas morning when, aged ten, I sat at the foot of the twinkling tree and unwrapped my first pair of figure skates.

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Wearing my own skates, soon I would glide across the ice, free and alone. When I was a kid, skating often made me think about baseball. I loved the game, but I wasn't much good at it. I was good at ice skating. I liked to imagine that the skater, moving down the river or across the pond, was like any player in his fielding position, or on the pitcher's mound, or at bat. There was a loneliness in baseball that was part of its appeal. Throughout childhood summers, when I watched the Tigers, I sometimes dreamed of snow and my dad freezing the backyard to make a rink for me. In winter, practicing my spins on the ice, I dreamed of Tiger Stadium.

Sometime in late August 2012, many months after my husband had moved out, perhaps during the period I was figuring out some of these questions about dating, friendship, and what to do with myself, I began to notice the baseball standings. They appeared every Saturday in my British newspaper, so it was a weekly reconnoitre at first. The Detroit Tigers were leading the division. Soon I was checking every result on the Tigers' website, where I found there were photos and highlights. I began tracking coverage in the Detroit papers, learning about the players.

It was new to me, but it was powerfully old to me too. Following baseball was, again, like ice skating: a sense memory, a stir of knowledge, a movement that slips into your body and never fully leaves you. By the time of the 2012 pennant race and World Series, I had subscribed to Major League Baseball television and was streaming the games on my laptop. Okay, we lost in four games; I had barely returned to baseball and watched just a fraction of a season. But for a few precious weeks, I had fallen back into a pleasure so deep that I knew I would be there for the next opening day.

Winter came. I wasn't a girl in Michigan anymore, but once again, I thought about baseball during the cold months when all the ballparks were quiet. I worked, saw my friends, went out and about in London, got used to coming home alone and liking it. There were, and always will be, hard moments. When there is nobody to tell; nobody to call. But these are no harder than another person's hard moments. I was looking outside myself again, remembering what Humphrey Bogart once said to Ingrid Bergman – that lovers' problems, "don't amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world." And anyway, for my pleasure, I had a complete season of baseball waiting

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for me when the snow melted and the ice skaters hung up their skates.

And so to 2013, my first complete season in many years. My subscription granted me each and every game on my laptop, but of course the night games and west coast games appeared in the small hours here. For some night games, I moved the laptop to my bedside, typically drifting off to sleep during the middle innings. The cheering crowd or animated announcers woke me for crucial plays. But I lived for the day games, which would arrive about dinner time in London; I cooked and ate with the laptop on the kitchen table, and was regularly joined by my son. A Londoner by birth, he persists in calling the games ‘matches,’ but he now knows the difference between a sinker and a slider, can give the ERA for any Detroit pitcher, batting averages down the line-up, Miggy’s home run count. Like baseball fans anywhere, we sat in the kitchen and cheered, complained, argued about calls. In between innings, we looked up baseball rules, stats and lore.

During some games, my son and I spent excessive amounts of time peering into baseball’s living room, its domestic space—the dugout. We desired the company of the players; we analysed the character of this one or that one, or the relations between them. Like a pair of homeless people outside the picture window, we hungrily watched the talking and teasing in the dugout, the summer boredom, the camaraderie, the ups and downs of the game inscribed on the players’ faces. A diminished family, we secretly longed for more than was reasonable to ask of your baseball team. But somehow, the Tigers delivered.

Steady and reliable, these guys turned up 162 times. Yes, one of the most compelling aspects of baseball is its season, its 162 games. Readers of sports journalism may remember Thomas Boswell’s lovely book, *How Life Imitates the World Series*. In the opening chapter, he quotes Earl Weaver on the baseball schedule, “This ain’t a football game,” Weaver says. “We do this every day.” Boswell sees this as “baseball’s great blessing and the source of its richness: you play it every day.” Suggesting that the 162 games produce a micro-culture of regularity and balance, Boswell says the “sense of elemental sanity and order that we sometimes feel around baseball is not entirely a romantic wish; the game has, at its core, a distinct therapeutic quality.”

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Having entered the 2013 season following a period of personal loss and upheaval, perhaps I submitted Boswell's claim to a small, private test. I make no sweeping claims, but I can confirm that for me, the frequency of play, the episodic quality of home and away series, the removal of clock time, the old-fashioned uniforms, the grass and the baselines, the ghost of my grandfather near third base, the summer heat, the lights, the balls fouled off into the crowd, the 1-2-3 innings, the long and narratively complex innings, the strike counts, the arcane signs from the coaches, the impenetrable relationship between pitcher and catcher, meetings on the mound, the occasional bench-clearing fight, the endless statistics attaching to each player and each situation, the lazy inaction on the field punctuated by bursts of brilliance from a batter or fielder, then the return to a quiet game in the middle of a hot afternoon – all of these elements burrow inside the person who watches with any kind of regularity. They slow a person down, cause her to live in the moment, cause her to feel close to the players who turn up every day. She comes to care about them, mothers them, sisters them, gradually forgets her age and falls giddily in love with one or two of them. She sends little messages throughout the season, if only in her thoughts. Fans and messages. It's a powerful element in baseball culture. We talk to the players and imagine they hear us.

Towards the end of the regular season, I was out for dinner with a friend. He asked me why I didn't show much interest in dating. I told him that at least 162 times a year, I've got nine guys in the field, and at least eight of them are willing to go to bat for me. A few weeks later, the Tigers lost the Pennant to the Red Sox, and for the first time in many months, I was lost and lonely again. But I had things to do and the feeling slowly passed, leaving a residue of post-season melancholy.

My divorce will soon be final. I used to find it hard to imagine life without him. Not anymore. I'll be fine, having understood that many good things do, and should, come to an end. Fortunately, baseball isn't one of them. Dear Tigers, I'm back, communing with my team and my grandfather too. When winter comes again and the cold winds blow, I'll keep busy. Maybe I'll try a date or two. But between you and me, I'd rather go ice skating and dream of opening day.

HELEN McCLORY

TO STRING

To take a special holiday to visit the place where they were last seen.

To take a bus and then a train, the green countryside blipping past, the technology of an earlier era but no less miraculous.

To arrive at the station, the only person standing on the platform under a yellowing sky.

To see likewise the yellow fields of rapeseed swaying in a breeze your arms do not register.

To feel in your nerves the storm hunching below the horizon.

To depart from the station on foot and walk to nearest signpost.

To discover the distance to your destination is four and a half miles, and choose not to wait for the rural bus.

To remove from a messenger bag of soft i.e. well-worn brown leather a miniature jar of honey and a ledger with a soft leather cover in a brown shade exactly matched to the bag.

To adjust glasses.

To put the honey jar in your blazer pocket, ignoring the disruption to the line of your coat.

To begin walking in the direction of your destination, while silently reading from the ledger, keeping an eye on your feet, the overgrown verge, and the unasphalted road.

To realise you have forgotten your flask of coffee on the train.

To, at length, reach your destination, with a great thirst upon you.

To step up to the threshold, without stopping to take in the magnitude of the premises.

To remove the jar of honey from your pocket and set it down a moment.

To remove from an inner pocket of the blazer a small pearl-handled knife.

To remove your left shoe and left sock.

To lean down and score along the sole of your foot with the knife until a thin line of blood follows the blade.

To smear the blood from the knife to the top stone of the doorstep.

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To smear over this a little of the honey, so that honey and blood lie beside one another in a tiny rainbow.

To return the knife to the pocket (leaving the opened jar of honey) and to return all clothing to the order it had been in before.

To take in a long breath.

To hold that breath for one, two, three seconds, before letting it out.

To rub your fingers, upon which the mingled honey and blood remain in trace.

To step across the threshold.

To walk down the hall, imagining what it would have been to have been the first.

To imagine what it would have been to be the academic who first declared this site irreparably contaminated.

To imagine his pomposity and lack of understanding of what such a declaration would stimulate among the other faculty, tutors and from them, to the student body, a sticky transference taking numerous years, with multiple blots and disjunctions of information.

To imagine entering this place clean, as it was then.

To consider oneself clean, anyway, disregarding the knowledge that first academic indirectly transmitted to you and every other visitor.

To find yourself in a room which you do not remember entering.

To feel your shoe beginning to feel damp.

To sit at the great stone hearth.

To be sitting at a great stone hearth that is not in the same room that you do not remember entering, but in another room altogether.

To move to another room, possibly a few.

To note: kitchen (giant oven), dining room (wax hand and wizened grapes in a glass punch bowl), sunroom (no light coming from the outside, as if all is a naked midnight, when it was just moments before the height of day), bedroom (bed small and enclosed with curtains. Bed you find yourself lying in, with your shoes dangling off the edge, grey stars in your head, you note, from a loss of blood).

To have always been squeamish, and aware that this would occur.

To know that boundaries must be made fuzzy and unstable, and that to do

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this might require one to become fuzzy and unstable.

To laugh in the way that people alone tend to laugh, as if their continued presence on earth depends on laughing in a way that is convincing to themselves, or potential listeners-in.

To reach a basement, where you are sure the last came to, before they too crossed the border, irreparably.

To have no memory of stairs beyond a new smear on your hand, of beeswax polish.

To be confused as to what constitutes a memory and what a sensation of slickness.

To be reminded of the great thirst that is upon you.

To lick your lips subconsciously, then consciously, then wipe your lips, tasting metal and honey and a secondary type of the secretions of bees.

To find a bottle of wine, very old, with an art nouveau image of a naked woman on it, and to crumble the cork with your fingers and to drink the contents.

To feel immediate regret.

To wake up on the floor of the wine cellar in a wineskin of a body, something sloshing around in there.

To hear a voice.

To hear two voices.

To see, as you tilt your head, feet coming down the stair to the wine cellar. Feet in coral-red slippers.

To know that this person is not the others you came to see, but a different person entirely, and only singular. Or only two. Not enough at any rate.

To know that you have broken something.

To be confused as to whether the broken something is internal or external of your body.

To be confused as to whether you are a body, have a body, or what.

To then know that you do not have a history, or a messenger bag, or a cut on your foot (though you felt it, probably, just a few moments ago, or however long).

To know that you may not have one face, but many.

To have it confirmed, then, that the break was external, or rather not-you,

HELEN McCCLORY

since you have no interior, therefore nothing exists in relation to this interior. But, like, not to say there is no world. Just that your boundaries are blurry. Sticky, polish-streaked, and blurry.

To hate yourself (not-self, whatever).

To feel regret that you used to leave philosophy lectures early and go and buy hot chocolate and take this cup out to the beach to watch the sunset, even though this was quite close to perfection at the time.

To know anyway you are a trope, the intruder, the unexpected guest who is in fact there to inspect.

To be aware that this is how the others must have vanished.

To feel irreparably contaminated.

To put both hands over your mouth and squeal into this closed space until this wooze of feeling, of nauseated, but also hollow terror, leaves you.

To watch the feet passing you by – not just the coral-red slippered feet, but a pair of light boots that might belong to a man, given their size, a man whose job it is to travel a lot outside in unexpected climates.

To realise that the owners of the feet have not become aware of your presence, despite your prone position in the middle of the wine cellar floor.

To breath awkwardly for a few moments, trying to arrange your face so that it is not a wax model but a human face. Metaphorically speaking.

To get unsteadily to your feet.

To look at your left shoe and to see despite the odds it has turned deep black-red.

To remain unseen and hyperventilating.

To stare a while at the two, one indeed a man in outdoor clothing, the other a woman of some age, but evident amounts of self-control and grace.

To at length go up the stairs, hoping to avoid losing time.

To walk into a room you have never been in before, which makes sense, since this is not the place you entered.

To sit down at a long table of fine wood in a different room, in so different a style again that it might be a room in another century, or at least in the house of a person overly keen on historical re-enactments of great verisimilitude.

To break down crying, a really just all-out, orgasmic sort of crying.

HELEN McCLORY

To suddenly come upon another room.

To suddenly come upon another, this one filled with young adults, all of exceptional beauty and breezy gormlessness, staring back at you.

To come upon another room. Or it is the same room, but so utterly changed.

To blink.

To still find the walls of that room coated in a rust liquor, as they were a moment ago.

To look down at scraps of white clothing, nothing much else. Black and white tile, smeared prints. Wood. Cork. Sand. Terracotta. Your two shoes, one brown, the other black-red.

To hold your face in your hands.

To feel your teeth strange in your mouth.

To feel your lips chapped from the red wine and other substances.

To feel a great weight on the top of your head.

To feel with your fingers the weight is coming from a ribbed absence in the air above your scalp.

To start laughing, not trying to convince yourself of anything anymore, but laughing until your heart squeezes uncomfortably in your chest.

To, at length, desist from laughing.

To find your breathing awkward, but continuous.

To find with your descending, empty, sticky fingers your glasses still there on the bridge of your nose.

To take a little comfort in that.

BEN HALL

WHEN I'VE COME TO REST

There are two ways to get into my subdivision. The more direct path is cut over by a railroad and each day this provides me with a small gamble: to take the roundabout-but-unambiguous path, or risk the train. It is a fairly busy track; I get caught about every fourth time I take that road. I used to grudgingly spin my car around and backtrack to the road that circumvents the tracks altogether (even though it surely takes longer than simply waiting), but lately, I don't. I light a cigarette (silently cursing myself for not having given up the habit yet) and watch the boxcars glide by, and I imagine that it might go on forever, not traveling, but extending, on and on from its point of origin, somewhat like the way I envision life, though I know less about living than I do of trains. Here is what I do know:

You never saw a train when it was on the tracks, doing what it ought to do. You, like me, may have sneered at one or two when they crossed over your path, and damned your luck. You may be in that number of those who have traveled in them. Maybe you even have some technical or historical understanding of them: pistons and steam engines, origin and evolution, how each wheel on a locomotive has a nozzle that uses compressed air to spray a coating of sand onto the tracks to increase traction. But you never really saw a train until the day that you stepped out of the car and walked down the line of parked vehicles that seemed to have no end until you found that expanse of lacerated earth, longer than a football field, that would take decades to heal. The pierced embankments, and the shattered interstate, and the tubes of metal crushed and warped like tinfoil. Because they sail by so gracefully that, before that moment, you'd never had an inkling, truly, of all that metal, that incomprehensible mass, and what it would take to stop it.

But there are other kinds of mass, of force, that can't be measured in ounces or grams or tons. You have some experience in that subject though, with the momentum of a life, its weight, the way that it can tear like a bullet

BEN HALL

through the world. From there, where you sat crumpled in a noisome hotel room, heavy with the stench of liquor and your failing body, it was easy to see why the world begs for stasis and what you would sacrifice for that. But do we ever truly stop? In the end, life slows down. Your last moment of consciousness is drawn to the moment itself like an asymptote of eternal approach, but never arrival. You would live this moment forever. From somewhere in the room, you heard your cell phone buzzing, the call of what wreckage you had already left in your wake, and hoped it would stop and that there would be no more to follow. Because a train doesn't leave the tracks out of impulse to destroy. If you'd known any other way... And you found yourself wondering, feebly, through a fever that bore down on you like a locomotive, whether the devil cried when he saw just how much of the heavens he'd torn down with him or what excuse, if any at all, a train would give.

JOHN MYERS

TWIN PEAKS

All the men and women on this film are beautiful and bright-eyed and hot and one girl cries with her hand on her collar. I regret not having watched before at Oberlin what my classmates were watching on televisions at parties before cell phones.

Not then but now that I've lived in Montana and driven back and forth to Seattle the landscapes call me home. When the door is slammed and people hum is where I start. My grandmother gave me a piece of petrified wood and where it went is the older man is cute when he says, "Wrapped in plastic."

Sometimes in the school library I see a poster of a whale's tail and a globe in its wooden stand, the policeman's big felt cowboy hat and Bobby, the one who's supposed to be dreamy. I'm a bottom and I like hairy daddier men. I like one man prostrate and another man in a beard crouching over to kiss him on the back of the neck.

I have \$1,600 in the bank but I owe money to my hospital, boyfriend and landlord. I have a credit union but my coffee got cold. A piece of cloth keeps me company next to my bottle of condom-safe water-base lube.

I enjoy the shot of the trophy case because there's a red barre in front of it as though any minute male ballet students will, crotch in my face, appear.

Without shoes on and frost in the yard I can't be happier.

I make a pot of coffee with frozen grounds. One canister is almost empty. I have potato chips and wash my hands. With sunshine against me, wearing black pants, a sort of leggings, I see the green credits and a woman on both sides of the mirror, red lips applied and slightly smirking. I think I like this show already.

I have to get this off my chest: I have parasites and it's going to be another two weeks until I see the infectious diseases doctor. I'm a gay alcoholic poet sober eight years and I smell like cum and coffee and sunshine this first day of 2012. It looks like Twin Peaks' morgue is located in a high

JOHN MYERS

school, before the shot of wind in the trees.

“Your classmate Laura Palmer was found dead.” How passive that sentence is to me today, when I feel so pitied. When I look back on today in ten years I want to call it adventure then.

The task of every spiritual act is to help me make it through the winter. Hence the thwarted therapist and the callus on the middle finger of my right hand. I love this scene with Bobby, the hot policeman and the mullet policeman in a pizza roll with their three bodies pressed together pretty.

But I’ve been biting my nails for years, and though there’s nothing linear about it, it feels that way. Like next week. There are so many phone transfers, a can of oatmeal, and wool suit jackets, men giving one another bad news. I sit in front of my light therapy lamp although I blew off my therapist for our final appointment. “He called me last night from Butte.”

What is the difference between a sheriff and a police officer? Constable. A picture never tells a story, a live camera where I can’t hear the January birds. Brian is off to New York for the day. I’m gaga over the plaid jackets, policemen. Maybe she didn’t come home last night.

Now it’s raining and no music plays. In the background the detective and the sheriff fall in love. The show instead veers into another solipsistic motif: Day One or Day Twenty-Six: Laura has created, in her diary, a calendar. Laura has a secretary just like I do!

But I moved mine from my office into the kitchen so it could better catch unanswered mail. I try to write letters, say, to those I address. Laura Palmer’s mom, the actress, plays grief as a tiredness, an apnea.

“Shorty, tell the boys to pull the plug.” Finally I get to see the beautiful woman with the red red lips! I hope she likes watered-down orange juice.

And the car swerves by the famous Twin Peaks Population 51,201 sign. Reminding us that, as outsiders, we still feel the impact of the loss of one life on such a small city, smaller than some in Wisconsin. My favorite way that David Lynch shoots is when he looks at people from far away. I call it an establishing directive.

JOHN MYERS

“Ring finger, under the nail, let’s see what he left us.” Let’s see what other men know. Men asking to be let in. Wrap the scarf tighter. Knit a warmer one, a smaller and brighter. For any weather, brown cars, brown tree trunks, brown eyes and beautiful jackets. In love with salutation? Come along to notice the freckle or mole about the sheriff’s left eyebrow.

I want another coffee but I’m here in time now, prerecording sensation to come back and experience loss in it. I’ve foregone music this long to listen at language. I’ll take this coffee hot and milky and never kill another mouse. “Clean place, reasonably priced.”

“If you ever get up this way that cherry pie is worth a stop.” Now the show starts analyzing itself. The tape recorder in this man’s hands is like a map. We’re to assume he’s the killer. There is no least interesting correlation. I look at this detective’s face and its landscape. Lips and nose and the way the hair traces its hairline. I hear the pot soaking in the sink shift.

A woman crying for her daughter but why is the older sheriff touching her arm? “It would have been about 9. Yes, 9 PM.” Ominous shots of the brown-carpeted stairs, but a sweet smile from the brown eyes below the curly hair of our hero.

My doctor has a Master’s in Public Health and warned me not to Google my parasites. She knows me as a social worker but I trained as a sophist.

“Muffle it, junior,” and “You’re on my lot, friend,” says a man wearing waffle weave and plaid, hunky jeans and a protective smile. He has a note for Donna, and the movie’s dialogue sags under the pressure to push exposition.

They’re *Entamoeba histolytica* and I’ve already been through a regimen of metranidazole for ten days, nauseated. I was diagnosed by fecal smear, and to procure my sample I caught it on a paper plate, cut it in two with a piece of cardboard, doled it out into two separate specimen cups then threw the leftovers out downstairs. I don’t know how Brian did his. We live in third-

JOHN MYERS

floor walk-up, carry garbage down gingerly.

I get up for a glass of water. I drink from the tap. When I did this in Mexico did I ingest my parasites? Don't blame Mexico. It could as easily have been from American water. "You ever been surprised before?"

Two men square off. The nurse wears a light blue nametag and the sheriff wears a gold locket close to his neck under his wide eyes and cooperative smile. When men squint their eyes I put on scarves. When the glaciers melted over New England they left hills and valleys of slough I pick through. Now a rock the size of a bent-down finger, bent into itself toward the palm and the color of a filling.

A doctor arrives, says, "Laura's parents didn't know that she was seeing me," then laughs, rocking back onto his heels in his light blue shoes. Symptoms of bloody diarrhea and abdominal pain are common, though many people remain asymptomatic. Worst case: liver abscesses resulting in death. Again we're shown three men in a room. One sets his magnifying glass on Laura's belly.

A video within the show. Two girls, maple seeds on their noses, giggling. Laura finally alive against Bobby's hands woven together at the fingers, red and white like his maroon shirt over a white waffle weave top. Now I want to do fashion photography. "Did you know Laura was seeing someone else?"

Slow pan to mullet officer's crotch and leather gloves on his hands around a radio, engine in the background. I feel a little cleaner having taken a shower but I only have shampoo.

A calculator is a rectangle. My heart is.

Four men in a room together is a rectangle. My bathtub is a taped-together nose. I wish my favorite character was the girl with black-and-white shoes and red heels and twisting a pencil into a Styrofoam cup but it isn't. She wears her name like a characteristic: "Audrey, don't go in there!"

The pixie, like the detective, has a birthmark near her left eyebrow.

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Often I don't watch shows all the way through; I hate endings. Now I haven't mentioned the dark-haired doe-eyed leather jacket yet. Now is not the time, because three men are seen through the lodge's window and one in a Tyrolean hat! The bell is ringing on the concierge's desk and I feel ready for another. I use a huge mug that fits my blue and purple outfit and mouth.

The doorknobs in my office are painted over. Don't forget that sparks accompanied the show's credits from the town mill.

She breathes under her breasts to say, "Murdered." The places this show takes place: the high school, the morgue, the police and gas stations, Laura's house, and the detective's car.

Fog over the mountains, trees, the valley. My hero wearing his hat again, and me staring at the bottom of my coffee cup. I don't want to say any more about me. But I do disconcert myself with figuring out the mystery to focus on aptitudes, outfits, and ways of recording. A half of a heart locket is a used up idea I have to say it! Remember my niece in Annie, Jr.? I promised myself I'd be honest if it breaks this figurine. It's an unglazed ceramic penguin holding a heart that I made during a session when my therapist used to bring in clay.

Rectangular objects in the frame and rectangular objects outside the screen: tape recorder, cassette tape of Depeche Mode, piece of two-ply cardboard, book, large box of matches, box of tea, Laura Palmer's diary, two men looking down at their hands, house plant, pellets of green mouse poison in the corners, the pink light coming from the kitchen, curly dark hair or straight dark hair, open up all your blinds!

The detective fakes typing into the calculator.

Bobby, when asked if he needs an ear, says "I don't need any damn sympathetic anything." It's the first swear of the show. I see that David

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wants me to be aware of the signs on doors now such as PUSH. “Is there some law against having a picnic?”

She looks happy until he tells her how serious this business is. So it was with my doctor when I neglected to schedule my follow-up abdominal ultrasound. This is Massachusetts and everyone has insurance. What time of year is it if it’s continuously drizzling?

The secretary looks like she could be mullet sheriff’s older sister. But her voice is too rectangular.

A vamp in fifths is supposed to make me, what, fear her? Three rows of men with papers. An all-wood room. The desk I write and watch movies at is mostly wood. Some sort of faux leather I put cups all over.

High school students, it’s Day what of Laura’s afterlife? David wants us to look down hallways, suspicious. I’m suspicious of what goes into my drinks. The green pen I write with is plastic and has an iconograph of two big-eared bunnies. Coming into or out of the narrative, the map isn’t time-based but it is where the characters of the show are looking.

I remind myself not to fall in love with wet dream sheriff.

“Looks like a hog to me.” And this show has its morality about which drugs are bad, motorcycles are bad, high heels are bad, and government lackeys are respected and smart and bad.

When I cried about not making State Choir in eleventh grade my mom gave me chocolate-covered pretzels. “Mrs. Horn, it might help if you talk to Johnny yourself.”

I like the butter on its own dish in the middle of the Horns’ table. I thought I’d definitely like Johnny’s smashing his head against the dollhouse but now I’m not sure how I feel.

I can’t do it but can distraction be its own direction? I’m running a lavender bath and have yet to make my popcorn. He rings the doorbell.

“You’re not drinking and driving, are you?”

This little sister is a poet and her name is Harriett. This is reassuring. Slow jazz, mint brownies, coffee dregs. The lumen of my gut. It’s all I have

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left to offer tonight to men with suspenders. “We’ll keep our eyes peeled.” I want her earrings I hope I’ve been clear.

My night is a thumb in the eye, and theirs is a roadhouse replete with wood-paneled walls and punching. I’m glad Donna still has a red skirt to her ankles and we’re off on a chase.

The woods at night. Oriented times four.

“Things she let herself get pulled into.” The smell of citrus, proximity to an IKEA. I want to buy a home someday and I love a scene with desperate kissing and someone saying James over and over because the repetition makes me feel safe.

Ambient light, leather gloves, and jealousy. Maybe I should have gone to New York but it only takes one episode of this show to learn all the names. You get to know me as a standing ovation for my own insecurities. A night in prison. “Sorry, Dad.”

“Where’s your sister’s bicycle?” I have three and David Lynch doesn’t know gumshoe about siblings.

It looks like she pours decaf, I mean, isn’t that what the orange plastic handle on the coffee pot means? Start off with a question, a written record, please index. I want to own a ladder I can roll up and put on my lap, a rope ladder set to save your life.

“You’re here investigating the death of Laura Palmer.”

“Sometimes I get so flushed: It’s interesting. Do your palms ever itch?” And a calypso song, some time with a marimba or a vibraphone. Audrey’s shirt makes me jealous.

I take a drug for acid reflux every morning, half an hour before breakfast. Asphyxia: smother redirects here, as does suffocation. According to Wikipedia, the body has no way to detect the absence of oxygen.

I love Wikipedia, too, for pointing me to Ondine’s curse, a rare and fatal form of sleep apnea caused by chronic alcoholism in which a person fails to breathe while asleep: “Symptoms are usually obvious in retrospect.”

The sheriff shoving a donut in his mouth is wearing two necklaces! Call

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poetry a quiet art, a soda water, a tap. “Shelly, did you hear me say Norma’s here?” These men look like they’re wearing foundation.

I used to play a drinking version of Boggle with Pabst Blue Ribbon. My friend Mark was hit by an ambulance while riding his bike today. It broke his hand.

“I really believe you love me.”

The music! I finally figured out what it reminds me of. Those electronic pianos with push buttons designating different instruments. Clarinet. Trumpet. Wah-wah. Choir. “You woke us, crying in your sleep last night.”

“It was the sweetest-smelling job she’d ever had.”

“Don’t sweetheart me, you old dog.”

It’s late, I have my mother’s teeth, and I fell in love with Bobby. The coffee cups at the diner are shaped like eye-cups. I hate knowing Leo is about to whale on Shelly with a sock full of soap. “Why don’t you fellows sit down at the table and I’ll go check on the roast.”

I notice a gorgeous cigarette machine at the diner in front of the after-church crowd. Maybe I will like Audrey Horn after all, with her sweater looking like that. She drinks coffee and so do I (though we both threaten to give it up on occasion).

My David likes to put two people next to one another in a large frame between whom we make distinctions. With Audrey and Donna, because they look like twins, we draw the conclusion that one must be more inquisitive. “I guess I sort of loved her for that.”

I miss those small-toothed combs like Venus flytraps in plastic. I’m reminded, as Audrey’s dancing gets dreamier, of a word I love: Unumgängliche. That which is impossible to get around.

But the softness of my feelings for the world and myself sometimes. The girl Lucy sticks out her tongue.

If only more often.

JOHN MYERS

“What are you waiting for, Christmas?” In a bookstore in Brookline, Brian and I bought a bright orange plastic koi that squirts water.

Two men and an amateur third watching. In any show, bedroom scenes are my favorite. I assume that we each have our own telephone ringing.

These two parents of Laura’s dance like a sundial. “What is going on in this house?”

I do like the name Leland. Hearing it is a bedtime story.

“I mean it like it is, like it sounds.” Who was the lucky recipient of all the furniture after *Twin Peaks* finished filming?

Those ties, too.

A globe at waist-level, a wrinkled neck, and strobe lights let us in on more secrets. Be a record of your own most intimate experience. How does Lynch want us to feel watching a red-suited little man dance and snap his fingers?

It smells like the inside of a French horn in our apartment tonight. James’ hair matches the fur ruff of his leather jacket. A swordfish over the mantle, impeccable, Audrey looks like her father in this scene. “I wish that I could believe you.”

Or wet wool, is that it? I want to move to the desert, have my fruit desiccate instead of rot.

A trophy. Why hide it? “Hospitality girls escort important guests.” Audrey palms the unicorn.

He only sweats on one side of his face. He wipes her tear, showing the size of his left hand compared to her cheek.

The sign reads VERY VEGETABLE as someone pockets a lighter, and soup grins out at me, steaming. The one-way of the rain.



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COLBY ORNELL

THE RAMBLER

I love the desert.

I love the smell of the sand and the way it cakes into hard knots after the tiniest bits of rain.

I love the miles and miles of it, stretching to nowhere and somewhere, maybe.

In the desert, you can disappear.

In my beat up Camaro I keep water, all the time. It sits in dark metal jugs that I cover with a layer of shoes and t-shirts and jackets and the Native American blankets I buy cheap on the side of the road.

No one can survive without water. I learned that the hard way my first week.

I had been in the desert about ten days, hitchhiking through Santa Fe because I didn't have the Camaro yet and was broke because I hadn't worked in a month and had lost whatever money I had to trying to stay warm and eat something.

It was winter then.

I passed out in front of a biker bar on the outskirts of the city and one of the tattooed former drag race chicks who had a 30 year old son pulled me out of the arms of the drunk and dazed men with thick hands and small hearts.

I was lucky.

I woke up in a dingy ranch house from the sixties that belonged to a 47 year old cross between a mechanic and a nightingale. She was lovely and rough, warm and coarse like the desert wind on your face. She gave me food and water and a bed for three days and didn't ask me any questions. She didn't give me her name or number or tell me to look her up again, someday.

We both knew I was going and would never look back.

The day I left.

I didn't say goodbye.

I left a note; a brief thank you and the tattoo from my wrist drawn in place of my name.

COLBY ORNELL

She left a note, too, that she had slipped into my jeans' pocket, telling me she knew I'd be going, she could see it, said she'd watched herself enough.

When I left it was long before sunrise and by the time I was away from the city I could see the twinges of light start to creep into the blackness, breaking into slow shards that crashed, eventually, into blood and gold.

The ground was still black, and for the first time of a million times I wished I could be a part of that sky.

To leave the ground forever.

That was when I first loved the desert.

Six months later in Phoenix I got the Camaro. I had a job working at a truck stop diner along the freeway and an apartment over a gas station. I had lived in shadowy corners in the spring, fall, and summer and worked days and nights with only a few hours of sleep in between. By the winter I was ten pounds lighter and my eyes were darker, but I had enough money saved that I could pay for the apartment from the first frost all the way through the spring thaw and that meant that I wouldn't freeze to death in an alley corner and could stop getting groped and followed as much. I kept the .45, the switchblade, and the can of pepper spray on me and a baseball bat in the side of the doorway.

That's what you do when you're seventeen and alone.

The apartment meant that I could keep working at the diner and move up to a less hands reaching yellowed teeth sneering jail baiting bar where the showers I could take regularly and the bed I could sleep in meant that I would make in a night what I had made in a week before from tips alone.

The apartment also meant that when spring came I could leave the soiled yellow walls and buy the Camaro. It was red, once, a dark, maroon-ish shade that shined and gleamed, and now it was faded and aged, dull and listless. But it ran and the engine didn't sound half as bad I thought it would and it was cheap enough that I could get out of Phoenix.

After the miles of red stained desert I needed a break from the sun and the heat.

COLBY ORNELL

The Camaro made it to Wyoming first.

Then South Dakota and North Dakota and back down to Nebraska.

I loved the desert, but there was something about grass beneath my feet that felt like the right thing, for a while, anyway.

Towns and cities each become too much and it becomes time to move on, time to pack up, pack out, and leave wherever it is behind.

Sometimes you only stay for days, sometimes it's months. Sometimes there's decent work and cheap food and you can buy some new clothes, and fix up the Camaro enough to keep it going a little longer, and think maybe I'll stay forever.

Yeah, maybe I'll stay here forever.

But that's the thing about being alone. You can never stay in one place for too long.

Sometimes it's the couples; holding hands and sharing a milkshake like its 1952 and your stomach does a cross between committing suicide and puking.

Sometimes it's the stares. Skin stretched tight over bones with skin tight jeans stretched over it all and the men look at you like you're naked and the women look at you like they can see the scenes playing out behind their husbands' eyes. Either that or it's the tattoos on your wrist and hip and the one on the back of your neck just behind your left ear that you can only see when you pull your hair back.

The bar folks like them, the red shot, blood shot, alcohol poison shot eyes following them down to the sway of your hips and reaching out a grubby finger to trace their permanence as if you might disappear.

Which you always do. Days, weeks, months, hours later you throw the clothes you own into the leather flea market bag, leave the borrowed apron behind, and blast off blur out into a faded memory.

Because you can never stay in one place forever.

Because if it's not the couples or the stares or the grubby hands that churn your stomach to the point that you feel rising rising rising the need to escape, to flee, to fly away, it's the families.

More often than not it's the ones that sit in the corner booth for over an hour with their (at least) three kids. Two girls and one boy, eight, eleven,

COLBY ORNELL

and two. Sometimes they've just come from a soccer game and there's still mud on the oldest one's cleats and you can tell just by looking at her that she's the star, and that they'd be okay with it if she wasn't, but you know she is. And that they teach her to be humble and kind and her eight year old brother loves her, adores her, because he looks up at her with those eyes.

Those eyes.

It's those eyes that make you want to cry and leave right then and there with the cheeseburger and BLT for table two waiting at the counter window.

Those eyes that make you have to force yourself to stay and smile and coo at the baby's cherub grin until you can get a minute and go out back and slide down against the brick wall and shake out silent sobs.

Yesterday I woke up in Bismarck, an officer tapping on the glass to see if I was still alive. Sometimes the cops are asses and kick you out of whatever parking lot or alley or side street you've ended up in because you were driving and driving and realized you couldn't see and pulled over and just stopped and went to sleep.

This one is okay, stern but nice, and points me toward a priest that's known to give a place to sleep and a hot meal to the homeless, helpless, destitute, and wandering. The rambler.

Most of the time I back away from these, unless I'm really, truly desperate, and I don't know when or how I'll get anything to eat. Sometimes the priests are okay, ask the surface questions and then just let you shovel down the food in silence. But other times they try to make you into a convert, present you with a set of rosary beads or a Bible and you can see in their eyes how you'll be transformed from an ink marked dreadlocked sliver of a human being into a silken haired clean skinned child of God.

You pretend that yes Father, maybe Father, I'll just have to get my things Father, you can actually be anything more than alone.

After a while the knife in your stomach goes away, and those eyes from the restaurant stop following you and you're on highway 109 and you pull your car off to the side of a road where it doesn't even matter because there is no one else for miles and you watch the night stop being night and the slashes of red and white break through the blackness and you see the sun

COLBY ORNELL

and the sign to the side of you and you realize that you're in Mexico and you've made it back to the desert and you know that no one in a million years has ever felt this alive.

You are the first color breaking through the darkness that becomes dawn.

IRENE TURNER

NINE BEGINNINGS AND AN ENDING

Why don't I write?

Because I am continually imagining the possible tragic deaths of every member of my family, whether it be falling down our back hill, or being hit by a drunk driver or an accident on the highway to Big Bear. My ex-smoker husband had a heart attack before I met him, and it's not difficult to work myself up about lung cancer, clogged arteries and shut veins. I create the empty house, the lifeless bodies, how to bag up his clothes, sort books. I don't include melanoma as a cause because it would be too drawn out, not dramatic – and anyway, on my mother's side, that's what we die from. I refuse to think about that.

Some days, I paint mental pictures of forlorn funerals occurring on birthdays or anniversaries and wonder how I'd handle the cats. It must be important for me to feel I'll survive any catastrophe and the only way to know that is to make every decision in advance. All this complexity spins in my head going nowhere while my throat tightens and eyes water and another half hour slips by. I work myself up to a fever pitch anxiety, but of course, when it's over they're still here. None of this high-art melancholia ever gets put into a story: that would require critical distance and a tolerance for melodrama I abhor.

Why don't I write?

Two-plus-Two Poker Forums, the Speakeasy at Poets & Writers, every link on Twitter. A message board for screenwriters, which feel like I snuck into a private club. Trolling for online classes to replace the community I had with UCLA and Les Plesko. Wondering if I can still handle a workshop. Pointless news from people I haven't seen in thirty years – thanks, Facebook. The endless joy of Turner Classic Movies and the lurid true crime shows on Investigation Discovery. Rooting against the Patriots, because Los Angeles still doesn't have a team. Let's not talk about Gmail.

IRENE TURNER

Why don't I write?

Because Les Plesko rolled off the roof of his apartment building last September. It was too hard for him to jump.

Why don't I write?

Because I'm researching...

Victorian Scotland with special emphasis on the court system and its treatment of women and why Madeleine Hamilton Smith should have hung

1931 Hollywood, Freaks, the love life of the sideshow

Cults, sects and mind control, especially Scientology

Atheist Madalyn Murray O'Hair's house and other Austin hangouts – before she was murdered by her office manager (who drank at the Poodle Dog Lounge)

Movies about Mars and/or noirish sci fi

How cops talk, a boxer's training, surfing lingo and environmental terrorists

Why megachurch televangelists hypnotize their flocks

Borderline personalities, Munchausen Syndrome by proxy and killer moms

Every dictator who screwed up Paraguay

Why don't I write?

My late mother had a brief flowering as a writer, around the time she turned forty. She was recovering from a mental hospital stay (and the various depressions and addictions that put her there) and was encouraged to journal her feelings. She used Ira Progoff's system which required a huge binder and classes at the local community college. It seemed awfully rigid to me.

She then published a few pieces in our local paper, The Daily Pilot – gentle domestic satires a la Erma Bombeck, making fun of the absurdity of

IRENE TURNER

her life. One was about my ten-year-old brother's love affair with his new blow dryer. If you ask him, he'll laugh and say she exaggerated. She would have said, "All I did was embellish it."

She also wrote travel journals after each major trip – like China when it had just opened to non-diplomats or returning a second time to find People's Friendship Stores. She'd agonize over each word and have her friend Sherry do illustrations and head to the copy place and have them printed up as little booklets with colored covers. They'd go out with every Christmas card.

She desperately wanted to be a writer, as if you needed special powers conferred or granted, but it was tough for her to actually write. Her fragile boundaries wouldn't let her parse criticism without turning it into rejection. She kept up the travel journals until the cancer kept her from traveling, but the articles ended long ago.

Why don't I write?

Because I don't have to.

Why don't I write?

Because writing is a series of chutes and ladders and a guarantee I will fall.

Why don't I write?

Because I go to lunch with writer pals where we talk about needing psychological help and who we hate on Survivor and how we're not going to make it through Big Brother (but we keep watching anyway). Then we gossip about mutual friends and wonder whether they're writing and add money to our parking meters so we can blow our diets, split dessert. I come home and spend all afternoon spellchecking the elegant variation. And wonder if my standards are higher or lower than theirs.

IRENE TURNER

Why don't I write?

Screenplays can mean money and success and the process is structured and movies are what I always wanted to make. But biopics are hard, lives resist condensation. And true crime is dark and difficult and requires empathizing with monsters. I wish I were funny. For fuck's sake.

Prose is simple-yet-duplicitous: it pretends it isn't all about you. Even though I always seem to put death in my fiction. Why can't I just write about a house?

The novel is fantasy and heartbreak. The long con in breaths and moments. The life I should have been able to live.

Short stories are constrained and dutiful. A fool's errand.

I'm intimidated by poetry.

Flash fiction is quick, digestible. But does it mean I'm afraid to write change?

Memoir is too much like therapy, it requires exposure and probing. Even though with it, I can color-code my history, tell you what to think about me.

I control the narrative in essays, but whether I like it or not, the pain always seeps in.

Why do I write?

The answers are the same.

A.E. REIFF

DOLL MAKER

Doll Maker

Being a doll maker can't explain what Mama does. If dolls come up short an arm or leg she has a store. If dolls need a new voice or can't speak up Mama will. I am a friend of Mama, I even dare to call her Mrs. She is a patchwork of fairy tales.

Dolls say good things about Mom. One calls her Da. Another ticks and flutters the blue. She bathes them in the tub, gives a change, but Mama's not a dad to interfere, she sets them free. One put out to sit on a wall disappears, goes home to visit the baby Jones. She puts them on swings at school and children pack them off. She puts them on cars or boats in canals or on lakes with swans. When they come to shore children take them home.

I got a job at Mom's one summer and stayed on. Dolls come in all colors and need to be retouched.

Wash Up

As long as I worked for Mom I saw tired and ailing dolls washed up from a beach, or dolls that needed their hair washed, who were sick and couldn't cry, who looked up at you with fevered eyes, abandoned dolls, homeless dolls, and when they were brought in to Mom had no hope they could even be a doll, much less a girl running up and down letting her hair dry in the wind. From all this Mama taught me to never give up on a doll. Mika was brought to our shop not even breathing; she was swollen and wrapped in oregano. We did the usual things Moms know and then called the paramedics. They said this doll wouldn't make it. Never give up a doll came from this. We prayed for that doll and had no dinner. Today she swings at piñatas, her father on the roof jogging the piñata up and down like a red

A.E. REIFF

car while two years olds swing and finally eight year olds mash the stuffing.

Momma Child

Doll children came to Mom's even before she made new dolls. She had Saturday sales and gave them away used. People would stand five deep at her door as she wheeled out plastic bats and fur coats, red shoes and pumpnickel colored hats to dress. Some dolls graduated from college and had printed degrees round their necks in frames. "I'm a Harvard doll" one ticket said. "No you're not," a companion said. Sometimes those dolls argue with their pets, little grasshoppers and snails that live under the polls they argue with. If you put leashes on them they behave pretty well, but some have babies and get expensive treats.

So here all these people were standing at Mom's door, getting all the dolls they could. There were way more dolls than girls, way more dolls than children and way more dolls than those waiting to disagree with you about how to pull a button down. Dolls with zippers don't do that. There are not many zipper dolls.

Fire Fly Doll

Mama got a cab for one doll who was rather large and couldn't fit in a wagon. She sent her clubbing with other dolls who can't come to Mama's store. Not everybody makes dolls. A lot of dolls live along rivers and in swamps. How does a doll live in a swamp? You may not have heard of Swamp Doll or Fire Fly Doll, Mosquito Doll or Tree Doll. In this world there are many dolls and many needs for dolls. Consider what the nations do to get dog and cat dolls, bird dolls, bug dolls of all kinds, even playhouse dolls with plastic refrigerators.

Mom lives under a pine tree. When her dolls come home from an evening she has hot milk. If they bring a friend all the better, for Mama is looking for help. Doll helpers are hard to find when everyone is busy at sport. But

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what is more important than building and fixing dolls so they can inhabit the world? A lot of doll barns need mending. Doll apprentices are trained for that. Doll memoirs need to be written, but doll writers sit at desks in mortgage companies writing policies, making decisions on phones that affect the doll world. Sad dolls are going to war too. I worked so long with Mama I began to think like her. I blame boys. When Mama gives them little girl dolls you know what they want to do. Somebody has to step out and tell them, so Mama teaches doll history. It's a good thing she doesn't have to work. She wouldn't have time. Mama is teaching dolls the trumpet. Mama is teaching dolls how to mow lawns. Dolls have to make a living too. Eventually they make doll money, but it is hard to get.

Doll Shop

1.

I Am But Two Days Old is my specialty, but there are three Hong Kong babies with the same eyes and no hair. One is pink, another's voice box drips oil. Another's skull looks like it had an operation. I'm not going to probe the skull. One has a pony tail and an oiled blouse. They were in the ditch covered with mud when they got left. I've assorted trousseaus to dress them with, grandma hats, rubber stuffing, lots of sash. This is a reclamation factory for the tired and poor. They bring them to my door.

The widowed, alien and orphan come ticking. Bathed twice, they look too young to have lost so much. The hair is frizzy, the arms stubs. Maybe she's trying to clear her voice. They were on their way to the bottom for fish, or worse to float on their backs like cans. I check again. The pink stretched bean bags smell like the rest.

The worst part is over so I take a shower, spin round, raise my arms like dolls clean with soap, but I wasn't in the ditch so long. The dried skin is oil smooth. Girls come up and feel me. "Hey, I'm no doll," I say, but it doesn't stop them calling. "HI LASTY!" I turn to my escort and say, "that's just

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Susie.” He says, “oh sure.”

2.

I’ve got dolls of all sizes, two loads divide between animals and dolls. I did the animals first: Clorox, detergent, borax, hot water, bleach. The water runs brown. Oil is on my hands. Irrigation mud is unclean. I don’t know if I’ll run out of soap.

The people hadn’t bathed. That vehicle was packed like a boxcar truck. It was hard to breathe. Here’s the bill of lading:

One red cat with a bell from Gap in its belly.
A baby tiger, oil in its fur.
A Macaw Yellow Beak,
A red breast with green winged feet.

These were little guys, a yellow dolphin and green frog, an emu, as near as I could decide, an orange fish and white lamb with tags.

Bears in moo-moos with white ribs,
angels with sacks of gold on their heads
and I Love You on their chest plates.
A teething bear shaped like a ring, but oily.

An Oink from China. Plush, a Hug Me I’m Yours white bear heart. A sea thing. A purple teletubby from Eden. Dinosaur dudes with shades. A she-dude and a she-bop.

3.

I got the pick. Time for another box. The wash, the dirt, the oil aren’t enough. Now they have to be praised. I line the bodies up. All can be saved. “Aren’t you pretty,” I say, “yum, yum, girls,” but don’t look in the eyes.

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Frizzy beaubs in caliche mud shrink when the hair and a dress comes off, transfigure the world.

They go their way, but we get them back. Up canal they land in pickups in an awful heat. Whole garages speak a different language after this. The box is full. I can say that much. The basket is full.

One starts to call “Velma” or “Mama.” I go out to check. Heads bump. They’re hot, the water is hot, the heads are bald. I don’t see any boys. Eyes peep over suds. Water clears. Bald heads come out. You get closer, pop the lid. Heads go by, one in her fourth mind. One lost a dress. Another gained water weight. Stuffing’s out. Some holes open up. She drips, but the clothes are clean. The machine goes fast. They take off their clothes. It feels good to bathe. I wish we could have them at our club, eyes closed, heads thrown back to drain. It’s what we dream, the way dolls are made.

4.

Back and forth to the washer I go. The phone rings. I hear from one who has a voice yet and instant messaging. He recites Jefferson and Adams while my dolls clear. I turn the machine to Delicate for the oil and hot water, but have to clean the floor. If the borax holds I’ll re-dial. Now they are full of water the heads don’t bang; they bob. Other things I could have washed, the hair needs doing. A dinosaur with a plastic cap got in. They need helmets. It’s a hundred and ten.

I look at grownups and see dolls wrapped. Don’t tell me stars are caked in movie blood and if you wonder how to think about this, all human acts will be dolls when children take them home. I have a vast supply of children. The dolls will one day vote.

With intention I cover ears. Are you waiting for the count? Mama’s girl I knew from the sound box in her back. She had gold haloes in her eyes and pink PJs. They with brown hair and green eyes, black hair and brown eyes,

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red lips I adore. Even with the hair a mess I can get mechanics to fix the voice. She'll say "Mama" just like when she went under. A beach girl with shades, visor and cap says, "Recall Los Angeles."

Bring me also your tired and your ailing dudes.

III. Doll Odes

1.

Back to work,
To repair the broke,
One doll said,
"biology's End is at hand."
Another said "it is the end of man."
Not distracted by this moon bat,
Up the ladder Lasty sent another doll.
It could see better
The longer it saw.

2.

They used to capture them in Iceland
to work the British mines,
pull carts all their lives
unless they got away
and made such habitation for
a black horse with flapping nostrils
That was stomping mad.

3.

No doll wants to live in the steam
after being dumped in the canal,

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which is a problem like ours with coal
Or oil poured on mud.
The axis spread
the horse for harness
to pull the atmosphere
and Help li'l Earthy into space.

4.

A picture of doll in his pope outfit,
nimbus skewed,
introits a Destiny!
We hope to get that straight.
For the Gloria.

But do not frisk them
when they arrive.
If you go through bags,
here's what you find:
You have to be a doughnut
nosy parker to know.

6.

Once Dolls would hang their heads
and lose by wild scores,
now they smile and win.
After every storm a calm
Dolls need to learn.
It's not all pain
Of the moon.

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7.

Big Game lurches
Side to side in trucks.
Dolls circle left and right
snarl, growl
noises in the nose.
We videoed snorts
where eyes came out
and Squirrels and doves
on top court twelve
dove foreheads into their hands.

8.

The best we saw was the worst
At Charley's Decatur amid the smoke,
where digital handle pullers at 7 AM,
snow on the ground, high sun,
where everything was left unsaid.
And we drove across space city
To play at 1 AM.

9.

Two universes
the Brits escaped,
let's not have a third,
If there are more than two.
You wouldn't think one would do.
The axis spread, the horses pull.
Lasty has the red king,
I the blue.
He hopes that seeing will be enough

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To get to space.
Oil is a problem like coal and gas
to leave the world.

10.

Blue dolphin black horse flares the ice
Stomping mad coal car carts
pull your life.
Reach and touch,
Capture the dark
house biologic.

11.

In the pattern
lion and dolphin rest
before they leap and tuck the sea,
where further out they creep,
and windows and floors inset
with song.
That fellow needs to hone his bill.
where we thought the greensward full.

12.

Ready doll transport
for the coming dive
hope that you have three.
Train green Dolphy
Do not squirm.
Do not count fast.
Tell not to count to twenty.
Do not grab.

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Seekers are dolls!
That's why the sign lights on this world
entrance to another.