COBALT

VOLUME TWO
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* 2013 Writing Prize Winner
** 2013 Writing Prize Finalist
Steel, diamond-plate steps rise into his big rig, into his world of flannel, Old Spice cured into split vinyl seams and cracked upholstery, the green glow of radios for light. His gorilla palm claps my shoulder and I believe it when he jake brakes twenty tons of chained snowplows to a stop, says That’s what it sounds like to motorboat a fat woman’s tits. Eighteen wheels of tractor-trailer unclasp with an airhorn blast, shocking the heart. Beating it back to life. He’s copied his favorite Robert Frost poems by hand onto a legal pad and scotch-taped them to the crumbling headliner with every pine tree air freshener he ever bought, each poem dated in red felt-tip.

I think of yellow-jackets and stingers, amphetamines. Vats of burnt coffee swilled down the iced macadam, and when he says It’s cold as a fart in a dead eskimo, it moves through my gut as true as this landscape’s breath. The doggerel he recites. Carnal. Kind as the diesel’s throb. Limericks of the North Slopes, clubbing seals, rhyming the Alyeska pipeline with you betcha. Slushing past the weighstation and the cop hidden there, a warning squelches too late for salvation from his CB: Watch out, Big Ben—wolf’s in the chicken coop. My bones begin to hum, then resonate as the radio’s copper-wound crystal into the lambent night, and I feel like a pinpoint aperture widening just enough to let this burly-shouldered, bearded light through, a light once corporeal and distant as aurora borealis from the smell of Illinois pollen. The truth is I can’t remember exactly like it was or what he said. Maybe it was that the Prudhoe Bay freezes hard enough to cross in winter. Maybe that like the song that is always playing somewhere, someone has to drive it all night long.
In this lighthouse tavern are bell jars of moonshine sweet as jalapeno rosewater. A black stovepipe belches pine-knot plosives into the timbers in such a way it’s easy to forget this isn’t so much a place of warning as it is a haven from ourselves.

Just in from offshore, roustabouts in flannel line the bar, faces creased black and sullen as they talk already of escaping their women and children for the oil rig. It is inevitable that the one who is drunkest among them says *There’s two kinds of people…*

but he is the one that’s been rode hard and put away wet, and I am the lucky oiled wick which sputters to light—*suddenly*—

fatigued finally to the point of honesty at hitching this icy landscape looking for a spot of green. How amazing it is to admit falling hopelessly out of love with places where everyone is drunk, dangerous, and armed with creeds at whiskeyed daylight,

to recognize these frigates of men for what they are, as kamikazes who wreck themselves against rims and icy rocks,

buoyed only by flickering mirages they make against the walls of other shores.
The train out of Anchorage breaks down, freezes like a tongue to the tracks. Everyone huddles

in the dining car arguing about Talkeetna. Where it is. Whether we will reach the platform by dark.

The computer and the engine have stopped talking and if it isn’t thirty below then it feels like it.

There is no safe distance from a father and siblings who take turns with her Ativan injections

as she points again to the hue of purple she wants on her casket. In all this shaking of globes

to see where the silence settles, what else to do but fall into a story where everyone stops pounding their fists

and demanding a time for arrival? Where you hear the engine sigh to the computer Listen…

This locomotive. This lonesome passenger.
The people across the street moved or died or something. With their furniture gone and bric-a-brac junked in a wire cage truck for the render, they left two clean cardboard boxes under the front yard wall. The lids lay folded back, enticing as a travelling salesman's suitcase, presenting the shape and contour of a book giveaway. Instead of give books to a charity store where someone might make something on them, the departed preferred a neighborly poke with the sharp end of their generosity. That, and pretty much everything, made me nauseous.

By late afternoon, my routine watching yielded a woman in lycra, two young girls whose guitar cases strapped to their backs made them walk like they suffered some penance. Dog strollers, parking inspectors, truckloads of builders knocking houses to pieces. There was rarely much out of the ordinary. I watched.

Up above the busy family home opposite, a marine sky, its clouds thin white ripples on blue, laid a false promise of distant shores. I took pictures of skies I liked, holding them in my camera until its memory blocked, their colors truer, deeper than I recalled. To view their slide-show gave no pleasure, but deleting any one of them knotted my stomach with decision. I had a moment kept, its precise coordinates and elevation unique to me—to assign it destruction grew unbearable; I scrolled images, paralyzed with doubt. Was that shade an unforeseen blue? That cloud edge sculpted to unattainable crispness? To destroy such moments became monstrous; I lay terrified for what I’d do when I’d thinned all I could and was left only incomparable dramas. Every image was precious, or why had I hurried its capture? Grotesque that something precious could falter with time.

I twitched the curtain, painfully sure how I must look to anyone spying on me; I slid the button awkwardly, blurring the waves. High thermals already shifting the clouds, I deleted to shoot again. But how could I, with someone in the street. I hadn't seen her before. Tall, dressed for warm days, her shaggy blonde hair a little neglected, she went right by...
the boxes, took a half-step back, checked left and right before crouching beside them.

I wasn’t obvious—I didn’t want trouble—the inch gap between curtain and window enough to see unseen. She started to empty the boxes, turning each book over, skimming pages, checking beginnings, even reading what was printed on the back. She weighed each book as though reviewing its character, touching fingertips on cover designs, testing the turn of corners, examining side-on to gauge its depth. Effortless on her haunches, she gathered a pile of keeps, returning those that didn’t weigh or feel or start right with unsentimental briskness. As she searched, the strap of her red brassiere worked from under her sleeveless top to lodge the nub of shoulder bone mechanically reaching, lifting, sorting those suddenly wanted books, the red material stark against her skin.

When she salvaged a bricky armful of words, she smoothed up straight—a move conveyed through strong muscles tightly reined. She glanced at the house, maybe expecting challenge. I could have told her the place was empty. She swung around and smiled: perhaps at the value or attractiveness or pleasure of her finds; perhaps at her own daring. She went, swinging her two fists of books, that red cord snaking her arm.

What I hate—when I don’t feel empty—is lack of control. Ordinarily numb or sick-feeling, nothing stops me keeping watch, catching skies, planning the even stretch of days. A break in control is viral: my joints lock, my head bubbles noisy with distraction; a break in control derails. It’s important I stay empty, or there’s no room. Daily, on average, I’d see someone attractive. They’d pass, I went no place; I got life delivered.

On Monday and Wednesday, or sometimes a Friday before a special Monday, the truck came with groceries and what else they thought I’d need. Usually delivered by a cheery guy in overalls who gave me tips on what he called the ponies, while he lumped the coolbox and dry goods up to my apartment. When he pretended he was sick—as I guessed he sometimes did from how he mouthed the word ‘sick’ while digging me with his elbow—his surly co-worker left everything in the hall. I’d lose an hour unpacking to carry it up, buffeted from bites where the stairs got fleas. I couldn’t ask the co-worker to carry things up. His silence stopped me talking. It troubled me there was no consistent rule, but neither the guys nor Outreach wanted that conversation.

By the time I stacked my Wednesday supplies, entered it all on the chart, mystified why—again—they sent shoes, I was late. Before, I hardly watched out back, reluctant where gardens splashed with kids on Saturday swim, and buzzed Sunday mornings with leaf blowers. The gardens seemed always busy; when they weren’t, they were being maintained; and with maintenance done, shone in clipped glory, defiantly belonging
to people who might step out anytime. The gardens’ lush formality was private: their blue painted pools, white loungers, concrete barbecue pits staking ownership to ground. I could look on them as intruder or not at all.

The view changed. A pool tinged green. An arbor struck shoots, grew ratty. A dishevelment—sprung from the roots of lawns—pushed grass higher, wilder, its painted green fading to the wheaty yellow of dry country. Ornament trees sagged over with branches, confused by growth they never learned how to support. Dainty figs and parlor oranges woke to find themselves unmoored, abundant with fruit falling rotten among spring-heeled invaders: thistles and nettles, glowing foxgloves, dormant through the leaf-blown years. Order fell ragged: I grew troubled and watchful for people to calm these gardens. But as pools choked on algae, loungers subsided among wild oats, and barbecue pits speckled out with cement-loving flowers, the absence of ownership, first curious, grew compelling.

When gardens were kept, I glimpsed between careful prunings the backs of houses they served. Saw lights through the thin trees of winter. Now the houses were swallowed by untrimmed vines and poolside nightlights fell dark. Unnerved, I saw boundaries shift. A brush hedge dissolved into a neighbor’s yew; nervous aspens ceded to sniffy pines; silver birch and cinchona traded saplings across fences upheaved by restless roots. All the stately terraces—tenanted by wild.

There’d be ants, mosquitoes, foxes out there; squirrels, rats. There’d be rats, brisk from the sewers, swaggering empty paths, bringing their rabid grammar to my door. This change defied belief. Those houses had to be rich: they had pools and occasions, they had men with leaf blowers on Sundays. I thought maybe there was a sickness; I requested plastic tape to seal the windows. I cut sleep, chores, battled hours of winded inertia to scrutinize thickening greenery. I saw no one, only trees and wind-stalked entanglements haunted by shimmering sun.

I watched, prepared for dissonance, but dissonance overwhelmed me. The figure, glimpsed among throttling branches. I wasn’t mistaken. Light slid with intention through matted box hedges. Some official, perhaps, come to rectify. Some owner, returned to relieve my watch. I saw movement gain determination: branches shiver aside. The woman swept through in sunshine. Her clothes the same; her unshared smile rewarded the overgrown lawn. Her eyes questioned the backs of buildings I never saw, my window I never cleaned, the place where I hurled myself, breathless, from her sight. To watch and stay hidden the only required act. Recalibrating, I stretched up to the glass.

She had a soldier’s kitbag, camouflaged. I realized her mission. She ranged the gardens, bringing figs and tomatoes, lemons and grapes, a sug-
ar baby watermelon she carried like a gift from some pleasant-voiced god. She yanked swatches of green I guessed were herbs, brushing their leaves against the tip of her nose. Everything folded in cloth, laid in her bag.

Each time I feared she’d glance up I slid against the wall below the window. But always drawn back to her methodical harvest. The bag packed, she took a long drink of water, sun through the bottle flecking her face silver. The bag looked heavy but, shouldered briskly, she made it trivial. Maybe its weight pushed out her hips—she seemed to go with a swing.

Outreach warned against self-neglect—no corpses cluttering their files. Shown how to combine different food groups, each night I mixed rice with tomatoes, perhaps canned flageolets, pepper paste and a frozen vegetable pack. They often sent peas, sometimes carrots, rarely spinach. Frozen spinach had to be broken up with a hammer. I ate in the dark, focused on the gritty texture of rice, the sloppy tomatoes—bland and pungent collisions of taste.

When the chart said it was Saturday I set time to wash my sheet and vacuum the pillows. It made little difference but Outreach was particular. The women who visited once in a way checked bedding as much as they moaned about fleas. They asked if I was sleeping good, like either way there was anything they could do. If I said the right words, properly inflected, their visits were short. Unclipping the sheet, shaking it out, bought moments to gaze at the view. In jeans and a work shirt, her hair in a tail, she’d skim through overgrown hedges—her thickly gloved hands held a gunny sack and basket. The sack bulged and dragged; left on the grass it sat upright. She adjusted her gloves, slacked off the cord that throttled the sack and carefully parted its cargo of small seedlings from her tools—trowel, fork, a circle of gauze like a soft tambourine—and a slippery plastic pouch. With a knife flicked from her pocket she slit the pouch lengthways, unveiling a blocky oblong of dark earth.

Rigid with curiosity, my hands mechanically fretting the sheet, I watched her clear a feral flower bed, lifting ragged blooms, laying them in her basket with a small stroke of their stems. She tilled the clearing, sifting stones in her gauze, piling a small monument under the hedge. She planted the seedlings, bedding them with compost, threading tiny plastic flags to hold them firm. She worked skillfully, with great patience, settling each small plant before placing another. The woman tacked a hangar of wire mesh, stood and saw me, too late to hide. She moved side to side a little. She waved, the heavy glove making a rock of her hand. In my days I watched, took pictures. Only of skies. Had important routines that more and more I’d got late on. I let control crack—she planted her seeds in that fracture. Apartments left and right, above and below: maybe
they caught her wave. But her body said not. I dropped one side of the sheet, my hand dense: perhaps a calming gesture. She raised her water, slugged a long swallow.

I avoided out back: didn’t need the bedroom for sleeping. Or anything. What happened was an engagement event. I had to report it to Outreach. That I didn’t was troublesome: secrets have weight, become—unchecked—a modified read of life. I couldn’t afford the demands a secret would make. But I didn’t tell Outreach and viral curiosity untaped the bedroom door.

She’d found a sprinkler: tiny, lively rainbows flew among water sprays. As she trowelled ash from a hickory stove I marveled so many lazy cook-outs lay memorialized in the dust she turned through the same steady industry she had for everything. I didn’t intend on how her shoulders flexed as she jostled and scraped that thick powder. I didn’t plan on how her ponytail swept those shoulders. I’d never on purpose.

She waved both hands, pushing up her fists. A field sports gesture: her arms braced together then slid up and down. What gesture in return explains a window sealed against disease? My hands had no language for that. I stared. She shrugged and busied with digging.

The tape stripped easily, though the layer of paint clung with it left the frames looking sick with eczema. I laid the tape flat, careful of creases, for when I stuck it back. I had seen the windows open: Outreach showed me—part of familiarization, demonstrating how on sunny days I’d get what they called a lovely cool breeze a non-threatening way. Unscrewing the bolts bit my fingers; the physical effort to raise the sash defeated my first attempt. I saw, with disgust, truculent ants showboating on the ledge. Fearful that, once loosened, the window could spring uncontrolled in the night I tightened the bolts, my fingers pleated raw as beef.

I knew outside smelled phony. I got the door for the delivery guys: the gassy chemical bubble that whipped in beside them tar and oxidized paint, fur, warm plastic; a sour, shabby note maybe the tang of people. Outside smelled striving, token and bulked with persuasion: the smell of salesmen, I guessed. I kept windows shut.

I should have told Outreach. As I struggled to loosen the lower sash panel, easing one side up a fraction then the other, whatever sickness made my secret restless belonged in whatever glossary of me Outreach maintained. I’d been reassured with the program: a comfort that if I forgot myself, enough of me was archived to start again. But straining against the surly windows a new drive, its purpose unfocused, urged and sapped me. As the frame cracked from out its trough, a breath of green brushed me over—chlorophyll slicked the room: staining, surprising the walls; insidious as oil way at sea.
She checked moisture at sundown, testing earth with her fingers, her watering can dosing the ground. When she finished she knelt on the grass, her smile soft in dying light, a fingertip on her plants to hush them to sleep. She trailed through vines lingering among their broad leaves, turning and swaying their sprays, palms wide as wind-kisses. I hid and watched and felt cheap.

A fibrous, earthy smell—a rooty succulence—drove me from bed to front room in search of sleep; the scent perhaps not malicious, its playfulness grew wearying, my swift unconscious hours riled with dreams. I never dream, but sights unseen—wooded cliffs rising sharp to slice blue from the sky, to send it tumbling so, where cliffs fell away, fallen sky became sea rolling with sun—filled my nights. Muss-headed, I stumbled in early light, colliding the walls as though my space got smaller.

She found a wide, sun-bleached panama that tunneled her face in warm shadow as she clipped borders, watered seedlings—foraged with easy unconcern between gardens, their boundaries redrawn through vague agreements of plant life. She pulled out an old lounger, lay an hour reading a salvaged book. Unguarded to match her absorption, when she folded its spine and raised her eyes I stayed in the window, though my legs tingled to run. She waved the book lazily. My skin flushed with the apartment’s trapped warmth, I unworked the window bolts. She tilted her hat, I shook my head. She slipped from the lounger into the vines.

Neither Monday nor Wednesday, nor the Friday before some special Monday—Outreach appointments on hold for summer—no one should come to my door. The apartment was an upper floor with its own street door. For privacy, Outreach assured me. I piled up chairs to block the door, pulled them back for delivery times. I had nothing expected: with nothing expected I wouldn’t open the door. The knock came again, a voice edging through stacked furniture. I couldn’t be expected to deal with demands whose responses didn’t exist yet. The voice sang something about cool drinks; it was possibly viral, contaminant; some problem of other places. The thought ran me cold, the stairs climbed behind me. A rhythmic knocking, the broad-brimmed shadow in the glass a defined stain on daylight. “Who’s that?” My voice always surprised me. I never meant to sound that way.


“Got something for you.”

“I not ordered anything.”

“It’s a steal.” A hiccuppy giggle. “And it’s burning out here. And folks looking at me.”
I’d not spoken so many unplanned words the whole year. I lined the chairs into the corner—the outside smell of unswept yards insinuated round me. The woman’s white cottons gave their own scent of brisk soap. She’d pulled down the hat: its brim looked comically pummeled. It wedged her hair straight, laid her skin dark, frightening eyes that glinted. Her face a wary, puzzled resolve. “You in some kind of fix?”

I didn’t have unscheduled events. She sat with prim concern on a chair hauled up from the hall. “You sure not got much. Bugs maybe.” She slapped at her leg.

“I got all I need.” A programmed response that felt out of place, and more: some sense I located no other word for than ungracious. Her face confirmed it.

“Then you won’t got use for these.” Her basket, fussily tucked with white cloth peeled back to show pockets of grapes and dates, raspberries, a small sealed dish of sliced melon. “I got more than I need.”

Stung, I put her lemonade in the refrigerator like she told me. When I came back from the kitchen, she beamed with the empty sunshine I saw in the street. “Try a grape. They’re just fine. Varenella.”

“D’you what?”

“Me. Varenella. I live over back.” A humming silence I hadn’t noticed in that room before. “It’s pretty neat. Neat neighborhood. I see you at your window.”

Sometimes the coolbox brought fruit: mainly apples. I didn’t try the raspberries fearing their stain in my skin. I bit into a grape, its rowdy tartness busting the roof of my mouth.

“They’re good,” she encouraged, tipping forward her chair. “All good, left to go waste.”

I didn’t get what she meant. I stared. “Varenella?”

“Huh?”

“Your name?”

“Kinda neat.” Her eyes buzzed round. “No TV? I don’t got TV. I’d like one. Would you like one?”

“If I wanted one I’d ask.” I hadn’t meant to be so factual. She stared, worried-seeming. I added: “I mean it’s just not what I need.”

“See too much huh? Hot in here.” She glanced to the window.

“They don’t open. Not well.”

“You should come to mine. Mucho shady. And I could play you some music. You like music?” She seemed very concerned.

“I wouldn’t say I think about it.”

“I like to dance. Last year I was all-summer pasa doble champion. Ole.” She clicked her fingers—the echo went on, longer than any sound should. Slowly she lowered her arms. “I can see you wanna get on. Save
that lemonade for next time.”

“Don’t forget your hat.”

It lay on the floor. “Yeah,” she looked at it thoughtfully: a straw dome in a plain of blue grass. “Wouldn’t want folks to think I left it on purpose.”

I watched in the night. Though speckles of light broke out in the trees and shyly tracked onto the lawn, I didn’t see her. Perhaps she was making lemonade, or practicing her dance. I watched right through the night, a rich fascination in how dark leaves curled and nestled together, how shadings of night rose and dwindled, the trees and earth and soaked variety of clouds. But pictures I took were all dirt glass.

Varenella hammered an aluminum pole in the lawn. She tested its strength, swinging around, her open palm slapping the morning. She crowned the pole with a plume of wiry branches carefully cranked straight. In a while she came back with a basket of wet clothes, dressing her revolving wires carefully as a Christmas fir. I’d seen the busy family home opposite warm a whole December afternoon on tinsel and hanging bells.

I moved around until she saw me. She checked what was on show on the line and strategically turned it about, pulling—I guessed at distance—a prim look. She gestured both hands ‘Come on over’. I already got the chairs pulled back when she knocked at my door. Outreach talked about experience sometimes, about placement. I couldn’t imagine what work they thought I’d do. I didn’t guess people would react a good way to me at their doors, a box of samples and a wet smile. Besides, like I told Varenella: “I don’t travel.”

“You don’t travel?”

“Go out. I don’t go out.”

“At all?” Every sinew of her sunny face painful. “You don’t leave here ever?”

“My diagnosis.”

Her hands described some shape complicit with worry. “How did this arise?”

Outreach spoke of children who boasted of drawing stuff that didn’t need drawing and, anyway, showed nothing new. I wasn’t that kind of boast. “Always been.”

“Aw come on.” What was there? Anger? “No one gets born to some secret space.” She quieted. “No one.”

“Been always.”

“But not forever?”

It mattered more to her than me. “I don’t remember.”

“Come on.” She went at the stairs.

“What?”

“Come to mine. Come on.”
“I can’t.”
“You got clothes don’t you?”
I pointed loosely toward the window.
“C’mon. I made lemonade.”
“I don’t have shoes.” I never needed to lie. I engaged Outreach with honesty, the delivery guys, doctors when they came by in their shirt-sleeves—half-looking at me, half-busy at their devices. I told them just what I knew.
She pointed at my neat black socks. “Come as you are. It’s only the next street.”
I wasn’t to be pitied. “I lied.”
“I know.”
The shoes bit my feet. I felt constricted, diminished.
She wiped their unused dust. Smiled at me. “Okay.”
I could walk through the hall, up and down stairs. Just walking. To step outside: my legs seized, my heart galloped. I swayed. She pushed me and I almost fell, grabbed the wall, its grainy sand imprinted on my fingers.
“Oops.” She smiled, tense. “It’s okay. I’m with you.”
Outside smelled disheveled, unresolved. Light and color mobbed my eyes; she settled her hat low on my head, setting me in shadow. “The chairs.”
“Chairs?”
Startled, I saw her shut the door. “Who piles the chairs?”
“Same person unpiles ‘em. C’mon.”
I wasn’t scared, not that way. Choked by cross-currents, smothered with dust; legitimate inside, out there I was illicit. “I miss normal.”
“Yeah.”
People maybe thought I was out from surgery, some collateral damage learning to walk like the first time. Braced by a steady carer or dutiful relative, taking baby steps through liquefying tar. My skin stung, my lungs overworked, coming up short each breath. She guided me to a corner, to an avenue I’d never seen.
“You must have arrived someway?”
“Years back.”
“You must have been someplace else?”
“It’s gone.”
“See?” she said. “You remember something.”
“Everything.” She tweaked my shoulder. “Come see what I got.”
She’d chiseled out the locks to some airy place: a galleried suite, a kitchen of majestically defunct ambition. She had a sleeping bag, a pop-
up canvas wardrobe, some battery lamps and her pile of books. “It’s basic,” she twinkled across the terrace, “but affordable. And out here,” she gestured me into the shaded garden, “got a whole self-sufficiency thing going on. In fruit anyways.”

She fetched lemonade from a cooler and spread a blanket down under a cedar. “It’s clockwork: forty twists, it chills all day.”

I collapsed, stunned at greenery, birdsong – that clamor of reaching for the sun. “Can’t believe I’m here.”

“Why? We only have here—we scrawl ourselves right across it.”

“Varenella…?”

“Ruby.” She sniffed her glass. “Born Ruby. I changed it. Like you changed. Remember your name?”

“Says Edward on the lab tests.”

“Lucky you got that.” She surveyed her found garden. “I always thought I’d be the girl they built the town around. But I’m furniture to make space pretty.”

I carefully tried to piece some comfort. “You got all this, this garden. I see you planting, digging. You made this. You got…” I almost agreed out loud that she was pretty. The submersion that required counseled from my heart.

She picked a scrimmage of grapes from the basket, their skin rusty with shade. “Guess these look bountiful, huh? Pure nature. But everyone knows they been bred, selected, crossed and spliced to build the right gene for this color, this shape of sweetness. These adorable grapes—they’re an experiment got lucky.”

“It works though.” I felt uneasy in my response. “There’s no harm.”

She laid the sad grapes aside. “You cut off a choice, and ten clicks down the line the choice you should have made grays out. The happy ending already never existed. I’m that. I’m a lab rat.”

I’ve been tested, experimented; a spectrum of variables unsuccessfully hunted through fluids teased from my body. “I take pictures. Skies I want to keep. Sometimes I got only one memory space. I have to render out other things.”

She stretched back on her palms, squinting up at the cedar’s quilled leaves. “Something happened one time. Some event of shocking magnitude; at least, in the place where it happened. People got hurt I think. Kids got nightmares. Some doctors made a plan. Something they wanted to try. They told everyone: what could be neater than to splice all those bad memories out from kids’ minds? They said: we can’t make things back as they were, but if we sponge out the bad feelings wouldn’t that be a gift to your children? And the people—horrified with what occurred in their community—said Yes. For love. They wiped all the bad from those kids’
brains and let in sweet sunlight.” She closed her eyes, her blush rising. “Those kids grew up just fine. A medicated self, derived from a self that never happened. Grew up, had kids, bought homes they couldn't afford with gardens for fruit they never got to eat. Some of them not so well off now. But their memories are spotless.”

I can't engage the way that I've seen people reach out, as I watch. Something blocked me, choked me back. I had nothing beyond program noise. “That happen to you?” Same question doctors asked me.

“I'm censored out my own recall. People talk about tragedy—I never know which tragedy was me. Who I'd be if that pain was accessible. Maybe some secret space, behind this nothing, that little girl still waiting.”

I never questioned my diagnosis. Avoidance fits my charts. “You... not staying?”

She sat up, drawing her knees to her chin—a single sinew electrified with charge to blow the socket. “I can't work, can't settle. I got no me—makes filling forms kinda queasy. I move around. Live on what's left. There's plenty places foreclosed.”

“But this place. All you done here. You planted seeds.”

She tightened. “I plant lots of places. In case I come by again.”

My arm still tingles—that blood pressure feeling, when the cuff’s unhitched and the skin’s unsure it can find its old shape. Outside smells of more than I knew, worryingly diverse. All DNA has value. I value the gene of sameness.

I stack chairs behind the door. The sound channels out footsteps receding along the empty street. I turn to the door, turn back to my safe places. I start to walk up, familiar autumn in the dust.
Rest assured, your Marine has been eating well. Not only MREs. Fox company, for example, has just received a state-of-the-art field kitchen. The FOBs also recently obtained gym equipment, where your Marine’s regular workouts keep him fit for combat. His upcoming transition is what should concern you most. Like deployment, reunion is a process, not an event, and with suicide as the second-leading cause of death in the Corps, it can take a tremendous toll on the resources and readiness of the unit involved. For more information on this topic, including how to respond to sudden episodes of panic or outbursts of rage and why your Marine may not seek help, see below.

Please know explaining more could compromise operational security, which can in turn, cost lives.
It is midday, I cannot see the sun directly, but it feels like midday.

The caked mud between the heel and ball of my boot has slowed my pace. It has been raining for three days now, only recently clearing. The chafe of a wet collar rubs my sore neck. I refuse to fully zip my rain jacket, there is no sense in trying to fight the natural world. Wet is a physical condition I am used to by now, be it the seize and sweat of dehydration in the summer, or the chill that you can never shake in winter. It is the dull ache of losing creature comforts in search of something we understand only in our most stripped moments.

The repetition of footfalls lulls one into a state of meditation; the tick of a trekking pole, left foot, right foot, tick. The old sounds of pots clinking, or an unsecured titanium spork chiming against an unnecessarily large carabiner that you didn’t need, but thought it looked cool. The trail couldn’t give a damn about cool, and the miles of hearing it beat against the outside of my pack, catching every splinter and bramble as I duck under fallen trees makes me inclined to listen.

No feet, save mine, have seen this section in months. I can see familiar tracks in the fresh mud; two cloven halves, small four-padded and slender five-clawed paws intermingling in their coming and going as the tread of my boots sinks slightly with each step, depositing mud from the previous print and collecting new so as to maintain my heavy feet. I take a few moments to stop and watch the aspens dance in the wind, letting the hot spot between my shoulders vent for moment as I, too, enjoy the cooling breeze.

The hike up to the ridge was arduous, for each step forward I lost half a step in sliding back. I remember the first attempt I made here, a pack full of “just in case,” four-man tent, alpine weight sleeping bag, two full changes of clothes, camp shoes, a bear canister and extra water in several hard-sided Nalgene bottles placed strategically (torturously) around the uneven and poorly distributed expedition pack I had brought to guarantee all my wasted energy was consumed in a hurry.
It looked cool.

This time, it was only the essentials: water, filter, food, toilet paper and tarp. Now, my twenty pound lighter pack leans against the swaying aspen, and I take in the vibrant green moss and clover covering each decayed trunk and fallen branch in new growth, peeking out from the fall's brown scattered over the forest floor.

I don’t hear birds.

I become aware of the silence in a way one is aware their keys are in a different place than where they left them, that brief flash of uncertainty followed by heightened awareness. There isn’t any wildlife visible.

My eyes are skyward and I turn my shoulders to face the sun.

The wind is blowing against my face. I have been travelling west for most of the day with the wind at my back, but in the arboreal silence I come to the realization: Rain is coming.

I cannot see the skies from this vantage point, but the torque of the canopy is enough to know I only have a few minutes to prepare. I pull my backpack close to me, unlatch the top lid to produce a tarp, guyline and stakes. The ridge is old growth, this presents a problem in a storm. The increased wind, the twisting of the canopy and the weight of rain will bring branches, known as widowmakers, from forty or more feet up, crashing to the ground. The thin nylon of a tent does little to prevent said branch from striking and possibly killing its occupants, even less so with a tarp. Given that knowledge, it becomes a calculated risk, one I’ve made before and haven’t swayed from since. Rainstorms are finite, pack weight is forever.

I tie my ridgeline low between two younger trees and stretch my tarp over the raised earth of their roots, staking each corner to make certain the rain will flow down and away from my temporary shelter of clover patch. As I tighten the lines once more, I hear the first drops hitting the undergrowth. I crawl under the cover and lay flat against the new growth staring up at the off-gray denier. The hard pack of rain hits the roof, slowly at first, then picking up in cadence. There is a flash and the distant roll of thunder; I won’t be going anywhere soon.

I do what I can to sit up, hunched over from the low ceiling I provided myself to limit the intrusion of wind-blown droplets. Rummaging through the outer pockets of my pack, I produce my stove, a pack of rice, bit of jerky, granola and a bag of chai tea. I use the heel of my boot to dig a small divot in the ground, setting the stove on the freshly turned dirt. I take the bite valve off the pack reservoir, filling the pot with the point where the metal discolors, two cups give or take. There is the familiar hiss of gas, then the snap of ignition and subtle roar of rapidly heating water. I drop the rice pack and jerky into the water as it reaches boil. The storm is
closer now, I can see the hot white flash of lightning across the vegetation accompanied by the clap and echo of thunder out through the exposed side of shelter, but my thoughts are on lunch and a nap.

Ten minutes pass and I remove the pack of rice from the water, placing it in the tuck of my boot. I can feel the heat through the leather. I scoop the jerky out with my spork, sans carabiner, and enjoy my backcountry beef and rice. The leftover starch and brine-clouded water is used for my post-meal tea. I reach out with the pot into the rain to capture runoff and help cool the mix down. The crackling of limbs and almost indiscernible sounds of debris hitting the ground combine with the intoxication of vaporized rain droplets and chai. I prop myself up on my pack, sipping and chewing granola, watching the rain fall in waves through the open end of my tarp. My eyes fall to two roots, exposed and intersected at the trunk, I am not alone. A small field mouse, no bigger than a golf ball and huddled up just as tight, has taken shelter with me against the fury outside. It doesn’t move, only twitches in its face, ears turned my way and nose extended only barely past its wet brown and black fur. There is no fear in the eyes, only resignation, acceptance. I offer a bit of granola, tossing it between the roots, but it makes no motion. This is the nature of the woods.

I continue to sip, eyes fixed on my companion, as the rain pounds us from above.
You go on a water fast
because you hate yourself

and Jeff Bridges laughs.

Remember me in Fearless.
My hair was so long

and I wasn’t afraid
of any strawberry.

I stuck my head out
the window like a beagle.

I yelled at God
‘You want to kill me but you can’t.’

So let it go. Let’s drive our
Volvo into a brick wall to make

Rosie Perez feel better.
Let’s buy presents for the dead.”
Every woman named Susan.
Every wallet used as bait, every
September dog-eared & barking.
Burying your face in your hands
did not make it. Burying your
dead in the yard has been
discovered & mourned. The
way the boy said your body
looked like an apricot. The
boy. The cobwebs between
your toes & eyes. The heart,
the fish inside the bear’s stomach,
the heart, the kite that was shaped
like your mother’s head. This is
how it is: no more ignorance, so
also no more bliss. The word
absolutely is absolutely dead. The
way we used to be beautiful has not
only kicked the bucket, but it has
scissored your mother away from
your father. All disbelief in love
has been Chuck Norrised. Don’t
expect to see it again. You lined
the streets with breadcrumbs leading
back to your house. Pigeons ate your
maps. Fill your pockets & sockets
with their beaks. One cicada, two
cicada, three cicada, floor. The
windows have been stolen, the frogs
double-crossed your brothers & now

These are the Casualties
Heather Bell
you may never leave. The doors are missing. I know a nice archaeologist, says your grandmother & then she disappears. Even the archaeologist has packed up and left. The air smells of gasoline & then suddenly, it is gone, stabbed in the throat. You give in to it eventually as well, we all do. Your cut meat flies from its basement freezer. Your hands are thick with gunfire. Your name is the last to give up. It lays down in rows next to the others, denies she belongs to you.
Things to Do When You’re Goth in the Country

When I was sixteen, I used to sit around and smoke by the bell tower with my friends. Smoking was something to do. The little courtyard under the bell tower was like nothing else in the town. It looked European to us. A pointless enclave situated between three buildings with iron benches and a small stone fountain; that’s all it was. Completely pointless and unlike anything else. There was never anyone there. We were the only ones in town who were in any way interested in that courtyard. It was a hip pocket where the universe opened up in the middle of that ugly rural town and allowed things to seem cosmopolitan for 150 square feet. All we did there was smoke because no one could see us back there and we were too young to legally smoke cigarettes. Cigarettes tasted better there. That taste they have when you don’t smoke often and it’s new, that’s what it was. The smell of Marlboro’s and Camels are two very different things, but both are savory when smoking is new to you, and taste like a fresh croissant in Paris your first day in town. That’s how cigarettes tasted to me there under the bell tower when I was sixteen.

One time, I’d been smoking too much for a few days, and cigarettes didn’t taste new anymore. They just tasted burning and sick. I was sitting on the ledge of the fountain under the bell tower, the fancy cobblestone under my boots, the thick foliage behind the fountain casting shade and a hot August sun at three o’clock. Sweat dripped down my nose. I pulled out a cigarette. My friends stood around preparing to do something smoke. I said, “It’s too hot to smoke.” They all laughed and repeated what I’d said, “Too hot to smoke.” I felt very cool. I knew in that moment that, whatever happened, I was going to be alright, we all were, because we could find a way to be hip, even there in the middle of nowhere trying to be the Bible-Belt, cow country, abandoned train town. I lit a cigarette and forced it down, making myself sick. The bell tower started gonging. We all looked up into the sunlight reflecting off the windows of the bell tower.

There’s a girl I like to tell things to. She doesn’t like to be called a wom-
an, even though she is. I like to tell her these pointless things because they are prizes the trick claw of my brain catches and drops into her lap, worthless as purple stuffed elephants but celebrated in the moment because they got hooked against the odds and extracted. She gives me these things too. We keep passing quarters, piling up pretty plastic toys that look so different hanging in a difficult claw than they did on the worthless heap of memory.

She looks like trash to me, and I like it. I’ve spent years polishing it away, worrying that people could see right through my bag. My cow-shaped underchin when I tilt my head might be a tell. I check skin-tone for smoothness and pockmarks. My stomach is a dead giveaway. But I’ve been assured none of these things are trash markers to anyone other than me. I’ve been assured it’s not visible to the outside world. Then I look at her, and it’s so obvious. The trash signs are everywhere, even through her queerness. Queerness untrashes people a little, or it can. (Sometimes it goes the opposite direction though.) Still, I can see what she would be without the good sex, weird haircut and interesting clothes, clear as a dump truck at dawn. And I know also, when I look at her, for all my polishing, my face must be the same sort of obviousness and there was never anything I could have done about it. Trash gets into the body and forms it, molds speech and jaw lines. It scars the skin with acne kisses from too many greasy-fry dinners. Just overhearing things like Guns N’ Roses and Bon Jovi rots the teeth and yellows the eyes.

It’s something about things. Things like things that hurt. Like whipped cream. $2.49. Something I did that became a thing for a moment. A thing for a moment because it abstracted everything and right then I wanted nothing to do with anything anymore that wasn’t abstract and indecipherable; that wasn’t a vague term.

Whippets turn the world into vague terms. My cousin and I had the same feeling about these days. So we went to the store at dusk all year and purchased cans of generic whipped cream, the aerosol kind. Then we went to the park. Then the sun would be setting. Then we laid down our sixteen-year-old trashy girl bodies on the merry-go-round. Then we pushed with our feet so that we were spinning. Then we tilted the jagged plastic nozzles of the whipped cream aerosol canisters to our lips. You don’t shake the bottle. You don’t want any cream to come out. Just the gas. We pushed the nozzle sideways and sucked. Inhaled. The nozzles have jagged tips for decorating. If you are dressing an ice cream sundae, the jagged edge makes the whipped cream wavy. It makes patterns, like stars. The gas creamed us. The gas cut stars out of our minds. Made us soft edges left over. The park was always blue-grey and empty just after dusk, and newly cool, and we spun, and everything hummed and became
a vague terminology of dusk glowing trees, cement and swing sets. Our minds were creamy stars poking through the dusk, waving us goodbye.

It’s something about things that hurt, how they stay and shape the body. Things that you seek pleasure in when you’re trashy. It makes you tell stories like this. Like we were basically huffing glue, but it seemed sweet because it smelled like whipped cream. It makes vague terminology very appealing.

I looked different than my cousin while we were tripping from fumes on the merry go round. I looked better. Which meant I was. I liked to draw upside down crosses below my eyes, connecting from my eyeliner down, like two sacrilegious tears ending above my cheeks. I wanted to draw Jesus there on them, a black silhouette of him hanging upside down. I drew upside down crosses under my eyes and purchased a sliver grill cut with upside down Jesuses on my three upper front teeth, and went around the country roads on my mountain bike when I was fifteen. I liked to go stand in the middle of cornfields in the autumn in a black bowler and trench coat and pretend I’d painted the sky, grinning my upside down silver Jesus grill toward the pink sunset.

I was like a cat that way: staring at skylines, staring at ghosts. We liked to go to the haunted bridge in the next town over. Three towns away there was a haunted ditch, and in the country roads between Nashville and Hoyleton, Illinois, there was a haunted bump. You had to know exactly where that haunted bump was or you would never find it since it was on an unmarked black tar road with only trees on one side and a cornfield on the other, repeating for miles, and no markers. The knowledge of where that bump was got passed down to you from other people, and then you had to really memorize it before you showed anyone else, be taken there a few times, or else you’d end up at the wrong bump in the road late at night and try to do that haunted thing that we did at that bump, and it wouldn’t work, because you weren’t paying enough attention and parked your car on some other, ordinary, everyday, non-haunted bump in that road. And then nothing would happen. Then you would just be some kids sitting in a car near a bump in the road waiting in vain to be haunted.

I experienced the bump haunting three times. I went looking for it, seeking out a fourth haunted bump experience, but by myself for once, and instead I saw a UFO that I had to drive very fast to get away from, and I never went back to that haunted bump again.

The haunted bump haunting was a very mechanical kind of haunting. If you situated yourself just right, it would happen every time like ghostly clockwork. It wasn’t as finicky as my haunted bridge. The ghost of the haunted bridge would only come out very sporadically, and even
when she did, it was debatable what had actually happened. This bump’s manner of haunting was not debatable.

The thing you had to do was park your car three yards past the bump and facing east. This situates your car sloping down a not very steep hill, front pointing downhill with the bump uphill behind you. It’s very important that you understand exactly what I am saying about the situating of the car, or else it won’t be obvious why what is about to happen when you do this is so scary.

Okay. So now you’re sitting there. You’re sloping downhill. Put the car in neutral. Turn it off. Leave it on. Either way. I usually turned it off so I could hear the cicadas for added effect. When the car is off and in neutral, it is natural the car will roll forward, downhill. At first, it doesn’t move at all. For several minutes, it just sits there. But then, it starts rolling, backwards, uphill, gaining speed as it goes, faster and faster, backwards, uphill, in the middle of the dark woods, until it gets over that bump, all the way over by a few yards, and then the car slides off to the side of the road into the dirt shoulder. Then it stops. Then you’ve experienced the haunted bump.

What’s actually happening there is, a school bus crashed there in the sixties. Right there past that bump, and twenty kids died. The bus stalled in the middle of the road there and a drunk driver of a pickup truck crashed into it. The ghosts of those kids want to reverse their death over and over. Ghosts are very associative. So if you go there with any vehicle and stop where they crashed, which happens to be by that bump which is the only marker, they will come and push you back, then leave your car off to the side on the dirt shoulder, out of harm’s way.

I wonder how anyone found out about that haunted bump in the first place. It must have taken a lot of sitting around. There’s a lot of free time in the country.

My friends once tested the ghost children theory and went to the bump with bags of flour. They covered the car in flower and tossed it on the road there by that bump. Then they situated the car correctly for the haunting and sat in the car and waited. It rolled backwards, uphill and all. The haunting worked as it did every time. Then they got out of the car and took out their flashlights, and they found children’s handprints in the flower that covered the car. About twenty pairs of them, and footprints in the flour on the road as well. Then they all pissed their pants.

I’ve only pissed my pants three times in my entire life, and always when I was sleeping. Once when I was just out of diapers. Once when I was thirteen and had pneumonia with a fever of one hundred and four. And once when I was seventeen. It was just a very bad dream. But I’d
been cutting myself all day the day before I went to sleep in that nightmare. (Cutting is also something to do, like smoking.) And then, in the summers especially, maintenance of cutting adds some other activities. Self-mutilation in the summer requires styling the legs of black panty hose to be worn like a sheik long-gloves over the blood-caked scabs. This way you can still wear t-shirts and be cool in the Midwestern humidity.

There is nothing like pissing yourself from a nightmare, with scabs on your arms. Waking up, a year away from legal adulthood, to wet yellow sheets in the wavering sunlight below dust-drenched windows will make you understand your own fragility only akin to suddenly realizing you are elderly. It is shocking as a bare light bulb to feeble teeth. It’s a grey happening.

Nearly, but not quite as shocking as surprise exorcisms. If you are going to be Goth in the country and really go for it, I would highly recommend a nonconsensual, surprise Southern Baptist exorcism. There’s just nothing else that can compete. That moment when your minister lays hands on you, and the faces of the congregation, people you thought you knew well, turn, doll-eyed and pitying, to begin praying some unknown demon out of you, their lips mouthing out whisperings of the same prayer in unison; that really is the pinnacle.

It’s going to take a lot to cause this occurrence. You will have to commit yourself to a very particular type of disturbance in order to get an entire congregation of Southern Baptists to conspire with God against your soul. You don’t have to do exactly what I did, but I’ll share my experience as a template that can be re-worked and altered, specifically tailored for your own personal C.G. (Country Goth) experience.

Always begin with the Bible. I took advantage of my church duties. Wednesday night Bible study was a rotation. There were twelve regular members, myself included. Mine was an enforced attendance. Each week, a different bible study member selected the text to be read and studied. Every twelfth week was my week to select the text, read it aloud to the congregation, and then sit through an hour-long discussion. For this, I utilized Halloween paint. It is very important to approach all unpleasant tasks in life as a performance art piece, especially if you are a teenager. On Wednesday nights, I dressed like I was going to kill a Marilyn Manson Concert. I approached the pulpit with my big red bible, held my hands out like an offering and spread the bible open, the thick soft pages resting splayed and flowing out like a woman’s, thick, parted thighs. My scabs healing underneath my hacked up pantyhose worn like sheik long-gloves. Chains rattling from my wrists, hips, and fucked up Barbie Doll-head necklaces hanging around my neck; Vietnam ear tokens honoring the violence of girlishness. There I stood before the congregation in
the small steepled white church, under the empty cross, exposed rafters echoing barnyards, my eyes painted thick with black curlicues swirling up from my lids to around my temples, and upside down black crosses resting like tears above my cheeks. My white powdered cheeks, sparkling fake-blood-red lips and hot pink dreadlocks sticking out from beneath a black bowler.

And I read them their Bible. I read the congregation their sacred text, dressed that way on their pulpit. I spoke in a booming, deep-throated voice that, at moments, devolved into a growl, echoing through their sanctuary like it was a black magick road show we were doing. I read them their Ezekiel. I read them their sacred book and I made it mine. I made their reverence my blasphemy, my sacrilege.

It was the word of the Lord I was reading, and more importantly, it was the word of their Lord saying through my horrible mouth, “And I will lay the dead carcasses of the children before their idols; and I will scatter your bones round about your altars.” And saying, “I will drench the land with your flowing blood all the way to the mountains, and the ravines will be filled with your flesh.” And saying, “And they shall know that I am the LORD, and that I have not said in vain that I would do this evil.”

It was like a song I was singing to them, like low scream core, like they’d never heard the words so crisp and clear before. And the earth will become flesh and the birds will peck at the flesh until the rivers are rivers of blood, for I am the Lord your God, sort of thing. It was my best performance piece ever. It was the best because it was happening in real time, in real space, on holy ground making righteous people question and gawk and quake a little. I would go so far as to say there was some quaking. And there was a women named Betty there. That made it really terrific.

It’s things like this you will have to do to reach the pinnacle point. (The pinnacle point being nonconsensual exorcism by people you have known all your life.) Carving Pentacles into your forehead with razor blades is always an option as well and requires less set up and performative skill. I prefer pentacles to pentagrams, as I find pentagrams to be a bit of an overkill, and rather silly as Satanism is so blasé and reactionary an endeavor. I also highly recommend being a homosexual. Rural Goth Trash just reads better homo. If you are not already a homosexual, you can easily become one. I became one as young as the age of five, so it will be all the easier to do in adolescence at a time when most have a more developed aesthetic understanding of the libido.

Oh there are so many things to do.

You can harass military recruiters who set up tables in your school’s lunch room by brandishing neon feather boas and dancing around them singing Adam Ant’s “You’re Just Too Physical,” as reworked by Trent
Reznor, for instance. You will definitely want to spend a lot of time in the old part of the cemetery, just hanging out, then tell people about it. If you are very ambitious, write some poems there. I always did. Try some necromancy just for kicks, if you are wanting to be a true professional. Don’t tell anyone about that. Some things we must keep to ourselves.

When I was very young, I had a voice in a well that I kept all to myself. As commanded by the voice in the well, our conversations were kept secret, and that was for the best, in retrospect, I am sure. The voice in the well was grey as the stone that housed it. It was a very grounded male voice of wisdom that told me many important things. It began telling me things when I was five years old, then when I was eight, my family cemented the well and it was covered then and I couldn’t hear the voice anymore. But when I could it told me many important things. It told me to never grow up. It told me to always smell the grass. It told me the wind would guide and protect me and loved me unconditionally because I was exceptionally beautiful to the wind in my area. It told me where to find dead things. I found many dead things guided by the voice in the well. One dead cow, legs pointing straight up toward the afternoon sky and stiff like Viagra meat. I found one dead dog gutted in the woods by a homeless man who’d been living there all summer. It was a golden retriever mix of something, and its belly was sliced open, full of maggots and flies so thick it looked like the thick love I had for the friend I found it with, and I would only have ever wanted to find something so perfectly fucked up with someone I loved as much as I loved that blonde girl. The Air Force stole her perfect heart years later.

I found a nest of rabbits drowned in puddles; drowned by the bare hands of my six-year-old cousin who had spent the previous night glassy eyed and babbling prophecies about stillborn kittens. So many dead birds fallen, innumerable deer, one dead squirrel I had known, and many dead classmates at funerals I attended during the summers when teenagers liked to have deadly wrecks or drown in lakes and flooded ponds. I found death in the eyes of friends who began enlisting in the military so they didn’t have to become farmers and break the legs of chickens with hormones. It was a deep well of death in their eyes and there were voices there too, but they were not my voice.

My voice in the well was grey and kind. My voice in the well was also probably dead. The voice in my well told me the most important thing and the most difficult thing. It told me empathy. Repeatedly. It told me, “Empathy. Child. Be a child. Be an empathetic child. Always. All we kill is ourselves.” It told me, “All we love is ourselves.” It told me, “All. We. Kill. Is. Our. Selves.”
The black helicopter’s sonic booms are classified information and officially do not exist, but when they happened, everyone would come down off their porches and stand looking up. They would say, “Air Force Base,” and point west. When the swarms of black helicopters would pass over us in moments of bad consciousness I would remember the voice in the well saying, “Empathy. Child. All we kill is ourselves.” I would look to the farmers saying, “Air Force,” pointing their calloused fingers west and feel the wars which are endless and meant to be endless ripping open my guts with their flapping blades and I would know I was dead too. And I would know for a moment that it wasn’t only me painting my eyes so black and my skin so pale. It wasn’t something autonomous inside me making me need to look so dead. Dead as the kids dropping hands like bricks, and the carcasses of children God promised to spread around vain altars. Dead as the Elite Republican Guard. Dead as Iraqi insurgents and people just trying to drive their cars home to dinner on the only road home that is awfully near a pipeline. Dead as oil and sand. Dead as the conscientiousness of this country that grew me up in vast cornfields jabbering with upside down silver Jesus teeth at broken egg-gone-bad sunsets that spill and spill and spill, as if there’s nothing to lose, ever. You could find me wagging my crotch and scars at the war planes that do not exist deafeningly in vast cornfields at sunset. Trench. Coat. Dread. Locks. Bowler.

Do not take the sky for granted. It falls all the time somewhere. And now there are kids wagging there at drones, wagging their fucked up trash at no one, at video screens below the cracking sky spilling out orange paths for strange jets and helicopters. So many insects. Mosquitoes and fruit flies. If you want to do it right, let them suck on you. Don’t smack anything painful away. The country itches. It eats you and burns. Always be prepared for the apocalypse. Or rather, be willing to see the apocalypse that is happening around you. Even when it is silent as glass and you can see nothing for miles except the miles stretching out to more miles. Know that it is out there, bred by where you are and so always present to you exploding the silence in silence.

Run through the fields in boots or barefooted in pressed suits and never comb your hair for any reason unless it is to be a Dandy. Run through the fields to the woods and collect all the dead things. Curse all manifestations of monotheistic nation God. Masturbate to ghosts by the haunted creek and let your cumming flow long as time that stretches out and lasts so long in this place where people build things like scarecrows and pits and mud is a verb. Hang dolls in trees and let them blow in the wind. Return daily to watch their decay. Cut blood out of yourself and feed it in droplets to the creek like little boats the creek is always hungry.
for. Let the boats go to be devoured at the mouth or the bend. Let the boats go on like dead crows on the water of endless time that will rot to fertilize a more elaborate nothing of this land of dust and imbecilic violence concealed below the scent of earth, fresh cut wheat and bleach for their fresh starched linens that glow on clotheslines at twilight like spectral flags. This is where you belong. There is much to be done.
My brother’s Someone went suicidal too. But you call that mourning? He creeps around like an apartment complex coke dealer. At least he didn’t find you. Oh, mother, of myriad faulty methods. You left me with my new name, accomplice. Back then we were all such good little Bolsheviks. Now you’re that vaguely familiar character from a film I cannot name. What choice did I have except to disappear from your house of failed inventions? Maybe my retreat was the same as yours, sans pills. And so I’ll agree to gather for a parody of a holiday. Dad will be all smiles. He’ll say pass the mother fucking peas, and, could you try not to murder yourself in front of the children.
VII.
A leathery bartender closes my tab after an extended evening of bourbon consumption. He hands me the bill to sign, then quickly pulls it back.

“Is there a problem?” I ask.

“Mickey Mantle?” he says. “That can’t be real. Your name is Mickey Mantle?”

“It’s wild, right?” I roll my eyes. “I think there’s a ball player with the same name. I hear he’s a total babe.” He looks me up and down. I am wearing a blue dress and a smirk. My hair is pinned back with my grandmother’s pearl barrette.

The man perched on the stool next to me laughs a sweet, warm laugh. He turns to me, rolls up his sleeve and reveals a small tattoo of the Yankees logo. “I’m guessing your parents are die-hards, too,” he says. “It would seem we have the same disease.”

I grab his arm and smile with all my teeth. “It is a beautiful, beautiful disease.”

When we finish exchanging war stories and another round of drinks, I pull him by the loops of his jeans into a kiss and onto 3rd Avenue. In the taxicab there is more kissing, some light hair pulling, and utter disregard for seatbelts. The driver mutters to himself, feigning disinterest, and turns up the pop station. As we pull onto the Manhattan Bridge, we are supine, splayed across the grubby narrow expanse of the backseat.

“I can’t believe I’m going home with Mickey Mantle,” he laughs.

The song that plays each time Derek Jeter steps up to bat comes on the radio and New York reveals its beauty and coincidence for the several-thousandth time.

VI.
On the final evening of our friendship, I bring Melissa Thomas home to work on a History project. As she crunches through the crimson trail of October
leaves leading to my front door, I consider warning her, but decide against it. In the living room, the 60-inch television is switched on to Game 7 of the ALCS. An altar above the fireplace bears seven tea lite candles, a baseball signed by the 1961 Yankees, a framed Lou Gehrig postage stamp, and the cap my father wore to the Reggie game in ’77—the night he met my mother.

My father barrels across the hardwood in his underpants, wielding a Louisville Slugger with Graig Nettles’s name burnished into it. My mother sits primly in the armchair, wearing a Tino Martinez shirt, legs tucked beneath her.

“Mickey!” he yells when I walk in. “Get to your post! Quick! We need all the help we can get.”

Fourteen years of carrying around the burden of my name and the legacy behind it have become heavy like a chain around my neck. I sigh, begrudgingly cram my flimsy 1998 World Series cap on my head, and take my ceremonial spot on the couch.

“Maybe I should go?” Melissa whispers.

“No! Stay where you are!” my father yells. “This is not a democratic household and I am not a rational man. This is post season. Don’t ruin the mojo now!”

Aaron Boone steps up to the plate. My father grips the Nettles bat and springs over to my mother’s corner.

“Rub this bat!” he cries. “I have a feeling this schmuck is going to do something!”

When the ball sails over the wall, the fat base of the Nettles bat pops and crunches seven jagged holes into the ceiling. We are screaming and dancing in a circle when Mariano collapses on the mound and Melissa slips out the door, crying and covered in plaster.

The living room will forever boast crooked recessed lighting—a monument to the night we staved off the Red Sox another year. It will be a decade before I bring another friend home.

V.

Terms are being tossed around the house and I sit quietly on the floor in the living room, collecting them like Topps cards. *Cirrhosis of the liver. Transplant list. Eulogize.* They televise the funeral of the man I was named after and my parents sit hunched on the grey expanse of the sofa, faces cold like slabs of stone.

A clip of the other Mickey Mantle comes on the screen. He is gaunt; beckoning viewers not to look up to him, not to call him a role model. My father scoffs and murmurs into his fist, “Too fucking late.”

Roy Clark appears holding a guitar to say goodbye with the song he
promised to Mickey. He croons that the time has come to pay for yesterday when he was young.

It is the first time I see my father cry.

**IV.**

On my first day of preschool, five round tables are set up with tiny name cards, the names of the children neatly printed on each one. All the girls have flowers on their name cards; all the boys have baseballs on theirs. I find my name on a baseball card, and take my assigned seat.

The girl next to me looks over and loudly informs me that I am a boy. When I tell her she is mistaken, she points out I was given a boy’s name card: if the card says so, it must be true.

I endure a barrage of mocking until the day it comes my turn for Show and Tell. I bring an old 45 single my father gave me and announce to the class, “This is a song written about me.”

Teresa Brewer’s “I Love Mickey” blares from the tiny plastic phonograph speaker. They hear my famous name over and over and it shuts them up for good.

**III.**

My father—sporting a backwards cap, a catcher’s mitt, and a Thurman Munson mustache—stands next to the doctor, holding a camcorder so heavy all our home movies come out on a tilt. My mother—feet up in stirrups, covered in rivulets of sweat—threatens to belt him if he does not come take her hand. My blue layette, purchased months before from Hy Friedman on Bragg Street, sits neatly folded on a side table next to my father’s box of “It’s a Boy!” cigars.

I arrive in grand fashion. I am the thrill of a lifetime, a misinterpreted sonogram. I am a girl. It is the greatest joke I will ever pull off.

My father laughs incredulously, removes his cap, rubs his forehead. “Doc!” he says. “You told us the baby was a boy. We were naming him after Mickey Mantle!”

I weigh 7 pounds and 7 ounces. My father takes this as a sign and neatly prints my name on the forms. My birth certificate reads Mickey Mantle Rose Newman. I am a girl named Mickey.

Hours later, the three of us sit perched in the hospital bed, waiting for the game to begin. “Mickey’s first baseball game,” my mother coos down at me, swaddled in a pinstriped blanket. “And it’s a World Series game!”

The sound of the ABC announcers’ voices careen towards my ears for the first time. Then: rumbling, panic, static. 3,000 miles away, the earth’s plates are grinding against each other. The announcers are gripping each
other’s arms in the broadcast booth and Interstate 880 is crumbling.

The Bay Series is postponed two weeks, and I spend the rest of my life telling people how the world shook when I came into it.

II.

In row B, seat 11 sits the boy who cut his teeth on the series of the early sixties, who in his wallet keeps the June 8th, 1969 ticket stub from Mickey Mantle Day next to his newly minted driver’s license.

In row C, seat 9, sits the girl who slept with a toy beaver named Bucky after the shortstop. She finds herself passing the time between innings anxiously running her fingers through her long hair, imagining she were running them through the hair of the boy seated in front of her.

In the eighth inning, Jackson strides to the bat and she begins to chant with all her capacity: REG-GIE, REG-GIE, REG-GIE. The boy turns around, smiles at her, and mightily joins in. The chant spreads like influenza and the Bronx is rattling when Charlie Hough’s knuckleball is driven into the stands. Instinctually, they turn to each other, grabbing arms, jumping, screaming.

When the game ends, they rush the field together, yanking up fistfuls of grass and dirt, aching in the most primitive way to hold onto a piece of the evening. He gets billy-clubbed and she gets pulled away kicking into the air. He catches the train back downtown alone.

He drags himself back to his family’s Bensonhurst apartment to find the slim shadow of his mother, perched by the tiny kitchen window, smoking a lipstick-stained cigarette and scolding him for getting home so late. He comes bearing a plastic bag of infield dirt and bruised limbs.

“I let you go to the World Series, you break your curfew. You’re always looking for trouble.”

He smiles, gripping the bag of dirt tighter.

“I found more than trouble,” he promises. “I found the girl I’m going to marry one day.”

I.

Seven years outside the day he touched down at Normandy, a soldier palms his hair and takes a deep breath. He is clutching a scorecard and has a pack of unfiltered Lucky Strikes rolled up in his sleeve.

She is unlike any of his other blind dates: as soon as she was out of her mother’s sight, she lit up a cigarette and freed a cascade of long dark curls from her pearl barrette. At the game, she tosses peanut shells and spills her beer while she heckles the A’s.

The new kid steps up to bat, returning after being sent down to the minors earlier this season. This time, he is wearing number 7. “I have a
good feeling about this one,” she says, without looking at her skeptical soldier. “I have excellent intuition when it comes to baseball.”

When the rookie knocks it out of the park, she turns to the soldier and kisses him for the first time.

When the game ends, they walk out of the stadium hand in hand and into the steamy night—the latest, but not nearly the last, in a long line of hearts destined to be left on 161st Street.

† First published in HOBART: another literary journal.
TV in the corner of the bar.
Hit a weak ground ball
somewhere.
A girl at the other end
of the bar, looking better
than she did a couple beers ago.
Or a couple beers making me
forget what she looked like
before.
Strikeout. Looking.
Or, my girlfriend. Down there,
at the other end of the bar,
instead of next to me. My girlfriend,
née wife, or wife, née girlfriend.
Either/or.
Fielder’s choice.
End of inning. Or no girl.
A girl made up to pretend
I’m not at the bar alone.
Up in the corner of the screen,
newly noticed: “Replay.”
A rerun, a game already decided.
Infield fly. Strikeout. Groundball
somewhere.
Andrew Keating: Your latest novel, *The Devil in Silver*, seems rife with opportunities for hyperbole, but you do keep your characters relatable, and the mental hospital setting both realistic and simple. How do you restrain yourself?

Victor LaValle: I’m so happy you feel the characters, and setting, were “relatable,” “realistic and simple.” I might have to steal that for a blurb on a later edition of the book.

In all seriousness, I find that one of the biggest challenges for me, as a writer, is to make my characters and settings feel relatable. I tend to write about people and places that might normally be pretty marginalized if not downright invisible to society. The mentally ill, the religiously extreme, the poor and working class, the petty criminals. These are not folks that people necessarily want to spend lots of time with. And yet they’re the folks I find most interesting and rich with dramatic potential. So, if I want people to spend time with them, I have to do some work to make them interesting company. This often means that I have to want to spend time with them first. I have to relate to them. Once I find my affection for them, it’s easier to generate that feeling in the reader. If I
can make you feel warmth or concern or just interest in the characters, then I think you’ll forgive quite a bit. I mean the characters in the book certainly do get out of hand sometimes, they do act outrageously, but because you’ve come to care for them you’ll go along with them. That’s the hope anyway.

AK: You mention Cuckoo’s Nest in other interviews, as well as in the novel itself; and when I bring up the realistic setting, I suppose I’m referring to the typical (as opposed to stereotypical) mental hospital setting that Devil in Silver and Cuckoo’s Nest have in common. The story emerges from the characters stuck inside those walls, and those characters, too, are pretty typical for where they are. The fiction I am drawn to forces a central character out of his/her status quo, and what better way to do throw someone off balance than to stick them (regardless of innocence) in a mental hospital for 72 hours?

VL: That was my thinking exactly. I had a feeling that outside of something like Cuckoo’s Nest, or that Shutter Island movie, most of my readers would have no real feeling for a mental hospital. Now the former is closer to real life while the latter is definitely fun but wildly over the top and not at all realistic anymore (if ever). I figured the average reader would be pretty shaken by the idea of being thrown in with all these troubled people, locked up in a madhouse, and that would get them tense. Then I wanted to upend at least some of their expectations. The patients aren’t monsters but then neither is the staff. Everyone is trapped in a terrible space that warps even the best of people. I thought that was a fine description of real life on a psychiatric unit and, in a broader way, of real life in a country going through the kind of current turmoil that makes even decent people start acting insane.

AK: One of my favorite moments in the novel is when Scotch Tape (“Cause I see right through you”) explains how Pepper came to be in the mental hospital. It’s a frightening thought. I mean, yeah, there’s this bison-headed monster roaming the corridors, but the idea that I could get into a scuffle at a bar one night and be thrown in a dangerous mental hospital for three days because the cops are off-duty and don’t feel like doing the paperwork? Were you actively prodding that this as a social issue?

VL: One of the things people find most troubling is the idea of randomness and chaos. Human beings find ways to make even the smallest bit of good luck, or bad luck, into some larger plan. We crave explanations.
This comes through clearly in most fiction. Crimes are solved, motivations are discovered, usually answers are given or at least inferred. It’s terrifying, I agree, to think you might get in that bar fight and end up in a mental hospital. But in my experience there’s a great deal of free-floating peril in the world. You get a cop on a good day and he lets you go without writing that speeding ticket. You get a doctor on a bad day and he leaves a gauze pad inside you during an operation and you die from septic shock. I was definitely trying to prod at the issue of abuse of power but I included the explanation—that the city wasn’t paying anymore overtime just then because of budget concerns—because I wanted the reader to understand the cops weren’t really evil they were underpaid. I don’t teach for free so why would the cops do their jobs for free? And yet this simple budget reality causes Pepper’s entire life to change. That’s how easily lives on the precipice can be decided.

**AK:** I read somewhere that you wrote *The Devil in Silver* at a Dunkin Donuts in Queens. Is this a standard writing spot? If so, what does this particular DD offer that other locations might not?

**VL:** I wrote *The Devil in Silver* in a Dunkin Donuts in Washington Heights, where we live now, not in Queens, where I grew up. I’ll grant you that this is a distinction that no one outside of New York City could give a damn about. I just wanted to clarify.

The Dunkin Donuts is about three blocks from our apartment. It was the only place close enough to our place that had space for me to sit and write for a while. There was a Starbucks even closer but the place was full of people writing! My wife had just given birth to our son in May and I was writing the novel over that summer. I needed to be close enough that I could get back home quickly. Also, there was no Wi-Fi in the store, no open networks nearby, so it was also a good place to disconnect from the Internet and just write. No bathroom though. That part sucked.

**AK:** I completely understand the urge to clarify in New York City. I went to college at Wagner on Staten Island, where everyone referred to Manhattan as “The City,” as more than just another borough. Do you think Queens (which you describe as “the most ethnically diverse region” and “in this borough there were probably five hundred countries to choose from”) has that same isolation/distinction from the rest of “The City?”

**VL:** I know Wagner. My cousin went there decades ago. I have a memory, from childhood, of visiting the campus for his graduation. I certainly
think Queens has the same sense of distance. We called Manhattan “the City” too. In many ways I didn’t think of myself as a New Yorker because we didn’t visit anyplace outside Queens too often. I said I was from Queens, not New York. My mother worked as a secretary in Manhattan but it was just a name to me. I really only came to know Manhattan when I was a young adult, about thirteen. At that age I started making trips, alone, into Manhattan, to Times Square. This was about 1985 when it was still seedy but headed toward the end of that period. I spent a lot of time sneaking into the old porn shops and walking the streets around the Port Authority and seeing way more than I should have at that age. I’m so grateful for that particular “city” education but I also don’t miss that era in the slightest. It was pretty wooly. I don’t think I really appreciated that until much later. At the time I just found it exciting and dangerous.

**AK:** Where else do you typically work? Do you have any pre-writing rituals or habits?

**VL:** I don’t write in that Dunkin Donuts anymore. It was the right place for the last book, but not for my new one. Now, since our kids go to daycare, I write in the kid’s room. These days I stand when I write so the kid’s changing table is actually a great height. I plop my laptop down and type away amidst my son’s toy trains and my daughter’s chew toys. Since the new book is about parenting and children in danger I feel inspired by working in that space.

I used to play a little mood music depending on the kind of scene I needed to write, to get myself into the emotional state of the scene, but these days I really don’t have the same amount of time. I’ve got two hours each weekday—which is still a lot compared to most other people trying to write—so even a few minutes for a song or two seems like an indulgence. Usually, as I’m going to bed, I’m planning what the next day’s scene/moment will be like so I go into the writing time with a lot more preparation than I used to do.

If I do put in the two hours, though, I reward myself with a nice glass of bourbon or Scotch at the end of the night. It’s something to look forward to and makes me feel all *writerly*.

**AK:** As writers, our stack of failures typically exceeds our successes. You have no shortage of successes, so I’m curious: Do you have a drawer where you keep the unfinished/failed projects that haunt you in the minutes before you fall asleep, and what might that drawer contain?
When I was younger, just out of grad school, I shared an apartment with my best friend and fellow writer, Mat Johnson. We had a railroad apartment in Harlem. When my agent sent my first book, a collection of stories, out to publishers we received about a dozen rejections, maybe more. Some were nice, making note of talent but still saying the books weren’t for them. Others were simply not interested. And one or two said ridiculously ignorant things.

I remember taking all those rejections and taping them to one wall in my bedroom. When posted this way they were like one giant billboard advertising my failure. Me and Mat called this my “Wall of Shame.” I put it up because I felt inspired to keep writing, to keep submitting, just to spite these twelve motherfuckers who were too stupid to recognize a good thing. That’s the way I motivated myself back then and it’s still the way I do it. I don't keep a wall of shame anymore because if I did my daughter would tear the papers down and chew them. (She’s teething.)

Also, I’m 41—not 26—and that kind of self-pity isn’t so charming at this stage. Nevertheless, I do keep a running log of the shitty reviews and backhanded bullshit in my head. (I’m not less self-pitying, just less willing to externalize the self-pity.) These things do haunt me but I try to use them as fuel. The only remedy for failure is another attempt at success.

AK: I interviewed Mat a little over a year ago, and he intimated that he was once part of a “horrible” rap group called Mosaic Blac. Were you involved in this? (You’ll have to forgive me. I can’t help but imagine a rap group composed of eventual rock-star-status novelists.)

VL: No, Mat’s horrible rap group was his own entity. We didn’t become friends until we were both in grad school, in 1996 or so, and that group predated our friendship. If you ever interview him again you should ask him about his first, and still unpublished, novel though. I won’t tell you the name of it because it’s ridiculous and hilarious, but if you prod him I bet he’ll share.

AK: While we’re on the topic, your novel The Ecstatic shares its name with a Mos Def album [he also blurbed Big Machine (confession time: my first experience with your work was Big Machine, and the fact that Mos Def endorsed it was the reason that book came home with me)], and you allude to his song “Ms Fat Booty” in The Devil in Silver (“ass so fat you can see it from the front”).

† Mat Johnson responds: White Chocolate Melts. It was the greatest book on that shelf.
VL: My editor passed *The Ecstatic* on to Mos Def (now Yasiin Bey) when it was first published. One day I got a call that Mos wanted to meet and hang out. One of the coolest phone calls I’ve ever received, of course. He picked me up. (And Mat Johnson was with me, by the way. There was no way he was going to skip hanging out either!) We ended up hanging out at a few different spots until well into the night. It was just a great evening and the beginning of a friendship that has lasted. One day he wrote me from London, while he was filming *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, and said he was working on some new songs and that he felt inspired by my novel to go into some interesting directions. That was the last I heard of it until, maybe a year or two later, he told me he was naming the new album after the book. If you want to talk about the honors I’ve received in my career that has to be about the best.

AK: I imagine that a lasting friendship with Mos has its advantages, and I’ve always thought of him as one of the most well-rounded performers/artists out there. Has any of his work inspired you similarly?

VL: Long before we’d ever met I was already a fan of his first album, *Black on Both Sides* and, of course, the album he made with Talib Kweli, *Black Star*. I also loved *The New Danger* and still play it often. What I like about him is that no album—and no acting part—really ever seems exactly like the ones that came before. While they’re all clearly his creations they’re never clones. I take inspiration from that always.

AK: *The Devil in Silver*’s protagonist, Pepper, like you, is a metal head. How does metal influence you when writing?

VL: I definitely grew up a metal head. I came up during the thrash era so my favorites were the Big Four: Metallica, Slayer, Anthrax, and Megadeth. Also bands like Testament and Death Angel, Exodus and Venom. The music taught me two things. The first was that it introduced me to writers and books I might not have known yet. It was Metallica’s “For Whom the Bell Tolls” that led me to Ernest Hemingway and another song “The Thing that Should not Be” that led me to H.P. Lovecraft. Anthrax wrote a number of songs inspired by Stephen King books and stories. And Iron Maiden, a slightly older group, introduced me to Samuel Taylor Coleridge through their song “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.” I didn’t grow up in a bookish household so I didn’t have anyone pointing out worthwhile writers to study. And yet I was drawn to reading, to books. With time my interests and influences broadened, but it was absolutely because of those early influences that I started down that path.
The other thing thrash metal taught me was a sense of rhythm and rage. The two coexisting together. The idea that your work could channel all your emotions—the grimmer the better!—but folks still better be able to thrash their heads to a beat. While I don’t think anyone’s thrashing to my novels, I do hope a sense of pacing, of rhythm, is there in the best of the stuff.

**AK:** We haven’t really talked about monsters, but they show up allegorically in a lot of your writing. Do you now, perhaps as a side effect of writing about them so often, see monsters everywhere you go? What do they look, sound and smell like?

**VL:** I’ve been in love with monsters long before I ever began to write. I loved the Wendigo in Stephen King’s *Pet Sematary* and these salamander like creatures in the brilliant, if under read “Children of the Kingdom,” a novella by TED Klein. I loved the shape changing alien in John Carpenter’s *The Thing* and many more. My first beloved monster is the wolf from *Peter and the Wolf*. I know most kids want to see Peter and his animal friends triumph but I always felt sad when that wolf got strung up and carried into town. All those monsters, and however many thousands more, are stewing in my brain all the time. What to make of them? And how to make some new ones? Those are the questions I keep mulling.

**AK:** You’ve been given the key to Jamaica, Queens, right? What doors has that opened for you? This is something I’ve always wondered.

**VL:** The key itself is big, the size of a stapler, but it’s fused onto a plaque. For that reason I’ve never been able to use it to open any locked doors, but it is always the honor people want to talk about most so, in that sense, it’s opened up many great conversations.

**AK:** Upcoming projects?

**VL:** My upcoming project will have a monster in it, at least it does right now. The book is about how posting photos of your kids on the internet is like a kind of invitation to those ugly things of the world, welcoming them into your home where they might do who knows what to the little people you love most. I’m hoping it’s disturbing as shit. My wife and I have posted untold numbers of photos of our kids online. I’m guessing most parents have to by now. The idea that I’ve, in a sense, offered my children up on a kind of altar is unbelievably disturbing. So of course I had to write about it.

This has been a hell of a lot of fun, Andrew. Thanks for inviting me in.
I like moles. Not the cosmetic imperfections, but the small subterranean mammals. In fact, I’ve written about them before. But there was a different protagonist in that story. This time it’s actually me. In this story, I like moles.

One time I was staying at a cabin near a lake that belonged to my friend and her husband. I was staying there because life had gotten busy in the city I love and there was work stress and money trouble and the alcohol had come back and of course there was a girl. So I was hiding out at my friend’s cabin. And there were moles there.

The moles lived in a lonely pile of earth across the yard from Betsy’s garden, which was the site where her husband Rick had been going to build a swing set. But then there was the miscarriage so the swing set never got built and the mound just sat there, ignored. And they ended up with a molehill instead.

After about a week of moping around, not writing anything, not doing much at all, I wandered out into the yard while everyone was at work. I found myself over near the mound, in a corner of the yard by the edge of the woods. It was shady there and looked sad. I climbed up and sat cross-legged on top.

I was sitting there only few minutes when I began to notice all these little holes everywhere I looked. They made me nervous at first, I thought of snakes and creepy things. I was very surprised when a little black face popped out right between my knees. It was a mole! I had never seen one so close up before…He looked like a worm, cylindrical and sort of slimy with traces of pink skin showing through his charcoal black coat. I liked him immediately. I felt sure that he would run off or scurry back down his hole, but he didn’t. He just looked up at me from under his blind, folded eyelids, apparently oblivious. So I picked him up! And he let me!

Now we were friends. I could tell.

Then another one popped out of a little hole to my left. I picked him up too.
Now I was holding two moles!
And I liked it.

We sat like that for a while until it started to rain. I let the moles crawl back into the earth. I remained there for some time and got wet. Then I went back inside and decided that I would learn about moles.

The Hairy-Tailed Mid-Atlantic Mole is slim in shape and dark in color. Its diet is largely made up of earthworms and insects, but it will occasionally dine on a small mouse if one of them is unfortunate enough to get near the entrance of a colony. The Hairy-Tailed Mole inhabits Virginia, West Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Western Maryland.

In the early days of Modern English, British moles were known as “mouldwarp”, “mould” meaning “soil” and “warp” meaning “throw”. Male moles are called “boars” and female moles are called “sows”. A group of moles is called a “labor”.

For centuries, moles have been misunderstood animals. I related to that. Mainly the cause of this misunderstanding has been things like: contamination of silage with soil particles, pasture and yield reduction, damage to young plants from the disturbance of soil, and damage to agricultural machinery by the exposure of stones. I had a different set of issues of course, but still I could relate.

So I started spending more time with the moles. Making daily visits to their sad little mound. I met more and more of them. Some were bigger than others, but basically they all looked alike. I couldn’t really tell them apart and when I tried to give them individual names, I ran into trouble and gave up. They would remain a labor of nameless moles.

I had zero idea what their total population amounted to, but I knew that I wanted them to thrive. I would set about developing their colony and improving their quality of life. I would cultivate their population.

I never mentioned the moles to Betsy or Rick and they never visited that part of the yard. Ever. At night they would come home and we would sit together on their porch and they would sip wine and, I think, try to cheer me up and distract me with jokes and stories and complaints about work and politics and family and things. They told me that my melancholy seemed to be improving, but they were in the dark about the molehill so they probably just assumed any improvements in my demeanor were a result of their positive influence on my spirit, or the fresh country air, or something as simple as a physical separation from my problems. Little did they know that I was purchasing earthworms from the bait shop each morning and saturating the molehill with food. I picked weeds and gathered stones from the perimeter in order that the mound and the tunnels underneath might grow. I cleared the upturned soil around each hole so that the dirt pile looked like a big brown belly covered with tiny
navels. I spent hours on a little throne I had fashioned from soil, basking in the loving presence of the labor.

And I began to heal.

And the colony began to prosper. I was discovering new holes each day, which meant new tunnels. They were building. I was proud. The worms were wriggling about everywhere as well, multiplying for the moles to eat. I felt a little bad about feeding them to the moles, but I chalked it up to a natural order. Besides, I liked the moles better. So I kept buying worms.

When I saw that Shelley was calling—Shelley was my girlfriend or ex-girlfriend or something like that—I didn't pick up my phone. I was sitting on the molehill late in the afternoon and my phone began to vibrate. I was surprised to have it in my pocket. I hadn't received a phone call in weeks. In some ways, I had begun to forget about the outside world completely. When I looked at the screen and saw who was calling, my heart got weak and fluttery but just then, as if on cue, a furry little head poked out of the dirt near my foot and smiled at me. I put the phone away. I was startled by my reaction. I hadn't expected to be smiling back.

Continuing with my initiative to develop the mole colony, I thought I might like to introduce a new species to the labor. I thought it would be nice to diversify the population. It had seemed to work pretty well with humans, right? I knew I would have to go to a lot of trouble catching them on my own, so I sought out a store that sold exotic pets. I borrowed Betsy's truck and drove there. I bought two dozen moles: twelve boars and twelve sows. The clerk was a kid with pimples and a lisp. He assured me, with what I took for undue relish, this particular species of mole mated aggressively and was very fertile. I would grow the population in no time. And then the tunnels would surely spread.

It was springtime and Betsy began to plant. Her garden was not near the labor. Like I said, she never went near there. Ever.

I would help her plant things on the weekends. Flowers and vegetables and carnivorous plants to keep away the mosquitoes and flies. It was good for me to help her and I felt like I was starting to earn my keep, even though I probably wasn't. I wasn't very good at gardening. I had lived in the city my whole life.

The tunnels were spreading. I began to notice new holes in the lawn on my way to and from the mound each day. The new species that I had introduced were larger and more skittish around me, but they seemed to be excellent diggers. The holes were popping up closer and closer to the cabin and the garden around it. I wanted to encourage the moles to build in the other direction, toward the woods, but I had no idea how to go about
accomplishing this feat. I thought and thought but nothing came. Still, I fed them worms. And under my care, the labor continued to grow.

Betsy was an experienced gardener, so when her young plants started to die and the grass began to recede from the area around her garden, she suspected moles right away. She asked me to help her get rid of them. For days, she searched on her hands and knees through the grass, finding new holes like hidden Easter eggs all over the lawn, but still she refused to go near the mound. If she had, she would have discovered a finely manicured little hill, swollen on the inside with moles. And one small dirt throne on top.

Rick was a carpenter by trade, but he was also a volunteer firefighter. He had access to high-pressured hoses. He and Betsy decided to use those high-pressured hoses to flood the moles’ tunnel system. I didn’t know what to say to them, so I didn’t say anything.

The night before Rick was to bring the fire truck by the cabin, I slipped away from my futon and went out into the yard. It was pitch black out in the country at night. I had never really gotten used to not having noise and lights around me after dark, and until that night I had rarely strayed more than a few feet from the cabin’s front porch after dusk. This time I went all the way to the molehill, walking on tip-toes to avoid any invisible moles at my feet that might’ve popped out to gaze at the stars or take in a bit of fresh air.

I sat on the mound and addressed the moles in a loud whisper. I was sure that most of them were too far underground to hear, and were probably sleeping anyway, but I did it anyway. I had to get this off my chest. Also, I had been drinking again, for the first time since I came to the cabin.

“Listen, Moles. I am afraid I may have steered you wrong. You have been the best thing that has happened to me in a long time, maybe too long, longer than I even remember. And I have tried my best for you – you know I have, don’t you? But I’ve failed you. I was over…zealous, my intensity was over…wrought. And now you all may die. You must move your labor into the woods. Tonight. Find a new home. And live there. Thrive.”

By now I was lying prostrate on the dirt pile, whispering into one of the larger holes. I could hear my voice as if it were someone else’s. I sounded like someone singing through a thick wet pillow. I felt ridiculous. I went back inside. That night I had a dream about underwater caverns. The fish inside had fur. And tails. They were moles, I think.

The next day, two small fire trucks rolled up with three or four volunteer firemen in t-shirts and ballcaps. I had already helped Betsy situate both of the cabin’s garden hoses in the holes closest to the house. The
water did little more than trickle out, doing very little damage to the vast system of tunnels.

I sat on the porch with a lemonade and tried to enjoy myself. I was failing at it.

There were four firehoses, all total. I watched from the porch as the men dug out the holes to make room for the heavy nozzles at the end of each hose. I closed my eyes as they turned on the pumps.

I could hear the water moving through the hoses. It sounded like what I imagined the innards of a waterpark might sound like. And then there were the screams.

Betsy was shrill like a bird when she screamed, Rick and the firemen sounded shocked. Some began laughing. But what yanked my heart into my chest was the blast of tiny squeals, almost a song like birds in a tree. Hundreds of moles. Screaming.

I opened my eyes. Water seeped out through the lawn everywhere I looked. But that's not what was causing all of the commotion.

The mound in the back corner of the yard had turned into a fantastic fountain with streams of high-pressured water spraying every which way. Each stream started and stopped in a sporadic fashion. All these tiny black clumps were being shot into the air. I noticed that as many of the clumps landed, they scurried off into the woods. Some didn't.

I could tell it was time for me to go back to the city.

After about twenty minutes of watching the yard leak and flush like a toilet, Betsy, Rick, the firemen, and I were all standing around what used to be the mound. The hoses had been turned off. The hill had been blown apart at the sides. You could see in some places where the animals’ passages had been. To my surprise, the top of the mound was in relatively decent shape. Muddy and misshapen, but still intact.

One of Rick’s firemen buddies was the first to speak. “Looks almost like a little throne,” he chuckled, pointing. “Looks like the moles had a king.”

We all just nodded in agreement.

Then I spoke up. “Had one,” I said.

And everyone just laughed.
The First Night
Amy left. She said she would stay at Peter’s for a few nights—however long it took for me to gather my things and move out. It was her apartment before I moved in, and going back to that was the simplest arrangement. After she left, I threw everything that was mine out of the closet and off of the bookshelves and used my feet to rake it all together into a big pile in the living room. Then I sat on the couch, and saw a pack of Amy’s cigarettes on the coffee table.

I had a nine month run as a smoker when I was nineteen, during which time I would smoke whenever I was stressed or anxious. (Often.) I learned to see stairs as avoidable and found the concept of speaking in groups of more than three people without smoking first to be preposterous. I quit mainly because it was too expensive, but I never considered myself a non-smoker so much as a smoker who couldn’t afford to smoke. I never forgot the instant relaxation that followed the hot taste of a cigarette, and I often missed it. I stepped outside and smoked a bitter cigarette, my first in a long time.

I pressed the ash into the wooden rail, threw the butt into the plastic red cup, and went for a walk. Much of downtown Salt Lake was under construction, and I had seen the structures grow from pits in the ground to their current status as opened up bodies with brightly lit elevators for arteries and crane arms for limbs. At night, they were at rest, the only movement the flags at the top swaying in the breeze.

I walked all over the city, and didn’t return to the apartment until after the light was turning purple. My body was tired but my chest was still tight, and I knew I wouldn’t be able to sleep. I brewed a pot of coffee and considered my options.

Night Three
All of the furniture in the apartment was either Amy’s straight-up, or “ours,” which meant she chose it, and I didn’t want to bother with it. So it only
took me the first night to pack, but I texted Amy and told her I needed more time anyway. I felt the urge to watch all of her DVDs before I left. At first I jumped around looking for episodes of *Seinfeld* I hadn’t seen, but after that I put in a movie that opened with Ryan Reynolds in a fat suit, remembered that Amy had a lot of movies like that, and abandoned the plan. Then I contemplated replacing the Seinfeld discs with movies I owned such as *Uncle Buck* and *Dragon Wars*, but thought that if Amy discovered the replacements in the near future she would think that I had made the switch only as part of a strategy to see her again, which was probably true. So I left the DVDs where they belonged and started searching online for a new place to live.

**Seven**

I didn’t realize how tiny the studio apartment I applied for was until I actually moved in. From the outside, the Silverado was a beautiful building, with tall, white columns, wooden doors, and large balconies. The balconies might have been the problem, as when I toured the apartment, I rushed through the inside, taking in only vague details (*Okay, it exists, it has walls, it has a closet…*) before blitzing outside to the third-story balcony. The balcony looked even larger when standing on it, though the floor had been carpeted with some kind of coarse green texture that reminded me of a miniature golf course. A stout, wooden railing with chipped white paint enclosed it. The vantage point provided a clear view of the Wells Fargo building, the tallest building in Salt Lake, and I could smell sweet bread from the bakery across the street. I filled out an application and paid the deposit that day.

The message of the inside of the apartment, however, seemed to be: “You will never have anyone else over, so why trouble yourself with superfluous space?” It would be hard to fit two people in the kitchen, and even with virtually no furniture I had filled up much of the floor space with boxes of books, clothing, and whatever other miscellany I’d hauled from the apartment. I fell asleep on a cot that I used to take camping.

**Eight**

As I looked at the instructions and the wooden pieces in front of me, my vision went blurry and I decided that furniture assembly was impossible without years of training. In the past, assembling a bookshelf and a bed would have been Amy’s domain, as she is superhumanly proficient when it comes to construction and assembly, most likely due to her Minnesota upbringing which I always pictured consisting of nonstop backbreaking outdoor labor except for the rare occasions when she asked Pa if they could quit an hour early in order to have the last of sunlight to worship
the Lord. When “we” built a coffee table from IKEA, she didn’t even seem to need the instructions, as though the task required no more effort than getting dressed in the morning. I thought about calling her and saying, *Will you please come over and assemble my bookshelf and bed? That isn’t a euphemism or a trick.* But then I decided, no, you have to learn to do this on your own.

After taking an hour to psych myself up, and down two drinks, I summoned the courage to tackle the bookshelf, which seemed less complicated than the bed. It took two hours, with a break for another drink in the middle, but I built it. A version of it. The end product included a remainder of several unused pieces and one upside-down shelf. I convinced myself that the shelf was fine upside-down; it gave the bookshelf character. I hid the unused parts. Nobody would suspect a thing, as long as they didn’t look closely.

The wooden bed remained impossible to assemble and I slept on the cot again.

Twelve
I was working when Amy texted me and told me I had forgotten some things.

Part of the stress of that summer involved employment. At the last minute, I’d backed out of a summer job as a camp counselor in Maine. Instead, I wanted to stay in Utah and spend more time with Amy. We had lived together for about six months when I made the decision, but by the time the summer rolled around, I couldn’t find work, and somehow the summer of unemployment had not brought us close.

Amy was working at the restaurant a lot and I was feeling lonely and inept. Sometimes she would come home from work late, grinning and bursting with energy, ready to change her clothes and go out, a post-midnight Cinderella. I was often exhausted from a day of filling out and returning job applications, and could only go through the motions.

After not finding anything that I wanted to do, I took the first job available. This involved mowing lawns and cleaning vacated apartment buildings for a property management company. They sent me to the jobs that didn’t require any skill to do passably well: sledge-hammering concrete, painting, cleaning, and other tasks that follow evacuation.

I was cleaning out an office building when I read Amy’s text. The tenant had sold tombstones, and there were still two models left out front with sample engravings featuring the last name ROBERTS. I swung by Amy’s after I cleared the place out to pick up the items that I’d left behind. They ended up being those things that had been relegated to the large storage closet—mostly nerdy items of mine not fit for an adult couple to
display in the open, such as comic books and a remote control R2-D2. I was glad she called; I’d nearly forgotten about that R2, also I wanted to see if Amy’s feelings had changed. After I started carrying boxes to the car, she started to cry. “This is why I wanted to be out of the house when this happened,” she said.

I moved close to her and asked if she was all right, if she wanted me to stay for a while and talk. She bit her fingernail and looked in the other direction. In my head, there was still a good chance that the situation would resolve, that our story would follow the plot of a sitcom—we would learn some things while apart, maybe date some people the audience would recognize as temporary because, for all their qualities, they were ill suited to either of us as soul mates.

Amy smiled at me, but it was her service industry smile. She said, “No, not right now. Please, go.”

**Thirteen**

**AMY CONS**

- Might want to go to church again someday if she has a kid
- Likes spending time with her family
- Often spends time with her family
- Says you should spend time with her family as well
- Likes Family Guy
- Actually answers if someone calls her needing a ride at 3 AM, often delegating driving responsibilities
- Wears flip-flops
- Favors acoustic music of an emotional nature
- Often drags you to live performances of this sort of music
- Makes you wait until well after the show is over to congratulate the musicians on a “good show,” only encouraging them
- Not very tall

**Fourteen**

The Silverado apartment building was not a social place. No one brought me any welcome gifts, or acknowledged that I’d moved in, though I did develop a custom of nodding to some of the other tenants on the stairs. The building seemed to be full of mostly divorced and broken-up-with losers like myself, and hardly any women. I adapted to my surroundings stunningly fast: within two weeks I’d gone from planning new recipes with Amy to eating Michelina’s microwaveable cheese manicotti and drinking inexpensive whiskey from a coffee mug, telling myself I was “too pressed for time” to cook. When my friend Joey called and asked if I wanted to go get a drink, I found myself saying, “Sure, just let me find a
shirt.” When I got to the bar, his first words were, “Well, I can see you’ve showered…”

Walking up the stairs afterward, I shuddered with the realization that this was my home.

Seventeen
I learned the first name of one of my neighbors: Justin. Around nine PM he knocked on the door, and asked to borrow my phone. He was tall and bald, with tattoos on his arms and neck. His eyes were so intense that I wasn’t totally sure he was asking. After hesitating, I said okay, invited him in, and acted like I was doing something in the kitchen while he had a long conversation about someone named Dallas. He concluded the phone call by saying, “You tell that motherfucker that if he doesn’t back off, I will slice him up with a hacksaw, and run his skull up a fucking flag pole!”

Justin joined me in the kitchen and thanked me for letting him use my phone, though his tone was still sharp, which made him sound sarcastic. Then he launched into a story about how earlier he had left his girlfriend’s apartment and he thought there were guys in the darkness watching him. He swore he heard one of them whisper his name. He assumed it was his girlfriend’s ex, Dallas, from the phone call. The story spiraled from there to how he did some time in prison—“some kind of fraud bullshit”—and ended with Justin seeming to zone out of his own story. His eyes glossed over and he was staring out my window as he said, “Never trust a motherfucking lawyer farther than you can throw him. And that’s not far, since his pockets will be full of goddamn gold.” I was thinking, So people in this apartment building do have girlfriends…

Nineteen
Many of the residents of the Silverado smoked, and I would watch them from my own balcony with envy. The old guy on the balcony next to mine had a terrible cough—deep, throaty hurls, as though he was forcing himself to vomit. I could hear him even when I was inside, and somehow even his coughs made me want a cigarette.

Twenty
SINGLENESs PROS
- Can eat food made in four minutes in the microwave
- Don’t have to hang out with Amy’s family
- Don’t have to hang out with other couples
- Allowed to display remote-control R2-D2 in the front room
- There are other attractive people in the world who can now be acknowledged
Twenty-One
I got drunk and called Amy. Though I knew it was a bad idea, the longer I stood alone on the balcony staring into the city, the easier it was to talk myself into it. Amy never gave me a concrete answer why we broke up—she said she “wasn’t sure” about her feelings anymore because “things” had changed—and I stayed up nights thinking about what things she meant.

It was almost midnight but that wasn’t late for her; she might not even be off work yet. With one more assist from alcohol, I made the call.

She answered the phone and said, “Michael, it’s late.”

“Hi, Amy, it’s Michael. How are you?”

“Are you all right?”

“I’m fine. I was just calling to see how you were.”

“I’m fine, Michael.”

“Good. That’s good. And also to ask why you broke up with me.”

“Oh, Michael, not right now, okay? I’m tired.”

Two weeks before she broke up with me, Amy had a bad dream that woke us both up. I touched her hand and asked her what was the matter, but she turned away from me and didn’t answer. That was unusual. She enjoyed recounting her dreams, often going into exhaustive, sometimes tedious detail and then inviting me to guess what they meant. My usual joke was that it was her subconscious telling her she wanted to make out with me. But that night, when I said, Honey? she just said, Please, go back to sleep.

Twenty-Five
Walking home from work, I saw Justin on his balcony, which was on the first floor right by the building entrance. Instead of heading in, I walked into the bakery across the street and had some coffee while I stared across the street waiting for him to go inside.

When he finally did, I went home. But it ended up Justin only went inside to check his mail, and I ran into him at the mailboxes. He said, “Hey bro, we’re having a party this weekend at my place.”

“I said, “Oh, cool.”

“There will be girls there with skirts up to here”—he indicated by pressing the side of his hand on his own thigh—“so you should really come down.”

Twenty-Nine
On the night of the party, I stuffed blankets in the crack of the door and tried to stay very quiet so no one would know I was home. But the apartment was small and I couldn’t think of anything to do that was silent.
After a while I decided to go downstairs. I told myself I was curious about the logistics of having a party in such a tiny space.

Someone I’d never seen opened the door and asked who the fuck I was. Justin came around the corner and invited me in by putting his arm around my shoulder. “This is Mike,” he said, and then he introduced me to everyone. “Mad Mark” was the one who opened the door, and Justin’s girlfriend’s name was Lara. She was tall and very thin. I forgot everyone else’s name. There was a guy with a goatee in the kitchen, a wasted guy in a gray hoodie on the couch, and three girls in their early twenties gathered around a small TV. Two of them were playing Mario Kart. Everyone was drinking Windex-colored drinks in plastic cups, but Justin said there was beer, too, and handed me one when I nodded.

I sat down and watched the video game. Nobody was really talking, except occasional commentary about the game (Eat my red shell, bitch, etc.). After about an hour of this, one of the girls, the one not playing—and drunk beyond the ability to finish sentences—spilled herself over the couch and landed in my lap. One of the video game girls said, “Careful there, slut,” and Justin said, “Damn, homie, the ladies love you!” I said, “Well, it’s been fun, but I have to work in the morning.” I tried to gently slide the girl off of me onto the couch. “Thanks for having me over, have a great time, stay safe, I’ll see you later!” I said, as I walked to the door.

Thirty
I saw Justin on the balcony and he asked me what happened the other night. I said nothing, I was just a little hung up on someone. He said, “Ahh. Want to go bowling?”

Justin tried to write my name on the game screen as LADYKILLER but there was only space enough for LADYKIL. He called himself J DAWG. I hadn’t bowled in so long that I didn’t even realize that people smoked and drank while bowling. It would have been a frustrating game without that, but I enjoyed the beer and the secondhand smoke. We played three slow games, which lasted long enough that our clothing turned the color of cigarette smoke. Justin didn’t say much, but he was as mediocre as I was, and he kept the beer coming.

Thirty-Seven
SMOKING PROS
- Tastes good
- Relaxing
- Looks cool
Forty-Two
I was good at reading Amy’s face and her body. I could tell when she walked in how her day had gone. I could recognize the fiery look that meant someone had signed, “Here’s a tip—have a nice day!” on his receipt in lieu of an actual tip. I could sense when there was sizzling energy beneath her apparently languid pose, and I knew when one raised eyebrow meant suspicion, when it meant delight, and when it meant both.

Amy liked to walk barefoot, even on the road, and she would carry her shoes home from the restaurant. As soon as she got home, she liked to hurry into the bathroom to shower. Depending on how patient she looked, I would sometimes try to catch her before she got in there—while her skin smelled like lemon soap, and her hair smelled like steak—and lick her ear lobes.

I had a sweatshirt and a scarf that still smelled like she did when she came home—sweaty and smoky. I threw them in the basket with the rest of my laundry. But after a second, I lifted them out, and went to the laundromat without them.

Fifty-Nine
After work, I rode TRAX back and forth from downtown Salt Lake City to Sandy until it stopped running. I was writing Amy a letter. It was raining outside and not many people were out, which put me in a pensive mood. I told Amy that I loved her and wrote that I thought we would be better together if we were both less stressed out, if I could get a good job, and we could move into a new apartment with hardwood floors and no cockroaches. I told her I was working on that and asked her to think about trying again.

Sixty-Five
Amy called me after receiving the letter. She thanked me for sending it, but said she wasn’t ready to think about trying again. “I’m glad you seem to be doing okay,” she said.

Seventy-One
I went on a date, my first since Amy and I broke up, with a woman named Julie. I had met her a little before I started to date Amy, but actively lost touch with her after that. I still had her number and I called her from my apartment balcony one night.

I was surprised when she agreed to go out with me, and I picked her up that weekend and took her to Brewvies. Once we started drinking beer and playing pool, she didn’t take long to shift from the polite formalities of catching up to lecturing and psychoanalyzing me. It was probably
a debt I owed her for flaking out on her before. She let me know she remembered that and said, among other things, that “ambiguous people don’t always get what they want.” She added that I needed to “find a better way of expressing carnal desires.” Finally, she added that I looked “more filled out” than the last time she saw me.

The lecturing and insight came and went pretty fast, and left me wondering if her sole purpose in going out with me was to unload that. She was much better at pool than I was, and the only games I won were the ones where she hit the eight ball into the wrong pocket. Brewvies played ‘80s music, and Julie talked about the many times she had seen The Cure live.

I started to zone out of those reminiscences after a while, tuning back in to hear the sentence, “I kept waiting for a second encore, but Robert never came,” only to respond, “Wow.” After a few seconds of silence, Julie said, “Want to see something?” and pulled out her phone and showed me a picture of a squirrel pulling apart its fur and revealing a Superman uniform underneath.

“Oh, you like Superman?” I said.

“Of course. He’s the ultimate man,” she said.

After we were done eating I paid the check. Julie hesitated before the doorway and it took a second before it clicked that she might be waiting for me to open the door. Amy was a door opener, and I had almost forgotten that opening doors could be a part of dating. I flashed back to a memory of Austin in high school, who removed the inside car handle from his 1977 Chevy Malibu so that when he took girls on dates they would have no choice but to wait for him to open the door. I pictured the sunlight reflecting on the surface of the discarded door handle, shining like a silver tongue in some empty field below the mountains. Then I opened the door for Julie.

Eighty-Five
I still had not purchased my own cigarettes, but when Justin offered me one from his balcony my eyes lit up. I climbed up and took it. While he told a story about getting fucked over by the phone company, his eyes focused on the pigeons below just as cats watch birds on tree branches.

He snapped out of it after a while, and suddenly said, “You seem down, bro.” I admitted that I kind of was. He invited me to go to the strip club during the weekend with him and his friends, but I said thanks, but no thanks.

“Same girl?”

“Yep,” I said.
Ninety-Three
I saw a blue shape a block ahead of me, walking down 200 South. Even from back there I could tell it was Amy and that she was smiling; she had a lightheartedness to her step, and a bit of a strut. She turned right on 200 East, which was where I was stopping. I watched her glide away from there.

Ninety-Eight
My fantasies about ways to get back together with Amy started to move from future tense to past tense. Instead of thinking, “Maybe if I express what she means to me, all of it, she’ll take me back, like in a movie,” I started to think, “If only I had listened a little more closely when she talked about her sisters at the zoo that one day, we wouldn’t have broken up.”

When Amy said she wanted to break up with me, she said she often didn’t know how I was feeling—she felt we were just going to be on the same plateau forever if we didn’t mix it up. They were cutting words, as it was one of the gifts Amy gave me that she rarely made me speak. When I was exhausted, or just didn’t want to talk, she would rub my back or let me rub hers in the quiet. I loved this, and she knew that, but it was hard on her. She loved to talk, but she loved to listen, too. I remembered one quiet night, in which she was rubbing my back with one hand while she placed the other hand on her temple, as if stressed. I asked, “What’s wrong?” and she said—after a pause—“Nothing, I’m just tired.”

One Hundred Three
The forecast called for the weather to be icy next week, and my job for the day was to climb up onto several rooftops and disconnect the swamp coolers so the water wouldn’t freeze. I was supposed to unplug the swamp cooler, drain it, and wipe out the metallic gunk inside. For the ability to climb on rooftops, I actually enjoyed that job as much as any I was given that didn’t involve a sledgehammer. On the last roof of the day, the water in the cooler felt particularly icy, and I jerked my hand out too fast and cut it on the green metal sides of the cooler. I was bleeding a little, and I dabbed at the cut with the filthy rag I was using to wipe out the coolers. Waiting for the bleeding to slow caused me to pause and take in the rooftop view, which was the drip of sunset on the Wasatch Mountains. Not bad. I hadn’t paid attention to it in a long time.

When I got home that evening, I spent most of the night applying for something else—any new position I could think of.

One Hundred Twelve
For our fifth date, Julie and I made dinner and watched a movie at her apartment. The movie was one of her favorites and involved a bunch of puppets
defying the audience’s expectations of what puppets do by swearing and having sex. Watching it with her was uncomfortable because she laughed almost the entire time and I could only force laughter occasionally. At the beginning of the movie I assumed this would be a good night to try expressing my carnal desires in a straightforward way, but by the time it was over I no longer felt like doing that. Instead I found myself saying, “Listen, Julie, you’re wonderful, really—but I’m just not in a good place right now…”

It didn’t occur to me until I was driving home, but Amy would have loved that movie, and that would not have turned me off at all. The only way I could explain my actions to myself was by noting that Julie just wasn’t Amy.

One Hundred Nineteen
I walked down to Justin’s apartment and asked if he wanted to get drunk at Twilite, the bar around the corner. He said, “Hell yeah dude, let’s hit it.”

By that point I was myself already so drunk I could barely stand up straight, much less focus on what Justin was saying. At the bar, he talked about the difficulty he was having of finding a job, and I just nodded through everything he said, barely registering any of it. By the time we left, I had to focus to remember how to walk; but Justin guided the way and we made it back.

One Hundred Twenty-Five
The winter smog inversion spilled over the mountains and roads and blocked my balcony view of the Wells Fargo building. Only the bright blue lights at the top were able to shine through. Joey, a jogger, said that running in that weather was like smoking a pack of cigarettes.

I was thinking about this as I walked to the 7-Eleven parking lot and stared through the windows for a long time, like a kid outside a pet store. It looked warm inside. I knew I shouldn’t go in, but I did, and I bought my first pack of cigarettes in a long time.

I lit the first one and walked. Last week it snowed all day long, and that snow was still on the ground—but it was hard now, and when I stepped on it I didn’t sink. The hard snow gave me the sense of being conveyed somewhere. I felt good. I walked all over the city. Once it was dark I found myself outside of Amy’s apartment, where I lit another cigarette. The street lights were dim and the brightest thing on the street might have been the flaming ash. It took me a few minutes before I remembered that it was creepy to stand outside your ex-girlfriend’s apartment smoking a cigarette, and then I put it out. I tried to move naturally, as if I belonged there, as I turned around and walked down the hill toward my apartment.
One Hundred Thirty
I went back to Justin’s the next weekend to apologize for being so drunk. I offered him one of my cigarettes and told him to just keep applying for work, something would come up. I said, “If nothing else, you can always break concrete and clean apartments with me.” He said he’d think about it, but he really needed to figure out his own thing. I said, “Fair enough.”

One Hundred Forty-One
Amy worked long double shifts on Thursdays and those days wore her out. She had a gift for transforming into whatever her table wanted her to be. If that meant girl straight from the little house on the prairie, something a little more flirtatious, or someone respectful of her elders, she could do all of that—but the performances exhausted her by the end of long shifts. By the time she got home on Thursdays it was hard for her to stand. These were days I would not try to grab her and lick her ears, but would instead help her draw a hot bath.

Sometimes Amy panicked that she would never be able to wash out the smoky steakhouse smell, that it would seep into her hair permanently. On those nights, I’d come in and bring her some wine. Sometimes I would wash her back as she lifted up her hair.

I was doing better; I had a job, my life was quiet, I was on my feet. But on Thursdays, it was hard not to think about the way Amy’s hair dripped like willow branches over her face while I smoothed soap along her back.

I tried the bath routine myself to see if it would relax me as it had relaxed her. But the water seemed to get cold fast and then I was drinking wine in tepid water in the dark.

One Hundred Sixty-Five
I was offered a job; or rather, a position as a graduate student with decent funding. But it was at Texas Tech University, in Lubbock, Texas. It was a surprise offer; I had initially been wait-listed by that school, and taken that as a rejection. Since it was late in the year, I had less than two weeks to decide. I didn’t have any connection to the state, or much interest in moving there, and could hardly even remember applying to the school in the first place.

I walked downstairs and shared a cigarette with Justin on his balcony. I asked him what he thought I should do. He said, “Look, man, I’d just about kill for a job offer at this point. If you have a job, you should take it. Besides, there’s good pussy in Texas.”

One Hundred Seventy-Eight
I swirled some mouthwash and stopped by Amy’s to ask if she wanted me
to go to Texas, or to stay, or if she wanted to go with me.

I walked to her apartment and called her when I was outside the
door, like I used to do before I moved in there. I leaned against the same
tree on the street and thought about what I was going to say. I was ner-
vous, but I moved with the boldness of someone who was running out
of chances.

Amy answered, and, after a pause, invited me in and offered me
some tea. I was relieved that she was alone. As she grabbed the cup from
the cupboard, I wanted to touch her shoulder, but I didn’t.

“How’s work?” I said.

“You know how it is. But it’s okay,” she said.

The conversation continued like that, just catching up, while I
thought of all the things I wanted to say. I had drafted them at home be-
fore, and this would be my last chance to share them with Amy. She was
telling me about the latest news at the restaurant when everything came
out at once. I said, “I miss you. I’m moving to Texas. Come with me. Or
tell me to stay. Amy, sometimes I feel like my whole chemical makeup
was formed to fit together with you. I don’t want to move without you.”
She touched my hand and looked into my eyes. Hers were watering. But
then she put her other hand to her temple, just above her right eye. Oh,
that gesture, I thought.

By the time I stepped outside the night was almost over. The sky
above the mountains was turning the color of apricots. I smoked one last
cigarette on the way home and left the rest of the pack in Justin’s mailbox
before I walked up the stairs. I didn’t really want to, but I left those in
Utah, too.
The horizon is $x$.
Call it (0,0).
Stationary.

The horizon never moves
it only appears to move
because your feet are restless
and want to go to the bar
or collect a paycheck
or scream from the edge
of a rollercoaster
(in which case, technically,
the horizon receded for a moment
while you were skyscraper tall).

You have been the same distance
from the horizon since you were 16
and stopped growing. Unless
you have been below sea level since then.
But the horizon is still (0,0).
It is going nowhere.

It is equidistant to tomorrow.
Tomorrow is going nowhere.
$x$ marks the spot where you will never be.
You are 4 cups of tea from tomorrow.
You are one Venus, one Mercury, and
one North Star from tomorrow.

(0,0) is the most uninteresting spot
on this plane.
Swallow hard and measure how the distance doesn't change. The bitch of receding/magnifying, she never shuts up. You are always capable of quantifying. You just can't be bothered.
Judy shifted in the booth across from me, relaxing into her usual slumped-forward state—arms crossed, chin up, cigarette in mouth. “I know you like to write about places,” she said. “But why here? What’s so special about this Pizza Rhea?”

My response—“Why not?”—contained several, hidden reasons: Because I work for the same establishment fifty-seven miles north. Because I’m also a waitress who runs about in a tacky red apron and matching baseball cap.

Because the entire “Pizza Rhea” franchise has to do with our reunion.

“Well, it’s messy in here today,” Mom said, pointing toward a minuscule pile of crumbs on the floor. “I’m gonna say something to Christie.” Then she took a long drag from her cigarette.

My Aunt Christie is the evening manager at the Rushville, Indiana Pizza Rhea. Their slogan—Bringing Families Together, One Slice at a Time—has a different meaning for my family.

As if on cue, Aunt Christie came running into the dining room carrying another tray full of breadsticks and beer, barely missing the wooden doorframe on her way. She managed to stumble safely into the booth beside my mother. Being accident-prone is a family trait. My mother broke her arm once falling from a stool. I broke my foot scampering from cops in platform pumps. My aunt, she just runs into things—doorframes, walls, gumball machines, invisible children. And she’s broken all of her toes. Twice.

“Whoa,” my aunt said, sitting down, “I just about ran into the damn wall.”

“I noticed,” I replied.

Aunt Christie tucked her long blonde hair behind her ears and smiled a big cheesy smile. “Ok,” she said, “I’m ready to be interviewed.”

“I’m not here to write about you,” I said.

Aunt Christie frowned. I think. She, my mother, and I all have the same frown. No matter how grave a situation might be, our frowns ac-
tually look like smiles—like we’re trying our best not to crack up. “Ok, Christie,” I said, humoring her. “Compare your life to a pizza.”

Before my aunt had a chance to elaborate on her instantaneous response—“Messy!”—my mother interrupted: “Why are you asking her questions?” Mom lit a new cigarette. The filter from her last was still smoldering in the ashtray.

“I’m just here to write,” I said, my hands defensively splayed at my shoulders. My Aunt Christie looked as if she might sucker punch my mom for disrupting. “Anyhow, where were we?” I asked. “Oh right, messy. Why messy?”

I caught the first part of my Aunt Christie’s response. It was something like, “Well, when you paste a pizza, you automatically get crap everywhere. It’s like ‘pasting life’. You can try to make it as neat as possible but, no matter what, you’re gonna get crap everywhere and….”

I stopped listening. Though I kept my pen moving, I nonchalantly looked around the dining room, making mental notes: So this is the Pizza Rhea where my biological mother works. So this is the town in which I was born twenty-three years ago.

So this is what it feels like to have my mother stare darts at me while I try my damnedest not to return her gaze.

The dining room was halved into two sections—smoking and second-hand smoking. A giant double-door frame separated the rooms. In the non-smoking area a middle-aged couple occupied a table, whispering and leaning toward each other as if engulfed in a game of “Win, Lose, or Draw” and one of them knew an answer. They’re talking about us, I thought. Somehow, they know our story. Mom and Aunt Christie and I are stick figures on poster board to them, with yellow marker streaks for hair. Because of the glances this couple kept shooting us, I half-expected one of them to shout, “Oh, I know! They’re a classic depiction of an estranged Midwestern family. Just look at the scowl on the mother’s face and the confused expression on the daughter’s. And that other one, the chatty one, well, she’s handicapped. There’s one in every family in Indiana!” I giggled to myself because, sure enough, Aunt Christie, God bless her, was still talking about her life in comparison to making a pizza.

I looked around and made mental notes of the dining room décor. Everything was glazed wood. Glazed wood paneling, glazed wood tables, glazed wood booths with red cushions, glazed wood chairs. It was like a hell for naughty maids doomed to dust their afterlives away.

The windows were stained-glass squares in the wall making yellow, green, and red streaks shimmer on the tile floor and tabletops. So this dining room is like a hell with stained-glass windows, I thought. Then it must be Purgatory or Limbo—a place of indecision, where people get
stuck for awhile until they figure something out. And it’s either up or
down from there.

Smoke from my mom’s cigarette twinkled and waved in the light as
if bidding adieu before evaporating forever.

“The baking process is kind of like going through middle age,” Aunt
Christie said, nudging my mother.

“I wish I was baked right now,” my mom said. I giggled. “Don’t write
that down, Abby.”

“Are you going to write about the Pizza Rhea you work for?” Aunt
Christie leaned across the table in an attempt to read what I had written.
I backed up, pulling my folder to my chest. “I only want a sip of your beer,”
she whispered. I pushed my mug toward her.

“Well, the Pizza Rhea I work for is bigger, but not quite as sanctuary-
like,” I said, making a small orbit with my index finger in the air. “It’s not
quite as dim lit and archaic. This place is medieval. I love the décor of
glazed wood. You know it must suck to dust in here. Like hell for naughty
maids doomed to dust their afterlives away.”

Mom and Aunt Christie had stopped listening to me. Both of their
eyes were on the television behind my head. I’d forgotten to previously
note the only *not* wood-glazed item in the dining room: the TV.

“Reunions are on Montel,” my mom said, poking her cigarette into
the air. “I called them once looking for you.” She smiled at me. Or wait,
maybe she frowned. I couldn’t tell.

“Well, here I am now! And who woulda guessed I’d be a waitress just
like you!” I knew eventually the topic of our reunion would come up.
Always does.

Staring at the TV, I noticed that my mother’s eyes were glazed—not
pie-eyed like a woman in love, but earnestly transfixed on remembering
something. “In my head you were a nurse. In Metamora, Indiana. That’s
where I thought Welfare took you. Metamora.”

“How would you compare your life to a pizza?” Aunt Christie asked me.

Good question.

I was born kind of like a pizza—fresh and hot from my mother’s
oven. Only I wasn’t served right away. I was rushed to an isolated nursery
where I was put in an incubator, kept warm like a little carryout. Eventu-
ally Welfare services picked me up. Then they delivered me to a family a
few cities safely away. “Here’s your baby, ma’am. That’ll be two thousand
doctors and fifty cents.”

“Only I get to ask the questions,” I said to my aunt, smiling. “The next
one’s for Mom.” My mother furled her brow; her eyes narrowed, and her
lips parted slightly. I asked, “What do you think about me working at
Pizza Rhea too?”
Mom exhaled emphatically. “Oh, I think it’s weird,” she said, rolling her neck.

Jeez, did she think I was going to badger her about my biological father again? I knew better.

“But it was cool. Like we turned out the same after so long. Except you’re doing this kind of stuff.”

“What kind of stuff?” I asked, defensively.

“Writing. I wish I could do that.”

“Well, Mom,” I said, “You can. It’s never too late to be a writer.”

Mom shrugged and turned to my aunt. “Okay, Christie,” she said. “Your turn.”

I followed suit, asking Aunt Christie if there was anything she cared to elaborate on: About working for the Pizza Rhea franchise; about making metaphorical pizzas.

“Mushrooms are like kids. They’re optional!” Aunt Christie laughed at her analogy. My mom shot Aunt Christie an angry glare. “Do you like mushrooms?” Christie continued, oblivious.

“No,” I said. “I don’t like kids much.”

Aunt Christie, my mother, and I all struggle with verbal impulse control. My mom slips expletives into her speech, unaware of her surroundings. On rare occasions, a person with young children nearby asks Mom to watch her language. To which she promptly responds, “Watch your bastards.”

Aunt Christie and I are bad about making inappropriate jokes—“Hey, who scraped the kitchen floor and dumped the trash bin onto this large pizza?” and “Here’s your medium crap pizza with a side of crap sauce, sir.” These jokes, harmless as my Aunt Christie and I figure them to be, got us both reprimanded at our own, separate Pizza Rhea’s. Twice.

The couple in the non-smoking area had gotten up; they were approaching our table.

“Judy?” A woman with thick glasses in faded jeans and a leather jacket stood a foot or so away, eyeing my mother. She’s eyeing Mom, I thought. I knew it, she knows more about my relinquishment than I do. Maybe she knew my father. Maybe she gave birth to my father’s ninth or tenth kid. Maybe she’s a Pizza Rhea regular, or Mom’s stockbroker, or my half-sister.

My mother smiled at the woman. Or frowned. One of the two.

“Hey, Sidney,” Mom said, “Doin’ good?”

The woman, Sidney, nodded. “I am.” She glared down at me. I shifted in my seat and searched my pockets for a cigarette. I took a long sip of beer, glancing nonchalantly over my mug, pretending to make mental notes of everything but Sidney. It’s not like I’d never experienced strange glares around my mother before, I simply wasn’t used to them. Neverthe-
less, my eyes kept bouncing back to Sidney.

Mom noticed my unease. “Well, it was nice seein’ ya’,” she said. Sidney nodded and walked off, peering curiously over her shoulder at me as she went.

The sunlight through the stained-glass windows darkened a bit. I wondered who Sidney was—to my mom, to my aunt, to me. Mom didn’t say.

The dining room was empty except for the three of us. “C’mon, guys, give me more to write about,” I pressed.

“Well,” Aunt Christie began, “What else. Oh, we take great pride in our jukebox! It’s got tons of Hank Williams on it and a rare Lynyrd Skynyrd album.”

I hoped I looked impressed when I smiled and nodded at my aunt, and that my smile didn’t accidentally look like a frown. I shuddered at the thought of both my mom and Aunt Christie strumming air guitars to “Free Bird”, picking at imaginary chords with their teeth like Allen Collins once did.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t stand Lynyrd Skynyrd!” I blurted, smacking my palm against my head. “And, you know what? I’ve been writing about you guys the whole time. Little things. Your frowny smiles, for example.”

Mom and Aunt Christie exchanged glances.

“Are you drunk?” Mom asked.

I shook my head no.

Aunt Christie asked. “Do you need more beer?”

I shrugged. I really shouldn’t drink more, I thought, but what else can I do?

“Drink more,” Aunt Christie persisted. “That way, once you get sloshed, you can fall in the kitchen and hit your head on the stove again. That’s something to write about.”

I giggled. “My damn head hurt for a week.”

“My mouth hurt from laughing for a week.”

Mom put out her cigarette. “That’s one thing you get from your father.”

Aunt Christie and I froze.

“Falling down drunk?” I asked, stammering, surprised by Mom’s confession. “Because I only did that once around you. Or are you saying that my biological father also hated Lynyrd Skynyrd?”

Mom chuckled, “Well, both actually. He was always gettin’ himself stuck and screwed up in the strangest of places.” She took a big sip from her mug and smacked her lips. “Somehow though,” she continued, “he would pull himself out with a big ol’ grin on his face.”

Now, the only photograph I’d ever seen of my biological father was an out-of-focus computer printout. He was playing the bass guitar. His
thick brown hair was frazzled like a child’s depiction of a man with one finger in a light socket. The photograph was a profile shot, so I could barely see any distinct features in his face.

I misplaced the photo anyhow. So, now, I’ve no memory of an expression, only a recollection of a flaccid cigarette dangling from his shaded lips.

“What’s wrong?” Mom asked. “You’re frowning.”

“I don’t remember that printout of him.” I figured it better not say “my father” or “Dad.” Or “Michael.” Or “Mr. Sansoni.” Or “That guy with whom you had two children.”

“Good for you,” Mom said. She was frowning. Wait, no; that’s a smile. That’s satisfaction in her eyes. Mom was pleased I’d lost the picture. “Are you mad that I don’t have more pictures?” she asked.

I shook my head no and peered into my folder. I furled my brow in feigned deliberation over the scratches and loops I’d inattentively made with my pen. I thought, it’s crazy that she even initiated a discussion about my biological father. Even if he were alive, he wouldn’t be the one sitting across from me, allowing me to write about him; about us.

“No,” I said, decisively, “I’m not mad at all.”

Mom lit another cigarette. Sunlight meagerly broke through the stained glass windows; then it faded. Shadows caught the hue of the smoke—silvery blonde and pale, like Mom’s hair and face and fingernails.

“Now you can remember him however you’d like,” she said.

I shut my folder and laughed. The first image of my biological father that came into my head was one of a stick figure with coiled brown marker streaks for hair, smoking a stick cigarette and smiling.
If your tattoo leapt off your shoulder and into my arms you probably wouldn’t notice.

I would be kind.

I would bring it on a walk around the neighborhood, laughing at all of its stories of observing you be human but pretend not.

Later we would go to my house. I would make your tattoo a grilled cheese sandwich, then offer my blue blanket and softest pillow.

After we read our favorite books aloud, we’ll look at each other and reminisce about the day you stop being a vegetarian.

Your tattoo would look at me and place its hoof on my hand, let me lean against its picnic shoulder with all the weight a sympathetic pig can bare.

He will not turn away when told the worst of it—
Few things in life have made me above average:
Five-eight (average), thirty pounds overweight
(average), divorced (is that average? I suppose
so). Muddy brown hair, collapsed muscle tone,
an addiction to cell phones and black coffee.
I heard the average commute in LA was thirty
minutes. For once I’m above average. Way,
way above average. So I sit on this un-average
day (it, too, is striving to reach beyond itself, to find
the far end of the spectrum, unlike most of my life),
and the traffic stopped on this freeway spreads
itself toward the horizon like a languorous snake,
fat and bored and dangerous. I’m listening to oldies
and squatting in front of my Ford Fiesta is a blindingly
white Cadillac Escalade with Liberace gold trim
and a license plate that says TWEETY and maybe
Mariah Carey or Jennifer Lopez is in the passenger
seat flipping through a fashion magazine and sipping
Diet Coke listening to her own music on speakers
better than the ones in my apartment in Torrance,
but there’s no Beyonce in there, it’s an orthodontist’s
wife and she has lacquered nails and gray roots she
covers with a three hundred-dollar dye job. Behind
me is a Camry, as average as it gets, but the woman
I’ve been watching is pretty, with soft brown hair
which she pushes out of her eyes often while she
glances in her own rear view mirror. Then she’s gone
and I look at my side mirror and her door is open
and she’s bent over, puking onto the hot concrete
and the traffic still isn’t moving so I shift into park
and I’m jogging back to her car, I’m not sure why,
and I’m asking if she’s okay before I even know I’m doing it. She’s wiping at her mouth with cheap napkins from a barbeque place but the gunk she’s spewed isn’t barbeque, but milky, thin, like she hasn’t eaten much and she smiles and mumbles, “Morning sickness,” but I tell her it isn’t morning, it’s after five, it’s cocktail time—I’m not sure why I add that, but five and cocktails always go together in my mind, and she tells me it’s misnamed, she’s sick all day long and then she tells me she’s sick of being sick and her husband doesn’t know and he’s not going to want the baby if she does tell him, but god she wants this baby and she’s old, she’s old, she tells me, she’s thirty-three and she’s not going to not have this kid, fuck him, and then she’s crying and I’m hugging this stranger, I’m kneeling outside her open door and I’m careful not to get my knee in her vomit and she’s bent over and her arms are around my shoulders and I can feel her shudder and her shampoo must have vanilla in it, something smells like fresh cookies, and I ask her if she’s okay and she tells me she just needs somebody for a couple of minutes so we walk hand-in-hand back to my Ford and she sits in the passenger seat, she pushes the days-old take-out cups and the crumpled, empty cigarette packs to the footwell and she asks me what’s playing on the radio and I tell her it’s a disc, Chuck Berry’s greatest hits, and she says who? I nearly fall out of the car, my mouth does the proverbial drop and I can’t believe I’ve found the only woman in California, maybe in North America, who doesn’t know about Chuck Berry, so I say he’s the father
of rock n’ roll, screw Elvis, and she listens and she’s smiling
and we sit there for too long, but the traffic’s still stuck
and I’m not worried my car smells like the average dirty
white man’s car, smoke and fast-food bags, I’m telling her
everybody thinks Chuck just wrote one song, maybe two,
with a bunch of different lyrics, but it’s so much more than
that, he’s freaking brilliant the things he does, and she’s nodding
and she’s another man’s wife and I don’t even know her name
and she’s three months pregnant, I know that, and she wants
a girl I know that, and her eyes are bluer than the ever-mother-
rolling Pacific not so far from us and there are crow’s feet
at their edges and I want to reach out and touch them, brush
her hair back for her, just like I watched her do before,
but we sit there and maybe we fall in love and it’s all right
because right that afternoon nothing is average, not one thing,
and we have, as the man says, no particular place to go.
On my vainest days I imagine myself
as the dashing Captain strolling down magnolia
strewn avenues, pushing the ornate perambulator,
nodding and waving my gray kid gloves with panache
to the sly grins and charmed, girlish giggling
of a hundred well-to-do matrons, the city mothers,
women who can make my daughter’s life
a skip from one open door to the next,
nothing but opportunity and privilege.

He’s one us—old fathers—Rhett, no pale boy-husband
when Bonnie Blue arrived. We share the squinted vision
and graying temples of mature fatherhood, though his hair shines
black, slicked with maccasar oil, and his teeth flash, decades
before porcelain caps or store-brand whitening rinses.
My teeth are dull and my gums rise like a geriatric
horse’s. There is no rogue in me, no scally-wag, no Ladies-
of-the-Night man. I wear tighty whities and shop for skim
milk at Kroger. Rhett Butler never ran errands. He ran guns.

And yet, I’m smitten, as smitten with fatherhood as Rhett ever
was, as smitten with the girl and as smitten with my part,
parading my sin, my wallowing in one of the Seven
Deadlies, that one called Pride, as I expect every stranger to coo
and compliment, to genuflect, yes, at the child of my middle years
and my handsomeness in the role.
And this is when I remember Rhett’s fate and the fate of Bonnie Blue, Spoiled Princess of the Reconstructed South, the girl who breaks her neck and whose doomed pony will graze by her warm little corpse, unwitting to the bullet in the Captain’s revolver, the bullet which has known its destination since its creation in the Georgia munitions factory before Appomattox, the bullet Rhett loads with still-shaking fingers, the bullet which will burrow into the pony’s brain like the sharp grief which lodges in his, a grief he’ll never get over, not for a million tomorrows and not for a million Scarlet kisses, and I remember, I don’t want to be Rhett, no, my world is better than his, I’m not him, not for all the grace in the world, and I will never let my daughter jump, no matter how high she thinks her pony can go.
In Afghanistan, there are storage connexes everywhere—steel freight containers, scattered and stacked around deployed military bases, outfitted with toilets and showers or bunk beds and two dressers. And in Gardez Valley, about sixty miles south of the capital city of Kabul, one holds Beanie Babies. They're a striking contrast to the stark landscape: metallic unicorns and tie-dyed rabbits against the dusty brown ground, brown rolling hills, brown buildings, brown military vehicles; florescent pink flamingos and neon-speckled fish against harsh gravel walkways; fuzzy, floppy-eared basset hounds to the straggly mutts that sometimes wander past the connex. Inside, the Beanies are stored with other items designated for humanitarian assistance: bags of rice, winter coats, shoes, notebooks and pencils. That connex is where we housed our hopes, our wishes that everything were simple enough to be solved with a charitable gesture.

Many of the Beanie Babies arrived in boxes addressed to me, 1st Lieutenant Johnson, Forward Operating Base Gardez. I spent nine months there as the public affairs officer on a team working to build infrastructure and governance capacity in the region. It was my first deployment, and though I didn't really know what to expect, many of the things I envisioned came to be true. There were long, thankless hours hunched behind a desk, punctuated by the occasional adrenaline burst of a trip “outside the wire.” There were meals of dry meat, mashed potatoes, soggy vegetables, scalloped potatoes, overripe fruit, fried potatoes, baked potatoes, grilled potatoes. There were meager bathroom facilities—128 steps from my sleeping quarters to the nearest single toilet, sink and shower that I shared with eight other women.

When I deployed, on some level I must have expected the sounds of war, the echoes of distant and not-so-distant gunfire, and the whoosh of helicopter rotor blades stirring up dust and settling it back in a thick film over our buildings, our boots, our exposed skin, between our teeth. I had heard about the feel of war, the hug of body armor and the creep of paranoia that even a 60-pound bulletproof vest can't keep away.
To a degree, I expected all of these things. I did not expect Beanie Babies. The first few packages were addressed to my predecessor. He had informed the contact that I was taking over the program, but it took the mail system a while to catch up (approximately two to four weeks: Afghanistan time). The return address on the boxes was for Indiana, the headquarters of “Beanies for Baghdad,” an organization that collects the stuffed animals to send to deployed military members for distribution to local children to help foster cross-cultural relationships. A noble idea, based on the premise that there is a surplus of Beanies in many U.S. households from a fleeting time when they were thought to be a valuable collector’s item. It seemed fitting that like so many other things that have outgrown their American usefulness—old magazines, computers, white Toyota sedans—the Beanie Babies would end up in Afghanistan.

I was no stranger to the toys. On a bookshelf in my childhood bedroom, I still have one of the rare nine original Beanies, Flash the Dolphin. I bought him at a swim meet in my pre-teen years, handed over a soggy wad of allowance money in exchange for Flash and a muffin. I picked him because he was cute and my team mascot was a dolphin; it made perfect sense. It makes less sense why I still have him. Without the original tag he’s not worth much. Maybe, as with the young adult novels scattered around him on my shelves, I’m just too lazy to get rid of him. Or perhaps I kept him because he’s a reminder of simpler times, times when my biggest worry was winning a heat of the 50-yard breaststroke. Not winning hearts and minds.

In Afghanistan, we sometimes took the Beanies with us on missions to local villages. While we met with government officials or tribal leaders, oversaw training programs or construction work, throngs of skinny tanned children played hide-and-seek between our vehicles. The boys were pushy, jockeying for the best view and practicing their English: “Madam, may I have a pen?” (We quickly learned to remove ours from the pen clips on our uniform sleeves, or they would disappear. Pocketfuls of crayons—and Beanies—were more economical.) The little girls were a product of their culture, timid and reserved. I watched them peek around the corners of the mud-brick qalats where they lived, their expressive eyes not yet hidden under burqas.

I never understood why the children were so fascinated by the American military. I like to think they saw us as their rescuers, riding in on our heavily-armored steeds to pluck them from the grasps of insurgent control. But it’s probably more accurate to call us aliens. Our big trucks were fascinating, so were our weapons and body armor, the brazenness with which we strode down their streets and burst into their homes. I was fascinating: a woman, wearing the same uniform as the men, doing the same
work. And our stuff was endlessly, insatiably fascinating. The children were excited not so much that they were getting cute, fuzzy bean-stuffed toys, but something—anything!—from the Americans. Except once.

Once, at the rear of a dingy building in the background of a meeting, I watched two girls lovingly prance their new Beanie Babies across the aisle between them. It was gentleness so rare in Afghanistan that I was unprepared to bear witness. My breath caught in my throat, and I felt my face crack and stretch into an unpracticed smile. Then I reached quietly into my bag and removed my camera. I needed this: evidence that gentleness still existed.

Typically, it was chaos. The men were shouting inside and the boys were shouting outside. Whether they were arguing about the number of locally hired security personnel needed to guard the newest paved stretch of the Khowst-Gardez road, or grabbing for crayons or an empty water bottle or a single flip-flop sandal, it was a frenzy of screeching voices, knobby elbows and dirty fingernails.

Back on base, we experienced our own frenzy at mail time. In a place so cut-off from the rest of the world, our twice-weekly, weather-dependent airdrops were a somewhat predictable source of comfort, a scheduled reminder that life existed outside Afghanistan. By the end of the deployment, we were all ordering and shipping items to ourselves just to hear our names at mail call (in two to four weeks). While we waited, our items made their way from vendors to the cargo space of a commercial airliner; to Germany or Spain for redistribution and refueling; likely to Kuwait or Kyrgyzstan for further sorting; then on military aircraft to the Regional Mail Distribution Center at Bagram Air Base, the military’s main base in Afghanistan; then on a smaller aircraft to eastern region hubs in Khowst or Paktika provinces; then finally by helicopter to Gardez, which has no fixed-wing runway, where our unit’s mail was separated and loaded onto the back of a rickety cart driven by our personnel officer down the gravel walkway until, amid eager radio chatter (“Mail call! Mail call in front of the B-Huts!”) he and his load came to a stop next to the storage connex.

A tangle of camouflaged sleeves.

_Sweet, my iPod came in!

_Hogan, one for Hogan! Two for Granger!

Expectant faces. Excitement. And disappointment.

We could always count on the Beanies. At first, I opened the boxes alone in my office, rummaging through layers of bright plush, pulling out any pigs (insulting in Muslim culture), the American flag-emblazoned bears (just a bit too overt), and any snacks or knickknacks that were buried underneath to be tossed in the “morale pile” for mass consumption.
But then something happened that neither I nor the founder of Beanies for Baghdad could have predicted. Maybe it was the regularity of the packages in a place where nothing seemed regular. Maybe it was nostalgia in a place where comforts were few and far between. Maybe it was the diversion from the brown landscape and harsh gravel. Whatever the reason, I suddenly became very popular on mail days.

It was mostly the women, but even some of the male soldiers loitered around while I sliced the packing tape on the familiarly addressed boxes. Over the pitter-patter of busy keyboards and the wind rattling the flimsy outer door, my office rang with cries of, “Oh this one’s so cute! I’m going to put it on my desk!” It quickly became clear that many of the Beanies would never make it on a mission.

One of my colleagues started a collection of sea creatures; by the time we left, she could probably have acted out every scene from *The Little Mermaid*. We could barely see our head medic behind the community of bears that inhabited her desk. I kept two cats perched next to a picture of my real cats. We came across a dinosaur that bore uncanny resemblance to the sword-wielding figure on one of the unit’s patches, and the unit adopted him, using a sharpie to make color corrections and gluing a plastic knife between his paws. At Christmastime, a parade of festively adorned Beanie Babies marched across the conference room table.

Even the hard-headed, no-nonsense engineer who worked next door took a liking to a lemur with large, goofy eyes. One day I threw the Beanie over the wall that separated our offices (it had become habit for my colleagues and his to launch all sorts of care package goodies back and forth—entertainment in a warzone). On this particular morning, though, all that came flying back was a comment about “this one” being “especially ugly.” “Big Eyes” spent the rest of the deployment displayed prominently on the engineer’s desk.

A few Beanies even made it back to the States. Birthday bears were a popular item to send to loved ones at home, but occasionally, another critter grabbed someone’s attention. I remember one afternoon a Security Forces soldier plucked a Beanie from its box and held it out in his burly arm. The soldier’s rifle, slung across his chest, rattled as he bounced excitedly, smiling through a cheek-full of tobacco.

“Hey L-T, mind if I take this one? I want to send it to my daughter. She loves pandas.”

I didn’t think about it then, the irony of these well-traveled Beanies, making their way from their original homes to Indiana, and through the odyssey to Gardez (two to four weeks) only to be boxed up and sent back in reverse.

It is, I suppose, just one of the many ironies of war.
Ben Tanzer interviews Tom Williams

Ben Tanzer: People always say why do you write, so I would like to ask why do you parent?

Tom Williams: To both questions, I think the answer’s the same: do I have a choice?

In parenting, though, it seems there’s a difference between being a parent and parenting. You can’t have one without the other, but to parent implies one is doing more than providing chromosomes, one is actively trying to balance a desire to shape and mold with a desire to open and avail one’s child to the world around him. I parent because I was parented well, too, and want to know that my son feels the kind of connection to me that I feel to my parents.

BT: How does being a father impact you as a writer, be that approach, time, themes, any, or all of it?

TW: I think we all have less time to do the kind of doodling and ceiling-staring that we used to do before. And in that way, I think that becoming a father has made me use that time more wisely and use it in a way that’s more productive. Also, when you’ve got, as I do, a little guy running
around and wanting to hear ghost stories about his friends, the fiction I might be trying to put together at my desk becomes less important. And in becoming less important, that fiction becomes easier to write, because, like the ghost story I’m telling my son, it’s just finding the right words.

It’s funny. Whenever Finn wants a story, I’ll set up the exposition and he’ll say, “Suddenly, they heard a spooky noise.” And while I’ve not incorporated too many spooky noises into my fiction, I have been keenly more aware that all readers want more than just set up and intellectual endeavor; they want something to shake them up.

And you know, another significant change, which is evident in my second story in *Four Fathers*, “What It Means to Be,” is that fatherhood has made me think a lot about being a son: both the child I was and the adult I am now. I know that you, too, Ben, had the tragedy of losing a parent while you were rearing children of your own. And it feels so unmooring, so thorough, such a loss, and yet the one thing that never disappears is the connection you have. The memories you keep. And I don’t think I’ve even got that stuff started yet, that writing.

My biggest fear, though, is that becoming a father has turned me soft. My wife and I can’t even hear mention of tragedies involving children, will turn off the TV if the news anchors are talking about a day care scandal or school bus accident. Yet it’s hard not to be sentimental when you see a little human learning new words or eating with a utensil for the first time or chasing a butterfly he will never catch.

Of course, I wouldn’t be any kind of parent at all were it not for my amazing partner and wife, Carmen Edington. Since conception, she’s the one who’s been doing the real work.

**BT:** Has writing about being father caused you to re-think how you parent or your previous perceptions about the experience?

**TW:** I feel like I didn’t want to write about being a father, to be honest. Every time I’d start to write “What It Means to Be” I’d worry that in writing down my fears that they’d come true—which echoes fully my character’s concerns in sharing his past with his son. In actually committing to completing the fiction, I found myself maybe exaggerating rather than examining, as if to distance my true fatherly self from that in the fiction. I hope that I’m a better dad than James, my protagonist, is. Plus, I think there’s a certain narcissism in writing about yourself as a great father. And, to go back to one of my earlier thoughts, who wants to read about a dad who has nothing go wrong? What spooky noise upsets the balance in that idealized portrait?
BT: Even when writing fiction, what obligations do you think we have to our children in terms of reflecting some of the elements of their lives in our work?

TW: I think we owe them a fair analysis of their lives. It'll be interesting to see my son when he's four—the age of the son in my story “What it Means to Be”—because I'm doing a lot of guessing what a four-year-old is like. Yet I'm fixing for that character a foundation where he shares much more with my son than with my imagination.

BT: Do you think it's possible to write pieces such as you have for this collection and not think about your own father and your relationship with him?

TW: Right now, at the risk of sounding schmaltzy, it's the best it's ever been, my relationship with my dad. But what's particular to it is that we never had an easy relationship before. Here's why, I think: My dad grew up without a father and in being my father he had no one clearly to model himself after. Now he's a grandfather and it's different: he did have a grandfather (even though that gentleman, my great-grandfather, was born in the 19th Century). And I'd have to say he's warmed to the role of grandpa far better than I have as a dad.

But looking forward, and spinning off far from your question, Ben, I'm projecting into a future where my son has a son and how he's got so much more to look back to for guidance. Not just me, but my dad. His stories. I hope I'm around then. And if I'm not, I hope Finn shares with his son my stories (the ones in this book and the ones I've told him), and my dad's stories.

Did I mention my fear that becoming a father has made me the worst kind of sentimentalist? Cue sunset. Cue Ian Dury singing “My Old Man.”

Dave Housley interviews Ben Tanzer

Dave Housley: You're a very prolific writer, especially for a writer who has a full-time job and two children. How do you do it?

Ben Tanzer: The simple answer is plastics. And ball bearings of course. But the more boring answer is a constant effort to schedule the opportunity to write on a daily basis, looking sometimes days ahead and figuring out where writing will fit and doing everything possible to stick to that opportunity. I also look to take advantage of opportunities where they
didn’t exist before. My wife and kids suddenly leave the house for an hour, and I grab it, and I write, immediately. I never wait for inspiration, sometimes I don’t sleep, and I keep the more spontaneous fucking around to a minimum. All of which sort of makes me sound very boring, somewhat compulsive, and kind of like a dick. Was that your plan?

DH: In reading the pieces for this book, and in all of your writing, I’m struck by how honest you are about the daily frustrations, petty emotions, and all of the unattractive or ungenerous things that might go along with being a dude at a certain period in his life—middle-agey, with responsibilities, frustrations, etc. In contrast, you’re one of the most generous, positive, warm people—especially writers!—that I know. Do you worry at all about how your work will be perceived, especially by the people in your life?

BT: You’re very generous and I completely retract that comment about your possibly wanting to make me look a dick. I do appreciate the kind words though, all of those traits are very important to me. As far the work goes and perceptions, that’s a great question, and no, I don’t worry about that. Not as a writer anyway. For the most part I don’t walk around expressing those kinds of feelings, I find that embarrassing. But as a writer I feel permission to say what I want as long as I am not hurting anyone besides myself, and I work with the assumption that the people who read these things see them as a writer trying to say something they can relate to. I also don’t mind if people think that maybe I’m more petty and frustrated than I let one, which I suppose is one advantage to being middle-agey, and married. That said, I also hope it sells books. Andrew, thoughts?

DH: Related to the question above, but something I’ve been thinking about a little as I edit my piece for FOUR FATHERS: what would you tell your kids if they were sitting down to read FOUR FATHERS? How old do you picture them being when you think about that (if, indeed, it’s a thing you’ve thought about)?

BT: I have thought about this, and what I would like to tell them is that they will see slices of our lives, sometimes mine, or theirs, and that these slices were spun into something else, things I was trying to figure out, and stories that people can relate to. It also feels like there is a subtext to this question about whether I think they will be offended or upset by what they read. Which I guess is the subtext to my answer as well. I don’t think these stories as a whole will be upsetting. They reflect more poorly on the protagonist if anyone, though as I re-read them, they are mostly
about confusion and how we communicate, feeling abandoned, coping, and the million small things I constantly think about. And from that perspective, my kids only play a small role in these pieces, significant, but small, despite the content.

DH: I’m curious about this one because I always write maybe five years after my own personal experience—for some reason, it takes me awhile to process things in my own life and for them to start working into my fiction. When did this idea of dads/parents/sons/kids start working into your writing? Were you surprised? Afraid to go there? Or did you just Ben Tanzer the shit out of it and write like five books in row?

BT: I suppose I Bent Tanzer’d the shit out of it in one sense. Which makes for an awesome descriptor, thank you, but no doubt sounds very pretentious all at the same time. I always strive to write things in real time though, moment to moment, and so I am doing some of that processing you reference while I write and then seeing what happens. On the other hand Four Fathers is unusual for me to some extent. My novel Orphans that is coming out was a conscious effort to explore being a parent, a husband, and how work, and the need to work, can impact and warp those relationships. Four Fathers though emerged from a conversation we had and your invitation to participate. At the time I had just written a piece of flash fiction that was dad related, but that was only the piece I had written like that. Four Fathers made me wonder if I could continue doing dad-centric flash fiction pieces and I ran with it. I’ve also recently completed a series of essays for a collection titled Lost In Space, and in that case, I had always wanted to do something like that, but had no plans to do so until I was asked to develop a collection. After the request, I started seeing everything as an essay on this topic, and I started working on them. Which I guess is part of it for me, both in writing and work, the smallest suggestion can blow-up for me into an idea and when they do I try to follow the path that’s emerging. The path has been dad-centric at the moment, and I am in it, so it’s ripe, but it will pass, and in some ways it already has.

DH: What are you working on now? Does it deal with these same kinds of matters? Or something completely different.

BT: I sort of began to answer this question above, but as a coda, I’ve started plotting out and writing a series of things, a short story collection centered on a flooded town, a sort of third chapter to my New York Stories project; a novel with a teenage female protagonist, a missing brother, and UFOs; and an essay collection of pieces that may have nothing to do with
dads. In fact none of these projects really have anything to do with dads at all on the face of it, though when I write, no matter what I set out to do, I endlessly circle back to fathers and sons, something that’s inescapable for me apparently.

BL Pawelek interviews Dave Housley

BL Pawelek: Have you ever been fired from a job? What did you do?

Dave Housley: I’ve only been fired from one job, and it was the first job I ever had, cutting the lawn for the man who is now my father in law. I was maybe twelve, and wanted money for, I don’t know, Van Halen records and popsicles. My father hooked me up with this job cutting the yard for my now father in law. I think I did that for a summer. My main memory is of this German shepherd who I remember as being about ten feet tall, who would stalk from window to window and bark furiously at me as I was doing the parts where the yard abutted the house. I was terrified of that dog, and apparently did a less than stellar job, because the next summer I was unceremoniously replaced by a kid from their neighborhood. I remember thinking, huh, that’s odd. It was the first time I had an inkling that maybe I had done a lousy job at something, and been kind of lazy, and it had cost me. I was so scared of that dog, though—a dog that my wife says was actually quite small for a shepherd (a fact that is in dispute, because I remember all ten feet of that dog snapping at my through the window) that it was fine with me. I was probably hoping to get a glimpse of the woman who is now my wife, but all I got was that terrifying, gigantic dog.

BP: If you had a million dollars to spend on one food and eat it, what would it be?

DH: This is a very odd question. I would probably buy one million dollars worth of El Pollo Rico Peruvian chicken from Washington, DC. We used to live about a mile from that place, and moved to Pennsylvania five years ago, and it’s still one of the things I miss most about DC. If I had one million dollars I would open up an El Pollo Rico in my house and eat it for the rest of my life.

BP: When were you no longer a boy, but a man?

DH: I have a distinct memory of waking up maybe a month after starting my first real job and having this sense of dread that I had to go to work
and I didn’t have a choice and this was pretty much how it was going to be for the rest of my life. I guess that’s a really depressing way to look at that transition, but I do think of that as a kind of coming of age lightbulb moment. That first month was kind of a novelty and a relief—I had a real job, after all, which was something we all wanted at that time (fresh out of college, sleeping on a friend’s couch in Alexandria, Virginia). But that idea of permanence hadn’t yet been processed in my brain, I suppose, until that morning. All of the sudden, I realized there wasn’t a finish line here—no graduation, no summer vacation—just getting out of bed and driving around the beltway and sitting in this office and doing my work.

A lot of what I’m writing about, still, is people coming to grips with that idea that the years of potential—in *Four Fathers* it’s expressed as the idea that “anything can happen”—are essentially over, that the things that can happen are limited now, decisions have been made and paths chosen. For a lot of people, I think having children cements that idea, and it can be a hard thing to come to grips with. See how I bring the book back into that question? Marketing!

**BP: Why did you want to have a kid like me?**

DH: Shit just got REAL, Pawelek! This is a really tough question to answer. Wow, can I quote a Todd Parr book? At the risk of being totally corny, there’s a book about adoption that he wrote and it answers that question pretty nicely (our son, Ben, is adopted). This is the parents talking to the kid about why they’ve adopted him/her: “Because you needed somebody to love you, and we had love to give.” That’s better than any five thousand words I could write on it, I think.

**BP: How much money is enough money?**

DH: Everybody only needs enough money to purchase a lifetime supply of Peruvian chicken, the estimated cost of which is roughly one million dollars.

Tom Williams interviews BL Pawelek

**Tom Williams: Who were some important dads in your life?**

BL Pawelek: When it comes male/fatherly influences in my life, there are really only two: writers Edward Abbey and Charles Bukowski. I first started reading them when I was 20, and I stuck with both of them for the next 15ish years. For me, that was a crucial timeframe of growth and development.
Both writers had many, many positive and negative aspects. Both of them were great examples of what a man/father could be, as well as should not be. I took bits and pieces of both of them to start growing into the father I am today.

I try to thank them every opportunity I get.

TW: What, if any, impact has fatherhood had on your writing life?

BP: For me, the biggest impact was in added/different subject matter. I am a huge “write what you know” type of writer. Before children, my writing was squarely centered in hiking, adventure, or nature writing. With the birth of my kids, it all changed. Almost all of my writing, and certainly some of “the best”, has something to do with my family.

TW: How do you do it all: husband, father, writer, wage-earner, triathlete?

BP: Well, out of all of them, the writer takes a back seat. The writing only happens when there is extra time and some motivation, which does not happen often lately.

As for the rest, I really think they aim toward the same goals: a successful and loving family.

As a husband, I truly believe I am the first and most important example of what a husband is supposed to be like to my son and daughter. An example of how a husband should treat and support his wife.

As a wage-earner, I have been so lucky and fortunate to have an awesome career in communications that is flexible and family friendly. Although I have been tempted with other “better” jobs, I have always declined for the fringe benefits of walking my kid to the bus stop, school lunches, and gymnastics practice.

As for the athlete, to be frank, I want to be as healthy as I can to stick around with my family. So I run a lot, and I hike a lot, and bike a lot. Plus, I actually really like to do those things, and I am a bit of a competitor.

Also, the honest truth. I could not do any of this well if I did not have an awesome wife, partner and love.

TW: Of we four, you’re the only one with a daughter: is your dadhood any different with the boy and the girl?

BP: Completely different, mainly because they are different children with very different personalities, traits, and interests. However, it is the little things that make the biggest differences. For example, while I am writing
this, my daughter is sitting on my feet, brushing her dolls hair, asking me if it is ok if we name her “Tangled” because her hair is so tangled, waiting for her mom to paint her nails. Her brother is doing what I did as a child—watching Spiderman after wearing himself out playing outside.

One of the best things about raising a daughter for me was that I knew absolutely nothing about it. I was one of three boys in my family, raised mostly with boys in the neighborhood. It wasn’t until I was 40 that I started watching the Disney movies with my daughter, realizing the differences between Sleeping Beauty, Snow White and Cinderella—which eventually became some of the subject matter of my writing for this project.

Learn more about FOUR FATHERS at CobaltPress.org.

†These interviews first appeared on The Next Best Book Blog.
His heart was heavy with gold when he heard white hyacinth wings droning the waters. Her bill was dipped, her eye was looking up, and a shrewd glint revealed her mute secret.

He ran to her, pressed her against the shore. She beat her wings wide to thrust him aside, but his fingers were upon her lank neck, clogging her trembling veins, sapping her strength.

He passed his hand across his brown forehead, dried his eyes, kissed her thighs with a tin blade. One wing would be enough to tie her down to earth, next to his name.

Gently, he whispered, “It is good to be alive all the same.” He wiped his mouth as he saw her heaving and let her drop onto the black waters.
While following the trail of the forest,
I glanced at a couple offering
a ten yen coin
to a miniature Buddha statue.
Their dark eyes softened
at its placid gravel smile.

Their prayers sounded
like cat bells.

Sunlight rained,
tingeing the sky persimmon—
a fox’s wedding,
perhaps.

I took sanctuary
at the hall of a hundred wood pillars
painted in bright red.

The tide came to blanket the yawning moss,
nuzzled the feet of the shrine gate,
and old lore painted the waters.

I had been told that God is present in beauty.

But my heart
tightened in guilt and delight
as I watched the earth flood.

*Let me spoil,* it seemed to say.
*I will be a saint later.*
My dear carnivore, do not be shy.
You watch me as you would a salmon watch,
or maybe even, a ripe autumn squash;
I know by that guilty glint of your eye.
Come to me with your awkward, lovely, gait
and nuzzle my ears with a low growl;
come and feel slowly, with your sharp bear-claw,
a tender woman’s spine reverberate.
It is all right, I like you warm-blooded;
such gentle heat can’t come from coats of fur
or the flesh of your large shadow. So stir,
before old solitude has you flooded,
and don’t go hibernating, leaving me
awake, searching for your stars at the sea.
The biggest hole of the world filled up with white—
I am under a sky of orange bulbs screwed onto a dome of oleos.

The beast’s forelocks shake and swag, while the tail is whipping the wind open—
Its fish eyes, limned with gold, protrude and stare at mine.

So much laughter at my throat that my breath punctures my lungs and everything echoes—
I pick up the high horns and piccolos singing out of a box.

My thighs slap against its sinews, over that brown skin that the sun is licking—
There is a twisting spear pierced through the plastic carcass.

Its smoked mane mixes with the scent of stamped grass; oh delicious dampness!—
Here comes the waft that sticks like cotton candy under the side of my tooth.

Legs smash the earth as the clouds yank me up—
My bones never felt its feet touch floor; it only knows to glide.

I delight in knowing I could fall—
But here I can only loop.
Here a pair of linked sounds that rhyme with “shy.”
Like lazy cats they arch
from the open back to the closed front
of my mouth.

I pause a second
to savor the hesitant air,
and yet my heart leaps into speech.

Here I form a scintillating “L”
with the tip of my tongue.
And now I move for the lovely vowel,
which hovers right in the middle—
My teeth gently nibble my lower lip,
trying to grasp the next letter’s value.

Here is the last, definite
sound that comes from lips rounding
into a kiss.

Come, don’t make me repeat myself.
It is a hard thing to say.
How to Catch the Ball

Step One. Thinking About Catching the Ball

A. Attitude
All your life you have dreamed of catching the ball and now, at last, it is time to begin. You have studied the history of catching, memorized that list of the most famous catchers of the ball, undergone extensive reconstructive surgery to render you more attractive to other catchers of the ball and to the ball-catching community in general.

B. Physical Conditioning
The muscles to be used for the catching of the ball are different than the muscles for throwing. Throwing muscles tend to be large, lug-like, twitching conglomerates of raw red tissue also used for the lifting of fully-loaded boxcars onto railroad sidings or the shoving of four-ton grand pianos through the plate glass windows of expensive French restaurants. Not that throwing is such a big deal. Any spherical object flung out into space in any direction can be considered a thrown ball. Any drunken palooka with a pound of raw hamburger in his mitt and a pack of stray dogs snapping at his heels knows what it means to throw the ball.

Catching the ball, however, requires a precision and an intelligence few individuals possess. Catching muscles are a set of tiny, finely-tuned filaments, an exquisitely delicate processing system responsive only to the most sophisticated of neural commands. The ball must be snatched from its trajectory at that one—and only one—optimal point of intersection between catcher and catchee. One must calculate to within a fraction of an inch the mutual approach velocities of a matched set of interrelated parabolic arcs. Ergo, catching muscles are intellectual muscles, and the physique of the pure catcher of the ball need not necessarily be anatomically imposing. Here, have another doughnut.

C. What to Eat
In order to be attractive to the ball, it is important for you to look as much
like a ball as possible. Since you are what you eat, we suggest as many spherical foods as possible: cheese balls, gumballs, sourballs, crème-puffs, bon-bons, chocolate-covered ho-ho’s. Be creative. Don’t be afraid to vary your training program by expanding beyond the six major food groups listed here. This is what is known as “having a good range.”

**Step Two. The Proper Equipment**

No athletic endeavor is complete without the proper equipment.

The glove was first developed in the middle ages to keep the hand warm during the period of time between the catching of the balls. As this period of time grew longer and longer, and the hand grew colder, the glove grew larger, gradually working its way up the arm, over the shoulder, and down across the torso in a linked, lobster-like armor of leather and beaten steel panels. This “Gauntlet de la Corseleur” (or “body-glove”) offered head to toe protection from the elements as well as gracing the table at many a festive Meade hall pillage. It was abandoned in the mid-16th century after the development of the glove-piercing cannon-directed solid steel projectile ball, which finally rendered all armored forms of ball-catching obsolete. Gloves today are made of space-age high-impact tear-resistant projectile-deflecting materials like Teflon, graphite, titanium, epoxified nano-tubular high-tensile torque-resistant plutonium schmeer—like the one that I am wearing. Meaning: belonging to me, and no touchy-touchy.

But not to worry. Thank God for modern science. What with pop-pin-fresh replacement kidneys and livers and eyeballs just around the corner, safety is no longer an obstacle to the full enjoyment of the catching of the ball. Right on your own doorstep you can find everything you need. Do you have a pair of sunglasses? Good. Do you have a pair of cleats? Good. Do you have a pair of shins? Good, good. Then roll up the legs of those city-boy trousers and let’s have a say hey! Just where have you been hiding those things? Those babies look smooth as a pair of porcelain swizzle sticks. You cannot hope to be catching the ball with equipment like that—here, here’s a bottle of Needsfoot Oil, trot back down to the trainers room and give those pegs a little rub-down. And here, here’s a ball you can pound into those shins a few hundred times so as to make them soft and flexible and responsive to the touch, so as to make them the shins of a true professional. This is what is known as the breaking in of the equipment.

**Step Three. The Proper Position**

Now limp on out to the diamond here so we can get a good look at you. Good. Now get yourself down into the proper position. No, no, that is the
fetal position. That is not right, that is incorrect, that is going to result in an error. An error is what causes you to miss the ball.

Now stand up. Good. Now let go of my hand. Good, good. Let's just try to concentrate on the ball on the ground—the grounder. There’s the ball. Okay now: catch it! Good, good. Now put it back down again. Okay now, catch it! Good, good! You have mastered the most basic of the fundamental of the skills, the catching of the stationary ball. Now close your eyes and try to visualize what it would be like if there was some kind of a movement on this ball. No, no, do not move the ball! Focus your energies upon the beingness of the ball, the Zen state of the baseballness of the ball. Good, good. Aquinas says that the ball is the same ball whether it is in a state of motion or in a state of rest. Einstein says that time will actually be passing more slowly when the ball is in a state of rest. Feel how slowly the state of time is passing. Good, good. Whew! This is an awful lot to try to grasp hold of here. Here, here is some milk and some cookies, lie down here for a little bit, take yourself a little nap, that's plenty enough for today.

**Step Four. Watching The Ball**

Here is the ball. Now watch it closely. Watch as we waft it to you gently with a puff of our breath, like a dandelion sailing on a light summer breeze. Watch as it draws closer, as it picks up speed, as it dances erratically to the left and to the right, spins and squirms like a swordfish pitched up onto the greasy deck of an Argentinean trawler during a hurricane.

Whoops. Too bad, you missed it. That’s an error. But watch, watch, it’s circling now for another pass. Here, here is some Dramamine, quick now, before it—whoops. Error! Error! That’s another error!

This time around let’s try to be a bit more precise in our ball-catching technique, shall we? Good. Come out from behind that tree. Good, good. Now elevate that glove of yours into the upright position. Excellent. Now hold yourself steady while we propel this ball with precision and with vigor and at a high rate of speed directly into the vicinity of—whoops. Too bad. Bad hop. You should get some ice on that. Let’s just try another—whoops. Too bad, too bad. You do not seem to be maintaining yourself in the upright position with the weight balanced lightly upon the balls of the feet. No. Upright. Upright. Okay now get ready to—error! Error again. Goodness gracious. But not to worry, everybody has made an error at one time or another. To err is human. They put a mark in the book when an error is made and at the end of the season they count up all of these different errors and figure them into your lifetime total. Sometimes they have to hire an accountant.

Here, maybe we should get little closer so that—Yes, yes, that’s the
ticket! You almost made a good stop that time. The ball would have been dead in its tracks had it not been for that little ricochet off the side of your anterior cranial cavity.

Now let’s—okay, the long ball then. Good hustle, good, but I have not done the hitting of the ball yet. You must wait until I do the hitting of the ball before you do the running of the—but no. Running, you are running. You cannot watch the ball with the back of your head, running, running, with the back of your head. Not until you stop running can you watch the ball hit the back of your head, can you watch the ball as it ka-booms off the back of your head and skips away, zips away down the block and around the corner turning left onto the interstate merging into the express lane at the junction of I-95 and State Road 27, destination Ogden, Utah.

But not to worry. Now you have stopped running. Now you are watching the ball. Here, let me hold your head up. Good. Good. There goes the ball. Goodbye, ball. You wish that the ball was still here, but the ball has gone away, far far away. This is what is known as “missing the ball.”

By the way, do you have a bigger glove, a sturdier glove, a glove without the sequins and the fuchsia lace trim? Good, good. Go and get the bigger glove.

**Step Five. Finding the Ball**

No, no, we do not need a map. A map is for sissies. Here, hide in the bushes so that you will not be seen by the ball, so that when the ball comes by you will be ready to jump out and to grab it. So stay loose, now—that’s it, just kick back and relax and, hey, the morphine’s on us! Good job, good. Love the sound, but give it more of an ahhhhhh, little less of an oooooo, and remember it’s a mating call now, not a tracheotomy, so use your diaphragm. Project. And toss another shred of clothing out there into the open, you know, as bait. *Veni, vidi, vici*, my son. Your typical eight-ounce ball—skinned, gutted, skewered, and basted over an open fire with a touch of basil and a honey mustard glaze—meets up to twenty percent of the minimum daily adult requirement for fiber, collagen, carcinogens, and beta-keratin. We have got to be running some errands, but you stay right where you are so that you will be in the best position to catch the ball. Here is the flashlight. Here is the mosquito repellent. No, no, do not worry, we will be back in no time at all, just as soon as we have finished running our errands.

**Step Six. The Final Exam**

A crowd (step seven) is beginning to gather. They have brought their cameras in order to capture the moment of you catching the ball. No flash photography, please. Maybe they think that you are somebody else,
somebody important, somebody who is known as a good catcher of the—wow! Whoa, look at that. Look at that catch over there. An incredible diving catch by that guy over there. Okay, now we're going to hit the ball at you now, it's—whoops, too bad. Let's try another one here if we can—whoops, too bad, too bad. Let's try again—you have got to be taller!—let's just—whoops! Bad hop, bad hop, if we can just—wow! What a catch, what a catch! Look at that catch over there by that guy over there. Hang on here just a minute while we go over there to watch that guy over there make some of his incredible diving catches.

Step Seven. Graduation Day

Boy, what an incredible diving catch over there by that other guy over there. You must have a good reaction time in order to catch the ball, like that guy over there who made the incredible diving catch. You must break for the ball at the crack of the bat. You must anticipate. You must read the hitter. You must get a good jump on the ball. You must drink lots and lots of coffee. Quick, quick, quicker and quicker! You are a tiger! Ah, ah—that was a popcorn wrapper. Now come on, get ready—bird, bird, that was a—whoa, whoa. That was your hand. Now calm down. Do not move. Do not move until you can see the seams of the ball. You must be perfectly poised. Do not make any harsh or sudden moves. Pretend that you are not even interested in the ball. Good, good. You must be gentle. You must try to make friends with the ball so that—watch out! Ooo. Ouch. Bad hop, bad hop but good ball, good ball.

Remember, you must be firm with the ball, you must show the ball that you are not afraid of it so that—yikes. Ouch and again ouch. That's it then! Forget it then! Bad ball! Baaad ball! You are going to have to punish the ball, you are going to have to teach the ball a lesson that it will never forget.

Step Eight. The Importance of Natural Ability

Natural Ability, which you do not have, has always been the single most important prerequisite to the catching of the ball. Gosh darn it! We'd just like to say that we're very disappointed at your progress up to this point in time. You are a failure.

Fortunately, you do possess, and have amply demonstrated, that one quality no catcher of the ball can live without: mass. And not just any kind of mass—what would be the point of that?—but protoplasmic mass. Congratulations! Eureka! Cowabunga! The time to act is now, but, quick, quick, you are facing the wrong direction. You must roll yourself over. That's it. Roll yourself over, face down into the dirt, and spread your arms out as wide as you can in both directions. Good, good. Clasp the ground
firmly with both hands. If the ground is too slippery, anything substantial will do: a tuft of wet grass, the steel stem of a pink flamingo lawn ornament, the chrome grill of a ’57 Desoto, skirt of a phone booth, leg of a mailbox, warm sturdy anklebone of an Indiana State Trooper, whatever is at hand with which to find an anchor.

If you happen to be on a parking lot, sidewalk, or interstate highway entrance ramp and can find no dent or nail to afford you the proper purchase, find two spots of flattened-out chewing gum at least an arm’s length apart. Now dig into these with tips of your fingernails.

Good, good. Stretch your legs out in the same manner. Good. Now press your nose down into the terra firma.

In every direction the sky in a perfect curve surrounds you. Feel the sunlight on the back of your neck, the roar of the leaves applauding, the warmth between your shoulder blades. Feel the cold earth pressing up against your chest. Feel the wind scouring down across the naked soles of your cleats. The sun smiles down on you from some 90-odd million miles away. Hold on tight. Patience, patience. Feel the stars rush by. Feel the wind as it lifts the back of your shirt as it tries to pull you away from your proper position, as it lobs the bright moon in an arcing trajectory from ear to ear across the circumference of your head.

You are tumbling through empty space at approximate 687,000 miles per hour. You are tumbling through space with your britches to the wind. You are hanging on tight with the tips of your fingers, with the tips of your fingers you are hanging on tight, hanging on, hanging on, hanging on tight.

This is what is known as catching the ball.
I.
Launching from Connecticut at five PM
we could make Alabama tomorrow morning,
when the summer sky rises hot,
full, trembling with the daily swelter.
Eighteen hours seems long in any car
but at least we’ll slice the country
with your silver, sexy Subaru sedan.
Provisions are minimal; loaf of bread,
peanut butter, strawberry preserves, knife,
three changes of clothes, lighters, wallets,
fresh cash crisp from the bank, Garmin and CDs.
We pack the car with nicotine and booze—
Two packs menthols, a bag of tobacco,
rolling papers, a tiny tin of Snus,
Irish cream liqueur, a case of cheap beer,
a handle of whiskey, liter of rum—
as there’s no use denying we need both,
some to get us there, some to keep us there.
II.
I believe we’ve been here before, I mean you and I, not eastern Pennsylvania, which rolls, dives, and stagnates on this highway, before telling us we’ve barely left its heart. I mean you and I, not this brand new car, which renders maps useless with GPS and does not gurgle when you hit ninety on highway eighty-one, or refuse ignition once we’ve stopped for gasoline. I mean you and I, trapped willingly together for claustrophobic hours, envisioning a destination but hoping it won’t keep our attention long, knowing departure holds more hope than all arrivals ever could. I mean you and I, when the stars were eternity over midnight oceans through the Strait of Malacca, leaning on the rails of a bobbing ship; when we ate mudfish eyes and drank snake wine in Mekong Delta riverboat markets. You and I, hopelessly drunk in Tokyo bribing bouncers for pint glasses of rum, slapping hundred thousand dollar blue fin tuna, stony-eyed at the fish market. You and I, now trapped somewhere in northern Virginia, chain smoking out cracked windows, wondering if cops patrol below Mason-Dixon, or we can just cruise and tailgate into this yellow-lined asphalt abyss.
III.
I think these cities sound like fantasies; Knoxville, Sweetwater, Chattanooga. You don't mind sleeping through morning skylines with a pouch of minty tobacco stuck between your gums. Interstates snake under sidewalks like sewers; my blood-stitched eyes sting. For a moment I regret missing my scheduled sleep from midnight to four AM, but I was worried you'd fall asleep driving or I'd miss out on private jokes you'd make to yourself. Now your eyes are slit like a frog's as you reach for the green pack, pop a cigarette and spark a small flame. This road barely feels real. I wonder when we'll see people stomping the streets; women barely clothed in jean shorts, men in cowboy boots, children with mullets. On the freeway, every exit advertises Waffle House. Crossing into Georgia you're humming with nicotine; I'll never sleep again.
IV.

From the sun through the windshield this morning, passing from Georgia to Alabama, I see kudzu crawling down cement walls lining the highway straight to Tuscaloosa. Vines suffocate the land that feeds them. We’ll be there soon, celebrate with coffee cut by whiskey and Bailey’s, try to sleep on a friend’s floor, swimming in humidity. The new time zone extends the trip an hour; you can’t believe one imaginary line could fuck with your head so much. My nine hour shift is done, but the steering wheel embeds a round groove in my sweaty palm, the gas pedal guides my sleeping foot, the driver’s seat molds itself around me, so I’ll guide the Subaru, nose-first into the stretching sky which sat beyond our eyes’ reach for 18 hours. And now Tuscaloosa’s promise of blonde southern college girls, unintelligible accents, four dollar cigarettes, is all but certain; still I wonder, would you speak up if I tilted the car straight west, just north of the destination, crossing into Louisiana? All that untouchable horizon. Nothing to grasp but what passes us by.
A few days after graduation, the girl sits on the beach with some former classmates, their faces lit orange in the glow of the bonfire, their red plastic cups full. She observes the girls. For four years she’s watched them conduct magnum opuses of emotion, pining themselves into oblivion. For what, the girl thinks. For the chance to now be sitting under some bro’s arm. She herself has spent adolescence developing qualities with real world value: authority, drive, will. You can’t cultivate these things and a boyfriend at the same time. It is better to eat than to be eaten. Still, the girl thinks. Maybe it would be nice not to be a virgin?

The boy’s yearbook photo shows him shirtless on a pier two summers ago. It has served as a reminder: the boy is dreamy. Last year, he went from basketball player to stoner; his blonde curls went dirty and wild. But the photo’s publication was like the shifting of a veil—everyone realizes now that the weed has done nothing to his exquisite bone structure. If he were less high all the time, he might notice the way girls have looked at him since the yearbook went out. They look at him like they want to swallow him whole.

When the boy catches her eye with his half-closed ones, giving a sexy, enigmatic half-smile, the girl trains her laser-sharp focus of energy on her next thought. The thought is: “I am going to have sex with that boy.”

When the boy smiles at the girl, he’s thinking about a meatball sandwich. She asks him to leave with her and he does, thinking he’ll be able to eat one. He couldn’t ask his friends for a ride to the deli, a mile away, because he knew they’d act laughingly superior about his hunger. They all started smoking last autumn, but he’s the only one to have made a career of it. It hasn’t yet occurred to the boy that the girl’s invitation might have nothing to do with a meatball sandwich. He can already taste the oregano on his tongue.

She knows the initial act will be a loss, not a gain. After her graduation dinner, where her parents poured her too much wine, the girl had a string of panicky dreams, in which unfamiliar naked bodies knocked against her. Teeth on her neck left permanent scarring, even the softest
of kisses obliterated eyeballs, earlobes. A nightmare, and yet—slightly seductive. So sweet, to be subtracted from. She’s willing to lose tonight. But it will be the first, the last, the only time.

He has to turn twice, to remember who’s driving. The girl—her red hair pulled into a knot. Hair the color of tomato sauce. The third time he turns, a memory: fifth grade. She wrote in a notebook. He was a basketball phenom then. Because he could, he yanked the notebook away. Held it out of her reach. She’d written a poem he read out loud. Here in her car, he wants to apologize. But maybe that was some other girl. The boy remembers she didn’t try to snatch it back, didn’t shout to drown him out. She’d bared her teeth at him. She’d snarled.

She parks somewhere arbitrary. She turns the key, and the world is snuffed out. Girl, boy, car. The boy laughs at something. The girl unbuckles her seatbelt, gets on top of him. His lips are dry but his mouth is wet as anything, and she can taste the sweet foresty weed on his breath. The boy accepts her kisses like water. She wonders how much this is going to hurt.

Life for the boy unfolds with dream logic. Occasionally girls just get on top of him. Hey, the boy thinks. Can’t complain. Suddenly he feels something rear up in him: the ghost of the basketball star. Like the older version of his younger self is inside, watching the scene unfold from behind his eyes with a self-satisfied smirk. The boy can’t stop his inner point guard from taking the girl’s head in his hands with violent urgency, and biting hard on her lower lip.

Alarmed, the girl tastes for blood. Her control of the situation—slipping. Is this normal? Maybe if she’d been on even one date in four years, she’d know. But it’s hard to even remember the time when she had crushes. The girl’s fierce and frightening ambition never extended to boys. Always she has striven in the direction of Yale. She searches the glittering black voids of the boy’s eyes in the dark. Just one loss, she reminds herself, in an inevitable lifetime of gains. She reaches down to recline the seat.

His high is peeling up around the edges: he senses Point Guard at the controls. Point Guard is inside his eyeballs, maneuvering him like an airplane, an SUV, something made of metal. The girl slips his grey-blue t-shirt over his head and Point Guard thinks, I deserve this. If the boy is here in the passenger seat of a girl’s car, while the girl contorts herself to kiss the line of fuzz beneath his navel, it’s because this is where he deserves to be. The boy nods his blonde head sagely. Then the girl gasps.

The girl has just now noticed that the boy has only one nipple. But—no. In yearbook photo, he has two. She pictures it very clearly. If he’d only had one, the ensuing conversation would have been different. Surely? Maybe the girls sitting around the bonfire would shrink from this development, would excuse themselves to gag, or keep going like it was none of their business, but this girl is too much of a scientist for that. The boy props
himself up on his elbows, cocks his head like a dog. In an effort to be sensitive, the girl doesn’t speak—she turns on the overhead light, and with two fingers pokes the bare spot on the left half of his chest. He glances down.

For a minute, he says nothing. And then he says: It was there this morning. I swear.

The girl is a born strategist, a future CEO neurosurgeon Secretary of State. She sweeps the car with her gaze, and when it falls on the boy’s t-shirt, crumpled in a ball in a cup holder, she picks it up, and shakes it out like clean laundry. A small disc of flesh flies from the armhole and falls flat on the empty driver’s seat. The girl and the boy stare at the limp little nipple for a few tense, silent seconds. Is this, the girl wonders again with clinical detachment, normal?

Well, says the boy as he cups the empty spot with his hand. Point Guard is freaking out up there, curled in the fetal position on the floor of the control room. Poor Point Guard, the boy thinks, feeling kind of sorry for him. Point Guard did not see this coming. Point Guard will have to tell this story to every girl who ever sees him shirtless. Point Guard will never again lounge on a pier without shame. And then the horror is ringing in his ears, because the boy has realized: he and Point Guard are the same person. The same stupid stoned one-nippled dipshit.

The girl doesn’t notice the look on the boy’s face as he turns to her now, his helpless silent plea, because she is appraising the new weirdness of his chest. It sort of looks like you’re winking, she says.

The boy pushes her off him, and stumbles out of the car, into the thick summer dark. This is not a dream. The girl, a witch?, has done something to him and she has done it on purpose—without his noticing, she plucked the nipple from his skin like it was a loose button on a winter coat. She must have done it, he thinks, because of the poem. She must have waited all this time to win. The boy walks five steps in the direction he thinks the beach is before falling to his knees, retching and half-naked in the night.

And the girl, before she slides back over into the driver’s seat, takes the nipple into her hand. It is so soft, still warm. She cannot imagine his anguish, but she tries to—what if this was her own nipple, pointlessly lost? The girl waits, expecting tears, but none come. Empathy, she thinks: another skill to cultivate. She doesn’t even remember the time the boy grabbed the poem away—she was eleven then, and the cruelty of boys was everywhere. It’s a wonder she didn’t let it swallow her whole. The girl puts the nipple on her tongue like a communion wafer. It tastes neither sweet nor bitter. It has the slightest tang of salt, of sweat. But mostly it tastes like nothing. The girl keeps it in her mouth the whole way home, like she’s waiting for it to melt, but it stays as intact as she does.
Walter Eldridge learned a great many lessons during the last few months of his former life, chief among them:

- The Russian Mob operating on the East Coast was persistent, nicely-dressed, and not above shopping on Craigslist.
- The human pancreas does indeed have a purpose. (corollary for schoolchildren: sixth grade health class likewise has a purpose).
- Wealth, on paper, is still governed by the same forces that govern paper. Paper burns. Paper tears. Paper and wealth, when put to any real test, have no permanence.
- Ethel Schweitzkopf would have been proud of him.
- A last resort can hide something behind its back.

Walter repeated the list of these lessons in his head, as if repetition might delay their escape into the ether. It was hard, trying to concentrate above the loud cracks made by the splintering of his front door. The Russians would be pushing against the armoire next, budging it just enough to get an arm inside, and then a leg past the jamb, for better leverage.

Thank God he hadn’t sold the armoire. He couldn’t remember why, exactly. Most people in his situation would have. It was walnut (solid walnut frame, veneer on the doors), Chippendale cornice, claw-and-ball front feet, oil-rubbed bronze hardware. It weighed a freaking ton. Maybe that’s why? Because he couldn’t move it if his life depended on it, at least until his life actually did depend on it?

He could hear the Russians, on the front porch, shouting in Russian. Or Anglo-Russian. The Anglo-words were all four-lettered and ugly, and despite the Russians’ heavy accents, their pronunciation was excellent.

Walter had barricaded himself inside the master bath, perched on the edge of his spa tub. Correction: the bank’s spa tub, formerly known as his. Even so, no call for an avoidable mess, right? Someone would have to clean it up, someone whose job sucked so bad that they almost weren’t
thankful to still be employed. Maybe someone quite a bit like him.

And this is exactly how things would have ended, had Walter Eldridge not done something completely unexpected.

Before the market crash, back before the lay-offs and the bill collectors calling at dinner time and the repo men lurking in the driveway, Walter had achieved a certain level of success, in the ways most people measured success: an office with three real walls and a fourth made of glass (non-operable), 4-bed-3.5-bath Tudor colonial in the suburbs, a luxury vehicle with Bluetooth functionality and leather seats, a senior job title. Walter was (was) Director of Development for Langston Kelleher Properties, retail developers well known in the industry for creating faux-historical shopping destinations out of cornfields and swampland. Walter had been responsible for creating The Shoppes at Kennesaw, which had graced the cover of Modern Retail magazine in Spring 2006, the urban-reclaimed Old Stockyard Market District in Omaha, too, and Three Palms Collection near Orlando. Before September of 2008, these were the places the wealthy spent themselves into a state of euphoria. In retail lingo, these were high end “lifestyle centers,” catering to anyone whose style of living was fueled by pomegranate martinis and country club soirees. Langston Kelleher centers appeared like dandelions across the suburban landscape during those headiest of times for capitalists. In those days, no one thought to put down their twenty-dollar drinks and watch for a cliff ahead. The Dow Jones fell three thousand points in an eye-blink and terrified consumers stopped buying and shell-shocked retailers stopped expanding and Langston Kelleher stopped building and Walter Eldridge stopped being useful.

Don Burkhardt, Vice President of Assets, looked like he hadn’t slept since the Lehman Brothers collapse. Was that stubble on his chin? Walter wasn’t sure he should sit for this, but there he was, sitting anyway. Don pushed an envelope toward him. “I wish it could be more,” he said, “but we’re hurting bad, Walt. Real bad. I’m cutting the whole department today. I might not survive either, and if by some miracle I do, I’ll be at half-salary, best case. Better that you get out now, while there are still a few jobs left to be had.”

Walter took the envelope, folded it, put it into his pocket unopened. It was very light. Too light. Something so life-dismembering should have felt heavier in his hand.

“There’s no other way?” asked Walter. He knew better, but it felt like something that needed to be asked. Like if he asked, maybe Don would reconsider. Like maybe if he just asked, very sincerely, maybe Don would commit to scrounging him up a half-salaried, half-useful position to milk for a
few more months, at least to get him past Lindsay’s graduation and wedding.

“We’ve got to sell off centers to meet debt,” said Don, grinding his palms into his eye sockets. “We’re selling Three Palms first, Walt—fifty cents on the dollar. That’s your baby, isn’t it? What a great property that is. Was. I’m really, really sorry. This whole thing makes me want to puke.”

Walter had seen it before: centers that outlived their usefulness, or were shunned in favor of a glitzier new neighbor, following slow trajectories of neglect until their anchors pulled out and the junior-tenant storefronts went dark and their historic-looking park benches traded their chic latte-sippers for the shapeless lumps of sleeping homeless. Now Three Palms Collection would become just another fake-stucco ghost town, populated by filthy pigeons and dollar stores.

Walter got up to leave. He extended a hand.

“It’s been good working with you.”

“I need your key back” said Don.

In Ethel Schweitzkopf’s seminal book *The Art of the (Yard) Sale*, Walter had underlined the following passage, despite the fact that the copy he read belonged to the Passaic Public Library:

“You can tell an amateur’s yard sale from five houses away. They all make the same basic mistake—no overarching structure. Cluttered presentation, without a hint of raison d’être.”

Walter knew she was right. The same people who would never dream of trying to sell their four-bedroom colonials without the services of a professional stager seemed to have no problem vomiting the contents of their home onto their front lawn, stapling hand-scribbled notes on telephone poles, muttering half-assed prayers for clear skies come Saturday next. He knew people like this. People like Rick Fulmer, for instance.

Rick Fulmer was a salesman. It didn't matter what he sold; to him or to anyone else. Mostly, he sold himself. Sure, he had some money, but he knew all the right social mirror tricks that made that his money expand in people's minds. He had good hair and white teeth and he did sit-ups each morning and he did a lot of women in the subdivision. The cul-de-sac gossips knew exactly which ones, and those same gossips became concerned for Walter and they were pretty sure they knew where Walter’s wife Meredith had disappeared to during an unexplained twenty-seven-minute absence at last summer’s block party, which also went Rick-Fulmer-less for the same twenty seven minutes.

Rick Fulmer held on to his job throughout the recession. He just switched product lines. He abandoned Risk/Reward and Speculative Markets, and concentrated on things that could be described as Safe, or
Conservative, or Time-Tested. He sold annuities. He sold panic room kits. He asked Walter, often, if he’d found work yet. Walter shook his head. Then Rick shook his head. It’s tough, Buddy, he said. If things get real bad, you can count on me. I’m not so successful that I can’t reach into the gutter and pull someone up, he told Walter, with an uncomfortable shoulder punch. I help the helpless. That’s just me. That’s what I do.

They sold the Lincoln Town Car first. Walter felt nothing. Three weeks later, when two scruffy men arrived to repossess the Land Rover, Meredith cried. That left Walter’s first car, the 1988 Plymouth Sundance, as their only mode of transportation. He’d nursed it well past its natural lifespan just so teen Rob and teen Lindsay had something to drive around in. The white paint on the hood and trunk had started to molt in 1989, flaking off at highway speed like an automotive psoriasis, and now the car was mostly a shipyard shade of gray primer. The interior was the color of hooker lips. It harbored the ghosts of questionable smells.

Much of the house was empty. Walter had become an expert Craigslist-ter. He knew how to present household goods in favorable lighting. Advertised and sold: three flat screen TV’s, the golf clubs, patio furniture. Meredith was mostly gone too. She’d resurrected her interest in real estate and took the Sundance keys and disappeared evenings and weekends. When she came back, she smelled different, like carpet freshener and leather upholstery. Staccato dinner conversation became the default stand-in for sex.

All this, and still the proceeds weren’t enough. A final batch of Lindsay bills was looming, and Walter needed another twelve grand. Ten might do. Maybe eight, in a pinch, with some further belt-tightening. It was the thought of a tightened belt that first gave Walter the idea.

He checked the Craigslist homepage. As he suspected, there was no category for Organ and Tissue classifieds. He’d have to try Medical/Health. He created a second username, just for the new ad. “Mr. Yard Sale” described himself in whole-foods wording. He indicated that he was blood type O Negative. Universal donor.

He hadn’t known what kind of response to expect, which was why he was thrilled to get even one call, from a gentleman with a thick accent. The man had difficulty pronouncing “pancreas,” but he understood what one was, and he (or his customer, rather) definitely needed one. Money was not the issue. Time was.

Another gem from Schweitzkopf’s tome, page 57:

“Don’t fear a calendar collision with the impotent attempts of neighbors. Instead, use it to your advantage! Let their traffic, mea-
ger as it may be, amplify your success! Your sale, dear reader, will be premeditated and polished and will shine like a jewel of opportunity next to the haphazard and refreshment-less offerings of all the other uninspired, unsuccessful yardsalers on your block.”

Walter knew that Rick Fulmer’s family was planning to piggyback their sale the same weekend as his, but they were a most pedestrian lot and their presentation would look like so much suburban diarrhea compared to his Buy My Life Event. He wondered—would anyone ever catch the double-entendre? Buy bits of my old life, and in so doing, buy me more life? That was just the kind of stuff Ethel Schweitzkopf wrote about. Raising the bar. Taking your sale from blue collar to white collar.

Walter had followed Schweitzkopf’s advice and created a yard sale plan, drawn to scale (one inch = ten feet), so he could visualize such factors as customer flow, rest-in-shade opportunities, sun angles vs. reflective surfaces vs. average customer eye levels. His theme was a variation on the classic chronological structure, but had decided to subdivide his belongings into life “eras.” ‘Destination: Childhood,’ for instance, would house the vintage Matchbox cars, the sports trading cards organized in binders, the crates upon crates of vinyl LP’s. On the end cap, he’d place his treasured copy of Pink Floyd’s *The Wall*, turned on angle so that customers could see where Roger Waters himself had autographed The Judge’s bare buttocks with a black Sharpie. Another aisle called ‘Go Blue’ would feature his college trappings from his Ann Arbor days. ‘Single in Chi-Town’ would (hopefully) liquidate all the bachelor stuff from the attic that Meredith never let him bring into the house, including a pair of double-bass woofers and a perfectly-usable waterbed.

The area furthest from the street would showcase Rob’s old sports gear and Lindsay’s menagerie of orphaned band instruments (three woodwinds, two brass). There was originally room planned for Meredith to utilize too, but she had wanted no part of the sale. According to Meredith, life resembled a parade of accumulation, which meant that dispersion of one’s goods had a disconcerting affiliation with death. Not so, Walter had argued, but to deaf ears. Lindsay would be graduating from Rutgers on May 20th and become Mrs. Josh Nowicki at the end of June, and with her would leave the last reason for Meredith to stay—in the house, or with him. Walter revised his site plan, re-designating Meredith’s space for his-and-hers Porta-Johns.

Walter had managed to contact Schweitzkopf’s publicist in New York, mostly to let Ethel know she had a huge fan in northern Jersey, but when he mentioned his own upcoming sale, things had taken quite a different turn. Ethel (revealed the publicist) was in development on a new coffee-
table book (working title *Sale-ing Across America*), which she intended to be an arts-piece-meets-human-interest gallery of fifty unique and photogenic yard sales, one from each of the fifty states. A photographer and staff writer would travel in from Manhattan the day of Walter’s Buy My Life event. Walter Eldridge could, if he played it right, get to represent the great state of New Jersey in what was sure to be a milestone in yard sale literature. He would wear his new tie for the portrait photo. He’d order an extra copy of the book, destination Rick Fulmer.

Shortly after his decision to go ahead with the yard sale, Walter had this dream:

It was a hot, sunny day in some sort of meadow. There were little blue flowers hiding everywhere among the taller grasses. There was one single tree, hanging heavy with crabapples. He held some picnic gear in his hands. He was sweating. Lindsay said Right Here, pointed to a scar in the shade. Lindsay had appeared. A scab of fresh-turned earth. He spread the blanket across the soft dirt. There was some sort of animal, more than one, perhaps many, hiding the grass. They were discussing something, in whispered animal conversations. Their conversations made him nervous. Lindsay, who now looked like a yellow, fatty organ suspended in a jar of liquid, kept repeating how hungry she was. Walter opened the macaroni salad. Ants swarmed up from under the blanket and climbed the jar. Lindsay was very, very hungry. With one hand, Walter swatted ants from the jar. With the other, he spooned elbow macaroni in the open mouth of the container. They sank slowly to the bottom, clouding the liquid in the process. Lindsay yelled I’m still hungry and the ants were climbing again and Walter did not have enough hands. Not nearly enough hands. Sweat erupted in streams from his scalp, flowed down his neck and inside his collar. The animals in the grass barked, but it mostly sounded like laughing. The little blue flowers in the grass were not flowers at all, but eyes. Walter’s body had developed dark cavities at some point during the picnic. They were hungry too. A strong wind blew and crabapples rained down from the tree and Walter abandoned the ants and the macaroni and Lindsay, using both his hands to cram bruised and rotting apples into his ravenous voids.

Saturday the fifteenth of April promised clear and warm, no last-minute sun-prayers necessary. Walter awoke before dawn, did ten crisp push-ups, drank strong black coffee, dressed in golf-ish attire and went outside to position and price the sale items. Just as Ethel’s chapter on climate had predicted, springtime yard sales located above thirty-five degrees north latitude could not pre-position merchandise the night before the sale due
to possible dew risk. In fact, dew lay in wet sheets over everything. Walter dried the tops of the folding tables with a towel from his recently-sold golf bag, then broke them down and lugger them, one by one, over to Rick Fulmer’s driveway. Rick’s stuff was piled on the lawn. As quietly as possible, Walter arranged all of Rick’s things in a bastardized version of his own “life eras” scheme. He finished before any of the five Fulmers were awake.

Walter left this note:

*Hey Buddy, just repaying the kindness, hope you like it—Walt*

Walter took his sale items from his own garage and dumped them in a long, thoughtless heap down his drive. He tried not to feel nauseous. He tried to forget Ethel’s principles. He tried his best to forget the recent dinner conversation that caused this horrible and draconian shift in planning. He could not. It played again and again, looping over the loudspeakers in his brain.

Walter: Lindsay, I think I came up with a way to get you that money for the reception.

Lindsay: What? You did?

Meredith: How?

Walter: You’re going to think I’m nuts, but it’s something I want to do for you.

Lindsay: Did you cash in your Roth?

Meredith: Oh God, no, please not the Roth.

Walter: No, not the Roth. More creative than that. I’m going to sell one of my pancreases. Or is it pancreae? What’s the plural of pancreas?

Lindsay: What?!

Meredith: What?!

Walter: I’ll get by just fine with one. No worries. I’m in a decent state of health for a guy my age. I eat fiber. Once in a while.

Lindsay: Dad, you dope, you only have one pancreas! There is no plural! You can’t sell it, you’ll die! That’s what makes insulin, so your blood sugar doesn’t go nuts. And it makes stomach enzymes too. Jesus, didn’t you know that? How do you think food gets digested?

Walter: Well, I don’t think that’s quite right, Lindsay. You hear about parents donating one to their sick kids all the time. I’ve seen those telethons. What about that?

Lindsay: Kidneys, Dad. Those are kidneys. As in: TWO kidneys. Totally different organs.

Meredith: Oh Walter, what the hell did you do now?

Walter: Are you sure?

Lindsay: I took Human Anatomy last year, remember?

Walter: You got a C minus.
Lindsay: Okay. Whatever. I’m right, Dad. You were really gonna do it, weren’t you? Thank GAWD I’m still living here. You’re so….clueless. See this? This is why you’re not walking me down the aisle. I can’t take this stress. It makes my pores erupt. Just look what you’ve done to my forehead!

Walter: (standing) I’ve got to go pull that ad.

Meredith: What ad? What ad, Walter? Holy freaking hell, what’s happening to this family?!

Lindsay: Unbelievable.

Walter left the dining room and shut the door of his study. He went online, logged in, and deleted the classified. Then he dialed the number he kept in his wallet.

The Russians never answered their cell phone. They would screen calls, listen to messages, then dispose of the pre-paid phones and call back from new ones.

The one Russian that always spoke to him did not believe in greetings. When Walter answered the return call, the Russian said, “How eez our pencreez today? Good, yes? Vee come for pencreez. Soon.”

Walter stammered. “Yeah, right, about that. Listen, I’m really sorry, but the deal is off. Tell whomever it is to find another one. I’m very sick, and I’ll be needing mine for the foreseeable future. Sorry. Good luck to you.”

“So vee come for eet, very soon, our pencreez,” said the Russian.

Silence.

Shortly after nine in the morning, a steady stream of cars and customers began jockeying for space along Mulberry, parallel-parking all the way back to Glenwillow. Most passed Walter’s pathetic sale, lured by the shiny bouquet of foil helium balloons he’d tied to Fulmer’s mailbox, or perhaps reeled in by the upbeat Jimmy Buffett classics launched from an iPod dock with speakers he’d set up in the Fulmer’s garage. A few strays ended up in Walter’s driveway, hesitant, looking over their shoulders, already contemplating an escape from Walter’s drab fare.

The photographer and writer arrived around ten, in a silver BMW. The photographer got to work immediately, trying a bit too hard to be inconspicuous, while the writer chose to absorb the scene first, experiencing Fulmer’s sale as a customer would. Professionals, thought Walter, watching from his lawn chair. How amazing, to almost rub elbows with Ethel’s pros. He hoped Fulmer had the presence of mind to reward them both with complimentary lemonade. Moments later, a third figure emerged from the rear seat of the BMW. The older woman stood and contemplated the scene for a minute before melding with the crowd. The
short-cropped red hair, the white pants suit—all so recognizable, from the book jacket photos.

Walter’s final few thoughts, as Walter:

Meredith would be fine. She was Rookie Salesperson of the Month. She had started jogging again. Rob would be fine. Rob was always fine. That left Lindsay. Lindsay would just have to learn to make due. She might have to move her reception to the VFW hall. Folding tables, folding chairs, so what. What a good lesson for her, heading into marriage—to hell with the trappings of life. Trappings, she would come to learn, are mostly trap.

There was one thing left to do. Walter backed the Sundance down to the foot of the driveway and popped the rear hatch. Inside was a sloppy, hand painted sign that read FREE STUFF. He propped the sign against his mailbox. People headed for Fulmer’s extravaganza eyed his sign and his car and his sad driveway full of junk with pity. They smirked. Their imagined thoughts played out in bold fonts, scrolling the marquee behind Walter’s eyes.

Walter, his face flushed, climbed back into the Sundance and lurched out into the street, narrowly missing a black Lexus with tinted windows. The car stopped short, tirescreech and hornblare. The rear window slid down. Walter climbed out from his driver’s seat.

“Hey, hey you, such terrible fuck you driver, where eez the one called Meester Yard Sell? It eez you, yes?”

Walter, wordless, shook his head, pointing instead toward Rick Fulmer’s place.

The Russian flipped Walter off. Walter waved back. The window went up, returning to reflective. The Russians rolled slowly past his yard, maneuvered through the gap left between a Ford Escape and a fire hydrant, and parked across Fulmer’s tree lawn. Three men got out. Two of them were black-suited and enormous. The third, smaller and older, carried a leather satchel in one hand and a small picnic cooler in the other.

The man never again to be known as Walter Eldridge did not look back. Armed with full tank of gas and empty bladder, he took Jefferson Avenue south to the overpass. He pulled over on the gravel shoulder, just past the Sunoco. I can be a Rick Fulmer, he thought, but better – armed with Ethel’s weapons. I can sell anything to anyone. Watch for me, in a coffee table book coming out later this year. I know, the photo won’t look much like me. I’ll say I’ve aged a lot lately. This economy has tested us all. Hey, friend, do you want to hear a funny story about a pancreas?

To his left lay a few million people and the cold Atlantic; to his right, a few hundred million, and their roughly ten million yard sales. He
pulled out into traffic, turned right onto the entrance ramp and merged into the westbound lanes of Interstate 80, trailing a fine dandruff of white automotive paint deep into the hills of Pennsylvania. From the Foreword of Ethel Schweitzkopf’s forthcoming Sale-ing Across America:

“Yard sales are an integral thread in the fabric of American life. This is so, I believe, because they are so fundamentally democratic. Flip through these pages. What do you see? So many flavors of people, defined by their places, whether mansions or double-wides wedged inside trailer parks. The places they are now, and places they’re headed. People defined by their things. Everyone is in some process of changing, or becoming, and the things follow suit, Walmart to trailer park and Nordstrom’s to mansion. Believe it or not, someone out there is trying to be you, wanting your old stuff as their new stuff, while you’ve got your eyes on another’s place and another’s belongings. Things are the fuel of our cultural engine. Or are they the emissions? And if the answer is both, doesn’t that indicate how much they are ingrained in who we are?

There will be bad days, of course. Possessions will feel like prisons. Rain will fall. No buyers will come. Accepting pennies on dollars will feel like surrender, not survival. But take heart, dear yard saler. Rest assured that someone out there wants what you have. It’s a fact. And that is, in the end, the greatest aspect of the American yard sale—the proof of change, which is proof of life.”
Contributors

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