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EDITORS' FOREWORD

Many thanks for picking up Euphony's Spring 2016 issue! It has been slightly too long in the making—much like the Spring season itself. Now that we are officially out of Winter (officially, but perhaps not experientially...) we encourage you to cuddle with Euphony and whatever kind of beverage suits your fancy; to ensconce yourself once again on a Quad bench, in a café, or in the illustrious Reg (we suppose you found this issue at some such place); and to devour all that we have to offer. In this issue, you will find the customary poetry and prose. We have grief and strange surprises, reminiscing and revolution, rococo-esque representation and an obsession with feet-cleaning fish. Fire, flea markets, homages, porn... but we digress. We promise not to reveal all our goodies. It's Spring, after all. The medievals called it the season which "pricks" everyone into lust (or love, if you're an optimist). Let's hope this issue will be the object of your affection.

Check us out on Twitter [[@euphonyjournal](#)] for our regularly-scheduled quips and the semi-serious [#euphonysuggests](#). See our newly-redesigned website [[euphonyjournal.org](#)] for content that is not featured in our print issues. As always, you can contact us at euphonyjournal@gmail.com for any ol' thing.

—The Editors

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Euphony is a non-profit literary journal produced biannually at the University of Chicago. We are dedicated to publishing the finest work by writers and artists both accomplished and aspiring. We publish a variety of works including poetry, fiction, drama, essays, criticism, and translations.

Visit our website, www.euphonyjournal.org, for more information.

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NEELE DELLSCHAFT

CLIP OF TIME (EXCERPT)

28

my mother's dresses,
her clothes I
remember and in
pictures but without
the known scent;
I cut the
flowered cotton and
she regrets giving
it to me,
worn so long;
I fleetry to
give it back
in other form,
her to enjoy
this new sewn.

29

blue skies and
the windparade—going
over seacove, fields,
the sun blanketed
with speedy clouds;
winds you can't
see because all
they move is
too small to
see from here;
or winds that
move everything about
you, pressing your
lungs and quickly
drying your teeth.

30

The grieflow for
so many years
of decline, sometimes
I fear the
world will leave;
like this, diseases
here and there
that are cut
and mended but
down it goes;
the final state
of the brain,
blood out of
his nostrils as
he dies, dissolved.

ANDRA EMILIA FENTON

FIRE BALL

I'm not sure if I'll miss my mark. Papi always said this is how he wanted to go, but I've never shot an arrow before. Mariana and Iker shot three arrows at the water and they went out with a tssssssss. But in the end, they each got one arrow in. When the first arrow hit, the boat lit up like a ball of fire.

"Hi Papi."

He froze. I didn't look at the can filled with special gasoline. I didn't look at the puddles around us. He smiled because he was surprised to see me. I smiled too. He put the gas can down. My socks were getting wet. I stood on my tiptoes, but when I realized I had, I set my heels back down.

"Come here, *mi amor*," he said.

And I did and I didn't take my socks off even though they were cold because then he'd know he'd done something bad. And then he'd feel bad for a second that only I would know about and then he'd try to forget the feeling by becoming twice as bad and he'd light the match.

So I just looked up at him and for a minute we were not standing on the gray tiled floors. We were not in the apartment with the brass nautical mirrors. We were nowhere near the white kitchen with the black fly-wing granite countertops he'd been so proud of. Nor were we under the ceiling he'd made higher so we could have more light. We were not in any place he had built, so we were not in any place I'd ever lived before. We were in an empty space. And it was the best place to be then because without the things he'd made there was nothing for him to burn but me. And I smiled to make it harder for him to do so. But we were not alone and Mami was screaming about the match.

"Don't you dare light that match!"

And she said his name.

And soon I was back in the apartment. And he was back, too. I knew because he was slowly seeing that the walls behind me were covered with the oil paintings of colorful Oaxacan women and men in dark rooms that he knew so well. And he turned his head to find the city lights shining on his back through the living room windows as they always had. And the closed doors of Mariana's and Iker's rooms. And he must have seen to my left the sculpture of the seashell carved out of a giant piece of obsidian. And to my right a pane of frosted glass covering the polished antique car motor and on top of that table the set of crystal blue ashtrays.

Mami said his name again and this time it reminded him of what he had become. And his eyes opened all the way to see everything that

had come from his hands and he looked at them and they were rough like a builder's. And he pressed the match head against the brown track and made a little flame.

And Mami began to cry but I didn't make a sound because I was scared to further wake the man of fire. But I smiled with my black eyes of water as if to say "it's ok" and he put his left hand in his breast pocket and pulled out a red and white pack and lit a cigarette with the match.

I ice-skated around him trying to absorb as much gasoline with my socks as I could and he found my movements amusing so I added ballet arms and we laughed together. And I picked up one of the blue ashtrays and gave it to him and he said "thank you" and tapped his cigarette against the edge.

And then Mami said something.

And his eyes became big again and he threw the ashtray with the cigarette inside it against the white concrete wall and it shattered into blue shards.

I picked up the cigarette, which was near the shiny part of the floor but not on it and said. "*No pasa nada, Papi.*"

But he turned all the ashtrays into blue dust smash smash smash. And the sculpture into black pieces of the sea and ran his nails through the colorful paint. And I swept where it was dry and picked up with grey rags where the floor was wet with gasoline. But the wet went down the hallway and there was too much of it. He lit one cigarette after another and at some point I lost track of where they all were.

There was one cigarette that stayed with him though, the one dangling from the side of his mouth. It moved up and down held only by his lower lip as he spoke in words that were forbidden. But then again, I should have known he could do such things.

And then the cigarette finally went out and when he tried to light another he opened the matchbook and it was empty.

He stopped and there was no fire.

And I went to my bedroom to sleep and called back to the kitchen where he was.

"Are you going to bed now, Papi?"

"Yes, I'm on my way, *mi amor.*"

And in the morning I ran to his room to ask him if we could make French toast knowing he'd say yes because we liked butter so much but he didn't answer because he wasn't there. His measuring tape and wallet were gone so he must have strapped them to his belt already or maybe he'd never taken them off.

Then I thought I should have taken the keys but I thought it was just the match that I needed to watch out for and then the cigarettes and I realized it was the gas can too, the one he used to fill the car he liked the most.

And I knew without being told that while I slept he flew in the fast car off the side of an elevated highway, bursting into the night like one more Mexico City light.

The boat is floating away and I want to give him the funeral he always said he wanted, but I didn't practice and the bow is too heavy and the string is cutting my fingers when I pull at it and I just can't make my fire arrow fly. And I start to cry but Mariana and Iker encourage me.

"Tu puedes," they say and one of them rubs my back.

And I run into the water and swim with three limbs. The burning arrow in my free hand held high above the wet. And I kick my legs and feet and they push me toward the fire. I don't stop until I reach the boat. But the side is too high for me to climb so I throw my flaming arrow into it over the edge. I hear the voices of my siblings cheering from the shore as the fire grows. And I smile a saltwater smile and wave in their direction but I don't know if they can see me.

DORIS FERLEGER

SHOPPER'S GUIDE TO THE VILNIUS FLEA MARKET

don't haggle—
they'll think you're alive
jew
don't be
alive or they'll tax you to walk
the dead
jew in your arms
over the bridge you'll go
with the body
you have
licked salty skin
that needs you still
to cover
the dead jew
there are never too many
the guide said
as the dead cannot return
the favor you must
carry on and on
the guide carries
on about the locks
padlocked to the bridge
for good luck
to the newlyweds
already lucky they are
not jews whose locks
whose locks whose side-
locks loved a bargain
my sister Tamara
can't stop buying
scuffed boots
how she will fit
piles of shoes
into her suitcase
she swears she doesn't ever
think about how
she is a jew she haggles three
for the price of one
two, three jews alive
we stand like sentries
at the flea market
guard Tamara, the youngest
who squats, pisses
behind a live tree.

SAM GRIEVE

THE MISSIONARY'S WIFE

It was a Monkey's Wedding that brought us together, or at least that is what Alice believed. Of course she did. Alice was always drawn to the mythic, the absurd.

I, on the other hand, insisted our meeting was due to my cough. And as this is my version of events—not hers—a cough it shall be, nasty and hacking, caught as I sketched the bare phalanges of a willow tree one afternoon in July.

It was the winter of 1913. Not as freezing, of course, as the long, dark days I experienced as a child in Twickenham, where the streets turned into slicks of ice, and hoarfrost transfigured each branch in Bushy Park into fairy-tale beauty—but cruel nonetheless. South Atlantic gales roared over the Cape peninsula, and each night I scuttled into a bed of damp sheets, my feet searching like moles for the puddle of warmth cast by my hot-water bottle. The transcendental summer light, a miracle of latitude and atmospheric clarity, vanished, and the world sank into a gloom of faded fynbos, pewter sky.

One afternoon it started to snow on the surrounding summits, and excited by this rare sight, I went out to paint, the frozen lawn splintering beneath my boots. And somewhere under the willow trees, the universe conspired to unite me with one of van Leeuwenhoek's invisible *animalcules*, a microscopic bacterium that crept into my lungs and proceeded to infect me with a cough. The above-mentioned, serendipitous cough that led me to Alice.

"By Jove, Joe!" were Doctor Gray's first words when I relented and had Betsy summon him. "Why on earth did you not call for me sooner?"

For once he was correct to admonish me. I had fallen sick, truly sick. My head pounded and I was barely able to sit up for him to press his stethoscope against my chest. Luckily it was not pneumonia, although Doctor Gray, throwing me a very dark look from his beneath his thistly brows, assured me that should I continue to push myself in my usual unseemly manner, heaven knows what I might succumb to. I was ordered to rest, and, incapable of insurrection, I did. Wrapped in blankets on the veranda for three tedious weeks, my feet wedged in a mustard bath.

By August my health had returned, but by then I was fed up with my home, the view, even the solicitous face of Betsy, who had nursed me to recovery. Travel was the answer, and the furthest place I could think of to go in the Southern colonies was Natal, a thousand miles

away. Reckling lived there. I had not seen him in years. I would paint the Drakensberg.

* * *

I disembarked in Durban on the 2nd of October. It was not yet summer, but already the port city simmered in heavy heat, and within minutes my shirt had adhered to my shoulders as though I had bathed in it. A line of rickshaws stood waiting for customers, and I hired one to take me to the station, clinging on as the man tore along the road, throwing himself into the humid air every ten paces so that the little cart tipped at an alarming angle. The whole place felt like a dream. Cardamom and curry scented the air, and beyond the portside buildings the Indian Ocean lay in a spill of molten silver. Several times my transport almost ran over a purveyor selling his or her wares, for prickled litchis, mangoes, and papaya were piled up in abundant mounds on the ground. Sun fell in jagged shards between fronds of palms. I saw a Chinaman disemboweling a shark amidst a cloud of flies.

At one point, nauseated, I tapped my driver on the shoulder. "Would you mind slowing down a bit?"

He yelled something in Zulu that I failed to comprehend and tore on, his bare feet thumping on the earth. Only afterward I understood his hurry; somehow he had heard that my train was departing early, and before I knew it, I was installed in my carriage, my trunk handed to the porter, and we were pulling out of the chaos, on our way upland to Pietermaritzburg and the mountains.

* * *

Reckling was waiting at the station. He waved his cane at me, and I leapt off the carriage into his arms.

"Little Joe." A damp kiss landed on my forehead. "You have not changed a bit."

"Neither have you," I told him, and for the briefest second our eyes met, acknowledging our shared deceit. Reckling burst out laughing. "Come on then, my darling liar," he said, hooking his arm through mine, and so united, we stepped out onto Church Street, Reckling's gleaming brogues keeping pace with my walking boots. Unlike Durban, where the heat settled like a moist breath over everything, here the air was cool. Neat Victorian houses, painted in pale blue, yellow, and pink, lined the roads, fronted by small plots in which a botanical battle between an English country garden and the indigenous species was being riotously waged.

"I hope you are not too tired?" Reckling extended a patrician leg over a horse pat and led me across the road to his house. I assured him I was fit, and he continued, "For I have invited a few people around

for dinner. I believe I have written to you of them before? The Scottish reverend and his wife? And the Watsons, whom of course you know.”

I was not entirely pleased about this—I wanted Reckling to myself—but alas it was to be expected. Reckling adored entertaining. His wife had died of malaria shortly after their wedding forty years back, and he had never remarried, filling his life instead with endless parties. I had lived with him whilst I studied at the Slade, and in that time become accustomed to sharing him, for there was no respite on Lawrence Street. Night after night, Reckling had held court, enthroned, when the weather was good, on his deck chair, a tinsel crown on his head. Favorites were made, favors dispensed, angelic-faced beggars invited in to waltz with the higher classes. On summer nights his garden blazed with Chinese lanterns, the bohemian of London collapsing intoxicated amongst the beds of roses.

The squeal of the front gate beneath Reckling’s palm brought me back to the present, and I looked up with interest at his house. It was large, with a green metal roof and deep porches trimmed with lacy ironwork. Rosa alba tumbled over a fence, and as he passed, Reckling snapped off a bloom and tucked it into his buttonhole. Then he scrambled ahead of me up the front stairs, flung open the door, and ushered me into the dim hall.

My breath stalled. Dearest Reckling! Every piece of furniture had been transported from Chelsea and re-placed here. Beneath my feet lay the Persian rug I had sat cross-legged on as a child, willing it to fly. Rosalind and Viola greeted me from their frames, etched smiles unchanged. There was the clockwork monkey, his eau-de-Nil silk jerkin now faded with age, and old Julius—just his head, of course—who, with his blank, marmoreal eyes, had been the recipient of my youthful secrets. The scent of paperwhites filled the air. I curled a hand through the ectoplasm of imported ghosts.

“Not altered a thing.” Reckling’s voice was cautious behind me. “Bloody stuck in my way.”

As it was nearly six o’clock, we went straight upstairs so Reckling could show me my room. Perhaps he sensed the scale of my emotions, for he left me soon thereafter, muttering something about pudding. I lay down on the bed and recollected myself. Beside me, the curtains ballooned in the breeze, and the pricking that plagued my eyes eased, then faded. My happiness, you see, is never unadulterated.

After a while I got up. My trunk had arrived and I unpacked my suit from where I had shoved it beneath my sketchbook. My hair I arranged as best I could, flattening down the flyaway strands with water, and around my neck I hung the single piece of jewelry I owned, my mother’s locket—for courage—although it was completely obscured by my collar. My nails needed attention; they were filthy with charcoal, so I scrubbed and trimmed them. As I completed my toilette, voices began to drift up from the garden, Reckling’s laughter rising above the hum. I

caught the chime of glass clinking, the exultant fizz of the soda bottle.

Despite my solitary profession, I like people, and most people, I have discovered, tend to like me, once they have accustomed themselves to my oddities. I made my way downstairs and opened the double door that led to the lawn. The small group turned in unison in my direction. The reverend was well over six foot tall, with a shock of white hair that sat at odds with his black suit and gave him the semblance of something untamed. I extended my hand toward him, and after a moment he shook it, his enormous palm soft and dry—like a powdery marshmallow. I bowed to his wife, a slight creature in a gray dress who stared at something of great interest between my feet, so the only impression I received of her face was of her nose, slightly askew. Mr. Watson pumped my hand and asked if I remembered them, which of course I did, as they had bought one of my pictures last year for the largest sum I had ever received. In retrospect it was well worth every penny, for after the transaction, I was forced to spend an evening in the parlor of the Mount Nelson Hotel with Mrs. Watson, during which I discovered that she had been blessed with every feminine quality, bar that of conversation.

Reckling and the Watsons were drinking whiskey and soda, but the reverend and his wife, I noticed to my relief, were sipping at orange squash. I accepted one too, and once the agitation caused by my arrival had dissipated, the guests turned back to the reverend, who had been interrupted, it transpired, in mid-sermon. I sidled in beside Reckling. Rev. Dow picked up where he had left off. He spoke with a pointed deliberacy of enunciation, which caught my attention. Did he think we might not understand his brogue? Or was it possible he thought himself surrounded by idiots?

I continued to watch him, not really listening to the content of the speech, which was concerned, for the most part, with our duty to spiritually enlighten the natives. Despite my antipathy to his subject matter, I recognized in him an extraordinary power, a primitive, charismatic strength that had reduced both Watson and Reckling to stagestruck boys. Mrs. Watson was nodding her head vigorously, and as for the reverend's boring little wife, she simply stood there, small and dun-colored like a thrush, her head bowed, as though the continuous onslaught of the waves had thoroughly beaten her down.

At seven, the bell rang, and we all trooped into the dining room, Reckling leading Mrs. Dow inside as one might lead a compliant, but blind pony. The room was beautiful—long windows looked out over the garden, and the mahogany table creaked under the weight of Reckling's silver. A rose bowl in the center, tight with blooms, cast its bewitching scent into the air. Mr. Watson hesitated, then held my chair for me.

"Reverend? Might we prevail upon you to say Grace?" It was a rhetorical question. Rev. Dow was already drawing himself up. We bowed our heads. I clasped my hands in front of me.

"Oh Lord," the reverend began, running the R long across his Lanarkshire tongue. "We are gathered here today..." His voice was very

strident. I could not help but notice how his vowels jarred my tympanum. "...in this godly house..."

I bowed my head further and squeezed my lids until my eyes ached. In a week I would leave, and Reckling was my dearest friend. Did it matter that his new acquaintances were bullies and bores? For him, I could make it through this Grace, massacre of the language and all. And then I would be free to partake of his culinary hospitality. For wasn't that lamb I could smell being roasted in the kitchen? And apple cake?

"And as Jesus taught us..." Heavens above, it was not yet over! I opened my eyes and flicked them quickly around the table. The western sun tumbled in the room, infusing the tourmaline curtains with a glow. Mrs. Watson had her eyes shut and seemed to be asleep. Her husband nodded along, while Reckling was frozen with a look of abominable piety stretched over his bony face. My glance moved on, propelled more by Newton's momentum than my own volition, toward the reverend's little wife, who to my shock was staring right back at me with a pair of basalt blue eyes. For a second our glances collided. She grinned, and I spotted some irregular teeth inside a wide mouth; then her eyes snapped shut, she dropped her chin, and like a moth performing its disappearing trick against bark, she turned once more into Mrs. Dow.

Had I imagined it? I began to think so, for the rest of the night she remained submissive at her husband's side as he preached and roared at us through five delicious but excruciatingly long courses.

"Fascinating man." Reckling turned to me as they left and led me into the drawing room. A gas lamp whispered in its bulb, and the light it threw shivered over Reckling's collections: fossils, bird skulls, rough-hewn crystals, and pieces of rock discovered in the Karoo, delicately sketched with bushman paintings.

I sat down, shook my head at the proffered malt.

"Ah, yes, I forgot you were an abstainer. Imagined you would get on with them then, those puritans. Quite something, isn't he, that Scot?"

A mosquito bit my ankle. I bent down to swat it. "He did seem rather righteous."

"Ha!" Reckling took a long sip of his drink. "Yes, yes, there is something about him. Kingly. Domineering. He has us all under his spell. Even his wife, and that, my dear Joe, is an extraordinary feat after ten years of marriage!"

I smiled at him through the shuddering light, recalling as I did so that brazen blue gaze. The clock chimed eleven and Reckling, obedient, creaked to his feet. I kissed him good night and made my way upstairs. My bed was soft, the sheets extravagant to the touch. Beneath me Reckling's house rocked on the lingering swell that surged within me. Random thoughts filled my head: the scent of the sea, the feel of Reckling's frail back beneath my hands, a wagon piled dangerously high with sugar cane wavering down the road, the reverend's sonorous voice,

and finally, as sleep came over me, a lingering image of Mrs. Dow's head, the pale line of her part, dividing her mousy hair.

The next week was filled with preparation for the trip. An ox-wagon was delivered from a local farm and left unhitched in front of the house. I repacked my trunks from Cape Town, and my camping equipment was loaded into the wagon. Seven completed pictures I left with Reckling to be hung for sale in the town gallery. From the grocers I ordered tins of beef and sardines, vegetables and anchovy paste, dried biscuits and biltong, porridge, tea, and condensed milk. Mrs. Watson brought over a fruitcake in a tin, and I helped myself to several bags of plums from Reckling's garden. On my journey, I would pass farms where I could buy eggs, milk, and bread, but once into the mountains I would have to be reliant on my gun, my supplies, and some foraging.

Throughout this fevered preparation, Reckling hovered, like a horsefly.

"I do worry about you, my dear," he said more often than once. "I could never live with myself if you were harmed. And there is so much out there of danger. Wild animals. People who might take advantage of a lonely traveler. Why, you might even fall into a ravine and never be found again."

At other times (and if I am to be entirely honest, more frequently), his thoughts turned to how advantageous my trip might be, particularly for him. I was to look out for gold of course, in the riverbeds. And fossils. Insects for his collection, and any San paintings that could easily be removed and brought back to his treasure trove. And he was dying for a stalactite should I venture into any caves.

"Of course, dear Reckling," I assured him, thinking with fondness of our walks across the wilds of London so many years ago, my nascent artist's eye spotting treasures that he might take home. Did he still have that butterfly I had picked up off the ground for him, its wings folded in death, and weightless in my hand? The carved flint I fished out of Beverley Brook? The tiny pottery Roman face I overturned with my trowel while digging amongst the lilacs? I had given them all to Reckling, for despite the thirty years that separated us, we truly loved each other. I suspect I was the child he never had. He was certainly the father my father failed to be.

On the Sunday before my departure, he insisted we go to church—not just to church, to Kirk, where the mighty reverend would be berating the masses in his thunderous baritone. I brushed my suit off and neatened my hair as best I could, fitting it beneath one of Reckling's town hats. We walked the two blocks, Reckling using an ivory-topped cane, for his knees ached. It was a glorious, vital day, the sky lavender blue and dissolving to a mist in the east. Birds darted across our path, and I even spotted a monkey at one point, sitting in a peach tree, his long tail hanging down and curved at the bottom—like a musical note.

I did not see Mrs. Dow until the end of the service. She was wearing a black dress with a white lace collar that could possibly have

been cut last century, and she sat so still, she was practically invisible. Her mouth was sealed shut, her eyes fixed on the floor, and had I not known she was a living woman, I would have presumed her a most lifelike waxwork.

As we followed the worshippers out into the blinding light, my ears rang from the reverend's imprecations. I had only listened to a portion of what he had said, but I surmised that we were all damned. "Going to be an awfully busy place in Hell," I commented to Reckling, who was glowing as though he had just watched his favorite opera.

"And so devastating that that man won't be there to chide us!"

We weaved our way through the throng to the Church Hall, where refreshments were laid out, some anchovy paste and cucumber sandwiches, pots of tea, and homemade ginger beer. In the garden a few fund-raising stands had been set up beneath the trees. I perused the cakes, the knitted wares, the plates of scones, eventually buying a small wax paper twist of fudge. A few paintings stood against the trunk of a tree and I ambled over. As I predicted they were extremely amateurish, in style and subject matter, frolicking kittens, children who looked bloated and feverish. I was about to head back to Reckling when I noticed the edge of a canvas protruding from behind the tree. I slipped around and had a look.

The painting was extraordinary. It was a landscape but done with a confidence and mastery that I doubted I had ever achieved. The colors had been rather roughly laid on, but each one was unique, and the depth perception, the entire conception, was modern, new. I felt a surge of that shameful emotion: a thrill at the beauty, the workmanship, run through with an undercurrent of anguish, or perhaps a jealousy, that I had not done this myself. I picked up the canvas. There was no signature, neither at the bottom, nor on the reverse. Was the picture for sale? Or had it already been sold and was thus hidden away, out of sight? I laid it against the bark and turned to alert Reckling, when a flock of ladies swarmed around me on their way to the cake judging. Many of them exceeded me significantly in height, so it took me several minutes to force my way through the throng. Reckling was leaning on his cane, providing a fatigued-looking man with a detailed description of his bunion.

I tugged on his jacket sleeve. "I hate to interrupt," I said, "but, Reckling, I must show you something."

We made our way tediously across the lawn, Reckling even slower now that his thoughts had turned to his malformed foot. The horrible kittens were still there, and the babies, but the landscape was gone. I circled the tree three times and even checked the oaks nearby but to no avail. The painting had vanished.

Two days later I was ready to depart. Reports from neighboring farms informed us that the snow that covered the upper reaches of the mountains had melted, and the rivers had reverted to streams again.

"Go the day after tomorrow," Reckling urged me. "Or even next

week. There is no reason to rush."

But I could stay no longer. The town, with its constant socializing and curious visitors stopping by to meet me, had begun to pall. Even Reckling's company was becoming tiring. I longed to be alone under the sky, be silent.

That evening as Reckling and I sat in the dining room, peacefully alone for once, I announced that I would leave the following morning. A fog descended over my dear friend's features; then he leaned forward and clasped my hands in his. "I am a selfish old man, Joe. You have been so kind, humoring me as long as you have. But before you leave there is something I must speak of to you."

His tone was unusually grave. I looked at him with concern.

"The reverend," Reckling continued, turning rather red, "has requested that Mrs. Dow accompany you on your trip."

"What!" I tried to stand up, but Reckling was still holding me.

"Joe, Joe," he said, pulling me down. "Please do consider it! After your illness I am concerned about your health. And those mountains, Joe—they are so vast, so remote. I worry about you, my dear. I cannot sleep at night thinking of you alone out there. What if, what if..." The sentence died in his mouth. He placed both his veined hands over his eyes and laid his head down.

"Does she want to come with me?"

"Yes." His voice was muffled. "She has always wanted to see the mountains. The reverend has no time to take her, and whom else could he trust with his wife? You, Joe, with your planning, your courage, your gun, your strength, you are perfect."

I exhaled heavily. The windows were open. Outside, the velvet darkness pulsed with cricket song. I had so wanted to be alone, untrammelled. Ever since I had come to this country, I had felt that I was being watched. But out there in the bush, I was free. And then my mind flitted back to Mrs. Dow. To how she alone had not cared to look at me, until that one peculiar moment when she truly had seen me.

And how could I refuse Reckling anything? Reckling, my touchstone, who had always stood up for me to my father, who had paid for my studies in London, who had sent me the ticket to South Africa, who had introduced me to my friends in Cape Town. Reckling, who had ensured I had a life.

I glanced at him. He was still sitting at the table, all vitality gone. His hands possessed the frailty of a Dürer sketch, and through his mottled skin I saw the delineation of his bones. Reckling was old.

"Of course I will take her," I told him gently.

* * *

I drove into the farmstead just after lunch. A mist hung on the hills, and it had recently rained, for each blade of grass sparkled as though all the wealth of Kimberley had fallen from the heavens. Mud coated the hooves of the oxen in red socks, and my lungs were filled with the perspiring smell of the earth. As we approached the house, I was met with the ululation of an Indian war cry, and two little boys, feathers in their hair, darted around the house pursued by two other boys brandishing pistols. All four vanished into the orchard.

The door opened and the reverend stepped out, followed by his wife and two houseboys, who were carrying a large trunk and, to my great astonishment, an easel. I was so shocked to spy it that my manners failed me entirely. I barely shook hands with Rev. Dow, so busy was I craning my neck as it was loaded into my wagon.

Without acknowledging me, Mrs. Dow walked to the edge of the orchard. She stood there, a black crow in her traveling coat, with a huge straw hat obscuring her face, until the children stopped their game and tore over to her. They wrapped her in their arms, pressing their heads against her dress, her belly. She crouched down to their level, her hem in the mud, and drew them close to her, whispering in each ear. Then she turned and made her way to the wagon, where one of the houseboys lifted her up onto the bench.

"I think it is time to leave," said the reverend, his eyes fixed upon her. "My wife and I have already said our good-byes." Then, with obvious hesitation he placed his enormous hand on my bare head and softly from above I heard the ancient words:

"Yea, though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, I will fear no evil: For thou art with me."

Did he have an inclination of what was to come? Or was he, through that recitation, binding us together? I will never know, for when I lifted my head, the reverend had already stepped inside and the door was closed shut.

I walked down to the wagon and clambered up to my seat. Mrs. Dow's hat was enormous. It obscured her face and took up so much room, and I had to lean slightly to one side to avoid it. Still she said nothing, and as I supposed she might be weeping, I picked up the whip and cast it in a long flicker over the backs of the oxen. We were on our way.

As we passed over the ridge behind the house, it began to rain once more, spattering drops that came from the blue sky above. The water, inevitably, landed on Mrs. Dow's hat, and this seemed to wake something up inside her. Pale arms emerged from beneath the brim; the hat was unpinned and then, to my astonishment, tossed carelessly into the wagon.

"It's a Monkey's Wedding!" announced Mrs. Dow.

"What?" I turned to look at her. The downcast chin was gone; back were those strong blue eyes from the dinner party.

"This!" She gesticulated toward the sky. "This is a Monkey's Wedding. When it rains whilst the sun is shining."

Her hand unfurled, drops ricocheted off her palm. "I find it magical. The insertion of the absurd into the everyday. Like the existence of fireflies. Or hummingbirds."

I nodded, keeping my eyes on the road, suddenly shy. What was this mordant change she had gone through? Ahead of us, the gravel track ascended a rise, then disappeared into the mist, too narrow along its length to turn my oxen, should I so desire. Mrs. Dow now extended both her arms out in front of her and splayed her fingers. Where before she had been torpid, clay-like, she now brimmed with a terrifying energy.

She turned her gaze onto me and I felt my cheeks redden. "You are a bit like that, Joe, aren't you? Something magical? Or absurd."

I shrugged. "I have always been who I am," I answered.

White arms stretched out again; I sensed her lips moving. An image crossed my mind of Moses, the parting waters of the sea. Steam plumed off the oxen's backs.

"What is your real name?"

It was still pouring, great shimmering baubles tumbling ridiculous from a sun-bright sky.

"My parents called me Allerley, Mrs. Dow," I said.

"Allerley," she repeated, trying it out for size in her mouth.

Did she mock me?

"Allerley, we are on an adventure," declared Mrs. Dow. "Two terrible women, alone in the wilderness. And Allerley, from this minute on I shed Mrs. Dow. I am Alice."

ZACHARY M. HODSON

A POEM I NEVER WROTE

from him we learned the fire and brimstone of high literature
twenty lashes for all words under three syllables

the pennsylvania dutch eloped from their burning houses
oaken smoke detectors split and sizzled to death

he taught us of north carolina in nineteen fifty two
& how he stretched tobacco in a double-roofed barn

with his grandfather's twenty seven year old mistress
somehow the two were connected

& so we learned stagnation of mind

the semesters ran full production until the day i died
& the university could tap no more money from me

i addressed a three line email to him entitled exception
it had been two years since we disagreed about Mark Doty

he scanned his favorite subscription list for my name
but quickly took to napping through the morning classes

six days later i received an acceptance letter for a poem i never wrote
suggestive alien verse posing a chat over coffee or merlot

haunted in expectation i declined

soon after my exception surfaced rippled and carbonated
taken slowly like winter's grip on the first mornings of spring

i donned twenty three dollars of charcoal polyester and a gold star
scanning the mass of crinkled faces in the auditorium in vain

my recognition came as a lone toast in the corner booth of Aris
where the belly dancers helped reaffirm my heterosexuality

later a scotch times five at my ex fiance's graduation party
i should have dammed my stream of consciousness

he would have

RICH IVES

CIVIC PRIDE

The chatter of centuries is held in the town hall, which is called the cellar here in Dickinson. The cellar is beneath the city, at the foot of the foothills, but it has no basement. It is only the basement as far as basements are known in these mountains, where rock sleeps comfortably beneath a very thin pillow of moss, and if you want to build something with stones, you need only look for a tree to find the cracks and move them to the stones.

Proclamations are issued daily. Sometimes they proclaim that the weather will be just as it was destined to be or that something unexpected will happen, even if all that's really unexpected is that nothing happens, as it does every other day. We never get tired of being surprised by this. If you notice some ordinary thing, it's no longer ordinary.

The great authors of Dickinson have never been published. They simply issue proclamations. It remains popular for them to be laughed at, but if the laughter must change to exclamations of joy or sorrow by the end of the day, the author is very popular indeed. Reading is a search for transformation.

The great musicians of Dickinson, however, have built their own cellar. Millions have visited this cellar to find clues to the transformations that are not contained within reading. Sometimes you have to do something to the text of an invention to get it to release its delightful exaggarations. You have to perform its implications.

A performance can be said to exist outside its own time if it has been recorded. Recording, however, alters the meaning of the performance, which was originally intended only for the people who gathered in the town center, where such recordings have now been gathered, beneath the appearances known as the town hall, which is called the cellar here in Dickinson, just as performances of many kinds, some of them infamous, have been gathered in the great cities of Europe. Lawrence Welk is a good example of this alteration of meaning. He was once a cultural export of the town and is now a source of oil. His tiny baton is no longer even noticed.

One proclamation stored in the cellar states, in a lyric singsong manner: The bride kissing winter is always the bride of ashes and beans. The fox is her groom and their children shall be little frogs, who are very good farm workers. Their legs are strong and require a great deal of pretty leaping. They shall live in a large room with the sky, which shall not punish them for their impatience but feed them potatoes and corn and grand Sundays with tiny little forks. The bride kissing summer is always the bride of stretching and paint. The prairie dog is her groom

and their children shall be locusts who always get the best part of the crop but shall not be allowed to proliferate. This proclamation was composed in Norwegian, however and translated by a scholar who could not sing. His name has been lost, but it is known that he was a Dutch inventor of rudders and telescopes. No one knows how accurate the translation is as the original proclamation seems to have been stolen. The proclamation is sung annually at harvest time, when it is traditional to teach the children to swim.

CONSTRUCTION

The bones that hold my creation together form a theoretical city. No one lives in this city only because you are not really here to see them but only yourself, and you are real and simultaneous but constantly shifting. I cannot keep up with you, so I must slow you down. The city, however, does not slow down, does not wait for you or I, but the city is not my city without you. That's why we have muscles. That's why we describe them. That's why we say "we" when it is I that am doing this. I am not alone. That's why we fasten the muscles to the bones, but we must imagine how the city travels around inside itself, and we must believe there is someplace to go, even if it is only where we have been, which makes it your city too. There we will find what we need to continue, but not what we are looking for.

SEAN MCCARTHY

THE NOKKEN

“Papa!”

Nina saw the old man first, just a second before Ollie, standing at the edge of the woods on the far side of the pond. He waved to them, and then beckoned, but they did not move. And then he was there, and then he was gone. The pond was below their yard, at the bottom of the hill, and they weren’t supposed to go down there unless they had an adult with them. Sometimes there were ducks on the pond, and sometime loud geese, and Ollie had seen another bird on there once that she bet was a swan, and one time last spring their father had brought them down there to try and catch frogs with a pink and green net. They did catch one, but as soon as they caught him, he jumped out and back into the water, making a splash. Their father wasn’t home now though—both he and their mother were at work—and Helga the au pair was inside babysitting.

Helga was tall and round and pulled her hair back tight, and she came from a black forest in a place called Germany and she lived with them now and watched Ollie and Nina during the day. It had just been Easter, and today she was busy eating the chocolates the Easter Bunny had brought their mother. “She told me to eat them,” Helga said, “so that she will not get fat.”

Ollie saw her come to the window every once in a while to look out and make sure they were still there: they weren’t supposed to be out in the yard alone, but Helga said it was too cold for her to go outside, and too nice for them to stay in. “You get some fresh air,” she had said, dressing them in boots and scarves and hats and gloves, “and this you do not tell your mother or father. It will be our secret. And when you come in—I give you candy. You must just do one thing,” she said, leaning over and pointing a finger, “you must stay away from the pond, and the woods, and be careful of the Nokken.”

Now Ollie scanned the far edge of the pond, but their grandfather was nowhere in sight. Nina turned to her, a stick in hand—they had been poking the ground looking for moles. “Where did he go?”

“I don’t know,” Ollie said.

None of the trees had leaves back on them yet, but the woods were big, and everything was brown and gray, and their grandfather had been wearing his heavy brown coat, so now Ollie bet he had stepped back into the woods. She had seen a deer drinking from the pond once, and he had disappeared the same way. And once she thought she had seen a horse, but he disappeared, too. It was easy to disappear in the woods, and that was why they couldn’t go in there. They were supposed to stay

by the swing set, and the green playhouse, and plastic gray castle, but Nina always wanted to go look down at the pond. Nina loved animals.

Now they turned and the old man was suddenly behind them.

"Papa," Nina said again. She dropped the stick and ran, grabbing the old man by the legs, and hugging him tight. Their Papa picked her up. Nina hugged him tighter, and the old man kissed her cheek. Then he looked down.

"Hello, Ollie," he said.

Ollie went over and he picked her up, too.

Their Papa was old, but he wasn't that old; he wasn't crooked and all hunched over—like their father's grandmother—and he didn't walk with a cane. But he was kind of bald when he didn't wear his baseball hat, and he had a gray mustache. Ollie and Nina had been going over his house during the day for a long, long time whenever both their mother and father had to work, but now they weren't going over there anymore, and Helga had come to live with them because everyone said their Papa was old. He didn't live in his house anymore either, not for a while, because their mother had sent him to a big building to rest.

A lot of people didn't rest in that place though, and some of them were either crying, or screaming, and Ollie saw one once hurrying down the hall without any clothes on. But some of them just sat in their wheelchairs with their heads tilted over on their shoulders, so she supposed those people were resting. Their Papa didn't like it there much though, even when their mother bought him bags of butterscotch candy, and he was always telling them so.

"This place is for nitwits," he would whisper to Ollie and Nina.

"It's not for nitwits," their mother would say, "it's for people your age. It's good for you to be around people your age. Good for you to have company."

"I had company," Ollie heard him say once. "And you took them away."

The rest place had a nun sitting at the desk when you walked in, and sometimes she would give you a piece of candy, and then you had to walk down a long hall passing pictures of Jesus, and God, and an old man called the Pope. The rest place had a funny smell usually, and a lot of times you would see trays with eaten food on them in the halls.

"Papa." Nina squeezed his neck again. Nina was always squeezing people she liked, hugging them tight. "I thought you were at the rest place?"

"Oh, I'm still there," he said. "I just thought I'd come visit. I miss you. I don't like to be away from you guys."

"Where's your car?" Ollie asked, looking towards the driveway.

"It needs a tune up, so I decided to walk."

"Through the woods?" Nina asked.

"Yes," he said, "through the woods. I like the woods."

"And did you see any bears?" Nina asked.

"I saw three. But I growled really loud, and I scared them

away.”

“You should be careful around bears, Papa,” said Ollie. They’re wild animals.”

“But they can be nice,” said Nina. “And cute.”

The old man put them down, and Ollie looked back at the window. Still no sign of Helga. Sometimes she fell asleep watching T.V.

“Do you want to come in the house, Papa?” Nina asked him, looking up. “We can ask Helga to make you some cocoa. And then you’ll be warm.”

The old man looked up at the house, and then crouched down. “That’s okay,” he said. “I better stay out here. I wouldn’t want to worry your Mommy.”

“But how are you going to get home?” Ollie asked.

He stood then, and did two jumping jacks. “I can run. I’m very fast.”

“That’s a long way Papa,” Ollie said.

“Well, I found little house out in the woods,” he said. “I can stay there a little while. Build a nice fire.”

“Papa!” said Nina. “You’ll get burned.”

“Not if I’m careful.”

Ollie looked out across the pond, into the trees. She couldn’t see any house out there, and she wondered if he was fooling. There was noise up above them, and then three ducks landed on the pond. One stuck his head in the water, shook his neck.

“And maybe I can cook a duck for supper,” their Papa said, smiling. He took a deep breath. “We could try and catch one. Jump right in the water after them.”

“No, Papa,” Nina said. “Don’t eat the ducks. That would be mean. And the water is too cold.”

The old man smiled. “Okay,” he said. “What if we just visit my house then?”

Ollie looked inside the glass door to check on Helga. The T.V. was on, and Helga was on the couch. Snoring. People on the T.V. were pointing at each other. Angry faces, yelling, and then the T.V. show faded to a commercial.

Their Papa led them through the woods. Ollie was a little worried, but not too worried, because if they were with him, they couldn’t get in trouble for leaving the yard, but she was worried that he might get in trouble, and they might strap him to the bed in his new home like some of the old men she had seen there.

And she was a little worried about the Nokken.

Helga liked to talk about the Nokken, and she knew all about them from her old home in the Black Forest. Helga had said that the Nokken were usually near the water, but they could be anywhere in the woods. And the woods were bigger once you got inside, and there were a lot of places to hide. There was a path that Ollie and Nina sometimes walked on with their father when he took them looking for rabbits. Their

Papa took them this way now, but they didn't see any rabbits—just a squirrel leaping up in the trees—and then he took them off on another path they hadn't walked on before, and when Ollie looked back she couldn't see the house anymore, and she hoped Helga was still asleep. Nina was talking to Papa about her little stuffed wolf named Woofie. Woofie had a bow tie and a fancy striped jacket and had been lost since before even Christmas, and their mother thought she had maybe left him at their Papa's.

Nina still cried sometimes in bed at night about Woofie. She used to squeeze him a lot and say he was her favorite and she took him everywhere—even once to the beach where he got all covered with sand.

"Have you found him, Papa?" Nina asked now.

"Found who?" he asked.

"Woofie."

"Woofie?"

"Yeah, Woofie," Nina said. "You know? Woofie."

"Oh, yes, Woofie. No, I still haven't found him, but once I get home I'm going to look one more. Maybe under the bed."

"When are you going home?" Ollie asked.

"Maybe tomorrow," he said. "Maybe the next day."

"But Mummy says your house is for sale Papa," Ollie said.

"It's Papa's house," Nina snapped, "and no one can sell it if he doesn't want them to."

"But they have a sign, Nina," said Ollie, "and the sign says 'For Sale.'"

"Oh, I'll take that sign and throw it in the pond," Papa said, "and then I'll go inside and look for Woofie. I bet he's under the bed."

They came to a little river in the woods now, and there were some rocks you could step on to get across, but the rocks were far apart and covered with slippery green stuff so their Papa picked them up and carried them over one at a time. Little rivers like this sometimes had spirits, too, Helga had told them, and if you listened really closely to the water trickling sometimes you could hear them talking or singing.

"What are spirits, Papa?" Nina asked now.

"They're like ghosts, Nina," Ollie said, "except they're not always scary." She thought about it a minute. "But they can sometimes be scary. Right, Papa?"

Nina froze, stopped walking, and said she wouldn't look at the river again, so their Papa went and picked her up. "Oh, they're not scary. They're a little like fairies."

"Like the Nokken, Papa?" Ollie asked.

"Nokken?" said the old man.

"Helga always says stay away from the pond because of the Nokken," said Ollie.

"And what is a Nokken?"

"I don't know, Papa," said Ollie. "Not really anyway. Helga says they had a lot of them where she came from, and it's like a fairy or

a ghost, and they can read your brain and they pretend to be nice, but they're not, and they try to pull you into the water, or sometimes pull you onto the ice when it's thin. And then you fall in and can't get out."

"And then you drown," said Nina.

"Well, I've never heard of any silly old Nokken," Papa said, "and most fairies that I know are good. Especially fairies that live in the water. They're always nice."

"Does the tooth fairy live in the water?" Nina asked.

"That's where she hides all the teeth," he said. "And then they become little white stones on the bed of the river."

"The bed?" Ollie asked, looking back.

"Where the fairies sleep," he said. "And stay forever. I like to think about forever."

He lifted them over a rock wall, and then they came to a small house that looked really old, but the front door was missing and it had a hole in the roof. Their Papa said it was his cabin now, but he didn't get a chance yet to fix the roof yet, but it didn't matter much because he liked to lie on the floor at night and look up at the stars.

"But you must get really cold, Papa," said Ollie.

"Oh, I get a little cold, but when I do, I just build a fire, and that keeps me warm."

He brought them into the cabin, and there was fireplace built into the wall. The fireplace was made out of round rocks, and there were ashes everywhere. There was a bed in the cabin, but the mattress was dirty, and half of it was touching the floor. There was a pile of white blankets on the floor, and there was a small round table.

"Who lived here before you, Papa?" Nina asked.

"Somebody who wasn't very neat, and wasn't very good at fixing holes in the roof. It might have been dwarfs."

Nina was staring at him again, wide-eyed, but Ollie wasn't sure she believed him. "But how did you know it was here?" she asked.

"Oh, I saw it one day a long time ago when I was out here walking one day."

"Papa, if those dwarfs come back, you better run, like this," Nina said, and she went running across the cabin to show him how. There was a lot of trash on the floor. Cigarette boxes and bear cans. And more old clothes. Something that looked like it might have been a sweater. She tripped on an old shoe and fell, and then she rolled over and sat on her bum, but she didn't cry.

"Dwarfs wouldn't hurt him, Nina," Ollie said, "they just like to dig for gold and sing songs."

When the old man brought them back to the yard, he kissed them both goodbye and made them promise that it would be their secret that he was living in the woods. Ollie went in for a minute—Helga was still asleep on the couch—and took two bananas, a bottle of water, and a package of crackers, and gave them to him before he went back into the woods. Nina started crying when he left.

Their father got home before their mother that day, and when Ollie asked where she was, he said she was at the rest home. Their father was tall and thin with blue eyes, and whenever he got his hair cut, Nina told Ollie that it made him look bald. "He's not bald, Nina," Ollie would whisper, "his hair is just really short."

"Well, Papa is bald," Nina would say. "He just has maybe three, or maybe seventeen hairs left, and he's an old man."

"Papa is much older than Daddy, Nina," Ollie would say.

A lot of times their father would be singing—their Mummy hated it when he was singing because she said he sounded like he was in pain—but tonight he was mostly quiet. He said he was going to cook some macaroni and cheese, but then their mother came home, said she would cook supper, and then she was crying. Their father said he would just order pizza then, but she said no, and said that she wanted to keep busy. It was better to keep busy, she said, but then even when she did, cutting some onions and celery, she was still crying, and Ollie wondered if it was because Papa had run away, but she was afraid to say anything. Nina went over and hugged her legs, pressing her face tight into them and rubbing it back and forth, but their mother just kissed her head, and told them to go play.

The playroom was down the hall. The room was a mess, and all their pots and pans and knives and forks from their play kitchen were on the floor. So were their Beanie Babies, their car, and Kermit the Frog. Nina was wearing her baker's hat, and pretending to make some brownies, and Ollie was helping, but she was also trying to listen. Their mother started crying again, and she could hear their father whispering, and then their mother said something about "it's like he's not even there," and Ollie knew she had to be talking about Papa. She wanted to ask Nina if they should tell them that he was out in the woods, but then she was afraid Nina might get scared, and then she might cry. And then if they told, Papa might be mad. He didn't usually get mad, but she had seen him mad once when he was watching football and his team was losing. He yelled at the T.V.

The next day he was back in the yard when Ollie looked out the window. Helga was in the living room again, but today she was wearing tights and lying on her back on the floor. When Ollie asked her what she was doing, she said she was stretching.

"Exercising is very good for the heart, young lady," she said. "You must take care of the heart." She sat up and took a bite of her doughnut. She helped them get their hats and coats on—it was a little colder today, she said—and she went to the back door to let them out, Ollie couldn't see her Papa anymore, and she thought he might have gone back in the woods.

Nina ran towards the hill above the pond, and Ollie scanned the yard. Looked at the shed. It was dark inside the shed, but she thought she saw something moving in the window. She was taking slow careful steps to get a better look when her Papa was suddenly beside her.

"I thought you might be in the shed," she said.

"No," he said, "this time of year there are only mice in the shed."

"That's why my Mummy won't go in there," she said.

Nina saw them then, and she came, running.

"Oh, your Mummy has always been afraid of silly things," the old man said to Ollie, "like mice, and dark sheds, and the pond. She's a silly woman."

He took them back to his house in the woods, but it looked better than it had the day before. He had swept the floor, and it looked like he had had a fire in the fireplace because there was a big pile of gray ashes in there now, some still glowing red.

"Where did you get the logs for the fire, Papa?" Ollie asked.

"Oh, some friends of mine." Their Papa had made a table out of a board and a big tree stump, and surrounding it were more tree stumps, standing up right. "I had some company last night," he said, "so I needed to make sure I had a table and everybody had a place to sit." He went to the fire place, broke some twigs and threw them on, and then once it was going, he put on another log. The fire crackled, and sparks and ash floated across the room.

"Who did you have for company, Papa?" Ollie sat down at the table.

"Oh, just a fox, a wolf, a dwarf and some elves. The dwarf wouldn't sit at the table though because he didn't trust the elves, but he was nice enough to cut the wood."

"A wolf, Papa?" Nina said, her eyes wide. "In the house?"

"Oh, he wasn't a bad wolf, and he is old now, so he doesn't have much energy to go chasing people or the other animals. And besides, he can't see very well, so he wears a pair of little glasses. I just gave him some chicken broth, and then a little tea."

"What about bunnies?" Nina asked.

"Oh, a couple of the bunnies were looking in the window, but even though the wolf was old, they still weren't sure if they should trust him—he still has very big teeth. And they knew they couldn't trust the fox even though he swore to me he was a gentlemen, and would never cause trouble as a guest in my house. But foxes are foxes and you can never be sure. The dwarf of course drank too much beer, and then I was afraid he might not find his way back through the woods, so I let him sleep by the fire."

"Where does he live, Papa?" Nina asked.

"He said he lives in a small cave not very far from here."

"Can we see him?"

"Not during the day. He would never come out during the day, and if we tried to wake him, I'm afraid he might get grumpy. He isn't a bad dwarf, but he has a temper if you wake him up when he's trying to sleep."

Ollie looked around the room, trying to picture the scene her grandfather was depicting, scanning for the signs that the event had

actually happened. "Were you cold last night, Papa?" she asked.

"Not too cold," he said, "The dwarf snored a lot though, as dwarfs are apt to do, so I didn't sleep very well."

The old man smiled at her, and Ollie listened for sounds in the woods. Footsteps. Possibilities. The wolf or the fox approaching, coming back. Slowly. Sneaking. She wondered if they walked on two legs like the ones she saw in the books her mother read to them, or if they ran around on four legs like regular foxes and wolves. Either way the wolf's tongue would be hanging out, wet, and he would look hungry. A bird called out in the trees above them, and then something shook in the branches. She looked out into the woods. The sky was cloudy today, and the woods were very dark.

"Mummy is worried about you, Papa," she said at last.

"Me?" she said. "She doesn't have to worry about me. I'm her father."

"She's worried because you're not at that place anymore," Ollie said, "and they don't know where you went."

"They don't?" he said. "I thought I left them a note."

"Maybe you should tell them you're living in the woods," Ollie said quietly.

"Well, hopefully I won't be living here long," he said.

"But where will you go?"

"You know, I'm not sure. Maybe Texas. Help with the cows."

"I like cows, Papa," Nina said.

The old man leaned over and patted her head. "We all like cows."

That night, in their bedroom, Ollie went to their window, and looked out to see if she could see a fire in the woods, but it was very dark out, and she could barely even see the trees. Nina was playing with their Barbies. She thought if she saw Papa down there in the yard, maybe she could sneak him into the cellar. But she couldn't see him. And then she pictured him in the woods with Wolf, the Fox, the Dwarf, and the Elves, all drinking mugs of beer, and she wondered if the dwarf was sleeping by the fire again. She hoped they had a fire because they had gone to the store with their mother when she got home from work, and it had been cold.

They were in the car, buckled in their car seats, when their mother told them that Papa wasn't doing well. She looked into the mirror on the windshield as she talked them, her chin raised a little. Their mother had blonde hair, and she usually wore it up unless she was going out somewhere with their father. Her eyes were blue, and she had small scar on her chin; she told Ollie and Nina she had got the scar when she fell off her bike when she was little.

Nina had her second stuffed wolf—"Woofie's Cousin"—that Papa had bought her when they couldn't find Woofie last fall, but his cousin was a little bigger, had a longer tail, and he didn't wear fancy clothes like Woofie. Nina was talking to him though, and sometimes

when she got excited she would clench him tight in her hands and shake him a little. Then she would pull him close and hug him.

"So, I want you girls to say a prayer for him that he'll be okay," their mother said.

"I think he'll be okay, Mummy," Ollie said now. She wondered why her mother wouldn't just tell them that they couldn't find him, and then she wondered if maybe he did stop back at the rest place and check in. She felt something by not telling their mother what they knew, but she wasn't sure what that something was. If she did tell, she thought Papa might get mad, and then they'd make him go back, but if she didn't tell and her mother and father found out, then they would be mad, too.

"He's really old," Ollie added now. "So, he's been taking care of himself for a long time. He told me and Nina he even had to take care of himself when he was little. And sometimes he had to take care of his little brothers and sisters—cooking spaghetti for them, and hot dogs. Back then they didn't even have T.V. so if they wanted to watch a show they had to stick socks on their hands and make them talk, like puppets."

"He is really old, honey," their mother said. "That's the problem. Sometimes when people get that old, they can't take care of themselves anymore. Papa forgets to do things—like shut off the stove, or drain the water in the tub, or to shut all the windows before going to bed. And he forgets to take his medicine, and to call people back, and sometimes he even forgets to eat, so it's dangerous for him to be alone."

The next day both their mother and father went to the rest home again

Helga fixed them lunch. Chicken noodle soup, and peanut butter and crackers. Helga was wearing an apron, and talking about how tired she was.

"Just exhausted," she said. "Work, work, work. I tell you girls, you get older, you marry a rich man, and then you be all set. I was all set to marry, back in Germany, but then he joined the Navy, and boom! I never see him again."

"Do you think the Nokkens got him?" Ollie asked.

"On the ocean? No. I don't think so. The Nokken do not like salt water. Just fresh water. And this is why I tell you girls to stay away from the pond. If I there, fine, I see them, and shoe them away. But alone, never."

"Would they run from you?" Ollie asked.

"Oh, yes, I make them run very fast."

"What do they look like?" Ollie asked.

"Oh, they can look many different things. Sometimes they may look like a very handsome man in very fancy clothes, and at other times, a kind old lady. Or sometimes an ugly old lady, like a witch. Or sometimes a small child, like you. But usually if they look like a child they are Myling, and not a Nokken." Helga licked the spoon. "I have even heard that they sometimes look like a horse. A beautiful white horse. The thing is, they really don't look like anything, and so they can

trick you by making you see something you are not. They are very clever, but you must never listen to them, even when they play beautiful music and try to enchant you. I read much about them in the Folkesagn when I was a girl. There is also the Huldra—she is very beautiful but you can tell it is her because she has a long cow's tail she hides under her skirt. And of course the Myling and Fosegrimen. But here I think, we just worry about the Nokken."

Ollie looked at her. "How come?"

Helga raised her eyebrows a bit. "Well," she said, "because of the pond."

She was sleeping again on the exercise mats, when their grandfather appeared at the sliding glass door. He tapped a little to get their attention. Ollie was watching The Wiggles. Greg was singing about Fruit Salad, Yummy, Yummy.

Nina was upstairs playing.

Ollie looked at Helga, and then she snuck out onto the back porch, sliding the door shut quietly behind her.

"Mummy went to the rest place to talk to them again about you, Papa," she said. "What if they go to the police?"

"The police?" the old man said. "Well, what are they going to do? Arrest me? " He made his hand look like gun. "Hands up Mac! You're under arrest!"

"It's not funny, Papa." Ollie looked at him closely. He looked a little more white, and his hair was sticking up like he just got out of bed. You must be cold at night. You can't stay in the woods forever, Papa."

The old man patted her head. "Not forever. Just for now. I don't like being far away from you guys."

"You must be hungry. Do you have any crackers left?"

He smiled. "I had a little but the dwarf ate them—right after he drank the rest of my beer. I have to get some more. But now, I was thinking maybe I can catch a fish. Do you want to help me catch a fish?"

Ollie looked back in at Helga to see if she were still asleep. "We can't be gone long. Do you want me to get Nina? She's upstairs, and she'll be sad if she doesn't see you. " She looked back to her Papa but when she did she was on the porch alone. The old man was gone. Inside Helga had sat up on the matt and was looking her way.

It was a few days later, that their mother got a call from the nursing home, telling her that she had to come. Ollie hadn't seen their Papa since that day on the porch. She looked out the window. The leaves were starting to come out on the trees, and everything was turning green, making it hard to see very far into the woods now. The sky was really cloudy, and it looked like it was going to rain again.

"Maybe if Papa built a boat, he escaped down the river," Nina said to her. Nina was beside her at the window, still in her Winnie the Pooh pajamas. The same as Ollie's.

"How would he build a boat, Nina, if he can't cut down any trees?"

"He could use an axe, or the wolf could chop them down with his teeth, like this," she said, chomping.

"He doesn't have an axe."

"Daddy has one, so maybe Papa stole it from the shed."

"Papa wouldn't steal anything, Nina. And the river isn't big enough for a boat."

Now the rain had started. Ollie could see the drops hitting the pond. Circles growing, bigger and bigger.

When their parents finally got home, Ollie and Nina were in their fort in their bedroom. The fort was made of blankets and pillows, and Nina had taken their Winnie the Pooh Light and put it on the floor inside, so they could see their dolls—Baby Pousie, the twin clowns Lovey and Lovey's Sister, the Panda Bear named Boo Boo, and the doll with the Red Hair. Claudia. Six of the Barbies. And Woofie's cousin. They were all having a tea party inside the fort.

Claudia was fighting with Lovey's Sister, when Ollie looked over and saw their mother laying on the floor, her head resting on her arm, as she peeked inside, watching them. Her face was very white, and she looked like she had been crying again, but she also looked like she was trying hard to smile. Ollie heard their father talking to someone on the phone in their bedroom across the hall, and then their mother told them that once he was off the phone, she and their father had to talk to them.

* * *

Nina was crying again. "Ollie, if Papa has gone to the angels that means he's dead, and we're never going to see him again." Nina's face was all red, and she was hugging Woofie's Cousin tight.

"Yes, we will Nina," Ollie said. "Just not for a long time."

Nina shook her head. "But I don't want to wait a long time."

"You have to. Once we're old, we'll see him. That's how it goes. Just like Daddy said." Ollie had been crying, too, but now she had stopped. Their mother and father were downstairs. They said the girls could sleep in their bed if they wanted. Just a little later.

"But we should tell them he was living in the woods," Nina said again now. She had already said it like five times. "And then maybe they can do something."

"He already died, Nina. They can't do anything."

"But maybe it wasn't him that was dead. Maybe they don't know that. And maybe they can save him."

"They can't save him if he already died."

"You don't know that Ollie!" yelled Nina. "They might be able to do something!"

Baby Poussie was lying on her back on the floor, staring at the ceiling. The fort had fallen down, and they hadn't fixed it. But their father had taken the Pooh Light and put it back on the bookcase before it

got broken or caused a fire. It was dark now, and it was quiet downstairs. Helga had brought them up some chicken noodle soup and Goldfish crackers on a tray, and then she had hugged them both, and kissed their heads before she went back downstairs. Ollie went to the window, and looked out on the woods, hoping that she might see the fire going out there somewhere. The Wolf, and the Dwarf, and the Fox. Waiting for her Papa.

The next day their mother and father got all dressed up and went to the place where people would come to visit their Papa even though he was dead. Nina said that that meant he wasn't really dead, like not in the ground dead, because other people could still visit with him, and pray that he wakes up, but Ollie wasn't so sure. They had wanted to go, too, and she had cried a little, and Nina had cried a lot, but their father said no—said they were too little.

"But they might need closure," their mother said. She didn't know they were listening in the next room. "Otherwise, they won't understand."

"Of course, they're not going to understand," their father said. "They're not even four."

The phone had been ringing all day, and Mrs. Clark had come by with lasagna, some bread, and more macaroni and cheese. Helga ate most of the lasagna while their mother and father were arguing about whether Ollie and Nina could go, and as she was licking her fork, she said, "You know girls, I must agree with your father. Things like this are no places for small children. It could give you nightmares for a very long time. My grandfather, he was your age during the War, and he saw some terrible, terrible things. And now he still has nightmares. And sometimes, he wets his pants. You don't want to wet your pants or your Mum will make you start wearing diapers again."

Ollie didn't want to wear diapers again—Billy Tudor who lived down the street still wore diapers and he was going into kindergarten next year, but their mother said he "had problems." Ollie didn't want people thinking they "had problems." But Nina said she didn't mind if it meant she got to see Papa again.

Helga put on the Wiggles for them once their parents were gone.

There were flowers in the yard. Small purple flowers with white and yellow middles, and the grass was suddenly all green, but it was still a little cold today, so Helga put their winter hats on them. Nina had found a little frog, and they were scared that their cat Ralph might eat him so they put him in a pail with grass, dirt, rocks and twigs. The frog looked like he wanted to get out of there though and was sitting on top of the rock, staring up at them. They had him in their play house, and the frog had already escaped twice. Then he peed in Ollie's hand. Now Ollie was working in the kitchen, making mud pies, and Nina said she was going to bring the frog to the pond so he could be free again.

"We're not supposed to go down there alone, Nina," Ollie said. "If Helga sees, we'll be in trouble."

“Helga’s not going to see, Ollie. She’s probably busy eating all the Fruit Loops. And I’ll run really quick. I’m really fast.”

Ollie watched her sister hurry across the lawn holding the bucket out straight in front of her. Ollie sifted some sand into a pie plate, getting out the twigs and small stones, and then once it was full, she patted it flat. She listened for Nina, but all she heard was a duck call out. More ducks had come back to the pond, and the Lilly pads were growing again. Their grandfather had been in heaven for almost four days now, and Ollie had stopped looking for the fire at night in the woods. He had probably made up the story about the wolf and the dwarf, she thought now, just doing make believe, but that was okay, because it was fun. Stories were like that.

Their mother had promised to take them to the graveyard to visit him, but their Dad said she wasn’t ready yet. They had gone to the church, wearing yellow dresses with white sweaters, but they didn’t see him then. Just his coffin, covered in a white sheet with an American flag draped over it. And then in the graveyard, his coffin was covered with flowers but it wasn’t in the ground. Nina had looked at the coffin and whispered in Ollie’s ear. “I don’t think he’s in there.”

Now Ollie left the play house, and looked up at their real one. Helga wasn’t at the door, or in the windows. Ollie called out to Nina, but Nina didn’t answer, and she didn’t think she had come back from the pond. Ollie put down her mud pie and went to the top of the hill. Ralph galloped by, and then ran halfway up a tree, and stopped, clinging to the bark, hanging there and staring at her.

Ollie stopped at the top. Nina was crouched down at the edge of the pond, looking into her reflection in the water. The reflection of Nina looked a lot bigger than the real Nina and was kind of blurry and dark. Nina lifted the frog from the bucket, and he jumped from her hand, all four legs spread, and landed with splash. He scrambled a little in the water, making ripples in Nina’s reflection and then he lay still. Just floating. Nina stood, and poked the water with a stick, sending more ripples, and then when the water was still again, her reflection was back in the water, but now there was another reflection there. Papa was there, too. Standing right behind her.

Nina leaned over to touch him, and the old man’s reflection began to drift. Separating from Nina’s. Ollie started down the hill. The old man in the water was moving away, out towards the center of the pond, and his image was growing bigger, thinner, as he did, breaking in the ripples. Nina leaned over again, and then she jumped, hitting with a splash. Ollie tripped, and slid a little down the hill. She almost stopped, started to cry, but she couldn’t stop, couldn’t cry—Nina was in the pond. Nina tried to stand up, but she was spitting water, a leaf stuck to her cheek. Their Papa’s image was gone now, spread so big that she couldn’t even see him. A noise escaped Nina’s lips, and then the ducks all quacked at once, and flew up and out of the water. Ollie watched them go, disappearing over the trees; she had never seen them fly so high. But

Nina had to get out of the water—Nina couldn't swim, and it was too cold. And they weren't supposed to go near the water. Trouble, Ollie thought. It was going to be a lot of trouble.

When she reached the water's edge, she found a long stick, and held it out.

"You have to grab it," she said, but Nina didn't look like she could hear her. She had turned away from Ollie, turned so she was again facing the middle of the pond, and now there was a man out there, looking as if he was trying to swim. Soaking wet, and what little hair he had left plastered to his bald head. Papa. Again. But now not just a reflection in the water. But really there. Trying to swim.

Nina called out to him, and he raised his arms straight up into the air, and then he went under. Nina took a step forward, and Ollie yelled for her to stop. Their grandfather broke the surface again, sending rippling rings across the pond. He opened his mouth to call out help, but no sound came out of his mouth. But there was something. It hadn't been there before. But now it was. Music. It sounded like music their father sometimes listened to in his den at night, the lights low while he read a book or did something on the computer. Soft and distant, and almost making her want to sleep. Violins.

Nina was now up to her neck, and their Papa again went under. He stayed under for longer this time, and once he did, Nina jumped forward again and tried to swim. The dog paddle. It was the only thing she knew how to do, only thing Ollie knew how to do, too, but Nina wasn't very good at it. Ollie called out for Nina to stop, but she didn't. And then Papa was in the middle of the pond again, but Nina went under.

Nina's head popped up. Ollie held out the stick one more time, but Nina was still facing away from her, and now the music was louder. Ollie called out one more time, and when Nina still wouldn't turn, Ollie took a step forward, and then she jumped.

The splash made Nina turn, but Nina's head was barely above the surface. The water was freezing. Ollie kicked her feet, heading towards her, but their Papa was still moving backwards, further across the pond. Ollie could only see the top of his head.

Nina started to cry, her face scared, and as Ollie tried to get hold of her arm, she went all the way under, too, her hat coming off. Ollie kicked her feet, pulling Nina as she did, and then her feet touched something, the rock or the bottom. She pressed her foot against it, and pushed off, kicking again, but Nina was crying louder, and fighting against her. Ollie swallowed a mouthful of water, raised her face to the surface, spit and then coughed, splashing again, reaching for the shore.

When the water was shallow enough, she tried to stand, but stumbled backwards. A frog sat on a rock, staring at her, just a few feet away. Nina sat up, soaked and shivering, and staring across the pond. She was still crying.

Ollie looked out at the middle of the pond. Now there were only

bubbles, ripples, in the spot where their Papa had been, but the water was quieting. She could still hear the music, but that was fading, too, and then it was gone. The only noise, Nina's sobs. Ollie looked up at the sky, solid gray, and then the breeze picked up, and a few of last year's leaves blew out upon the water. She looked across the pond again, and now there was person standing there, staring at them, having just climbed from the water. A man, but a younger man with longish hair, not Papa. Dressed in a cloak. His face dark, and his eyes like black holes. He stared at the girls a moment longer. And then he turned and walked into the woods.

TANNER McSWAIN

IN AND AROUND OWL SKULL, 2014

I have some initial hesitation about Erik Hammer from Lyontämer smoking a marijuana cigarette in our studio lounge at seven in the morning. It isn't Erik Hammer that troubles me—and I want to emphasize that I am only mildly troubled—nor is it the marijuana cigarette. I have smoked a few of those in my day. I am in a rock and roll band after all, so I am no stranger to drugs, including drugs that are even less wholesome than marijuana cigarettes. And Erik Hammer cuts a harmless enough figure, as famously destructive hair metal drummers go, pressing a chip machine button, waiting a moment, then pressing the same button again. He looks longer in the tooth than I would have pictured—fringe vest, black leather chaps, ass-length ponytail—but who wouldn't after thirty-odd years of rocking and, I think we can safely say, engaging in less than wholesome habits? No, what troubles me is that if Erik Hammer is here (he is) and if Robby Coulson is not here (I don't see him or anyone else), that means Scully double-booked the studio again, which means that Robby will be in a mood, which means that we will get minimal rocking done today.

I don't see Scully, so I introduce myself to Erik Hammer. He greets me warmly and calls me "brother" in his gravel voice and requests my help getting the sour cream and onion chips out of the chip machine, so I put a dollar and a quarter in and they pop on out. I ask if he has seen Scully, and he has not. I ask if he is working on a solo album or something, and he says no, he's here to jam with Robby. Am I here to jam with Robby, he asks? I tell him I am, and he says "Fuckin' right" and hands me his marijuana cigarette so he can open his sour cream and onion chips. I'm unsure if he wants me to smoke it or just hold it for him.

Bass has her feet up on the big red couch in the control room. The swivel chair at the board is empty, and the lights in the main room haven't been turned on yet.

"Did you see Erik Hammer from Lyontämer?" Bass says. "Isn't that bullshit?"

"He seems nice," I say. "Where is everybody?"

"Nice? He's a scab, is what he is. Drums is an asshole, but he deserved better. I can't believe Robby did him like that."

"I don't know what you're talking about," I say.

Bass sits upright and opens her big, yellow eyes all the way, poking her neck out like a ruffled chicken. "You don't know what

happened? Do you live under a rock?"

"Can you just tell me?"

"Oh my god, Guitar, you actually don't know. Do you not read the newswires? Do you not read Buzzfeed? Do you have no interest in the future of our band and our like livelihoods?"

Bass, of course, knows that I don't read the newswires and Buzzfeed. She should avoid them too! Robby does. Catalyst has been about speaking truth to power and embracing our true selves through the transformative power of heavy metal for almost twenty years now, and Bass and Drums and I have been a part of it for nearly three years. Long enough that Bass should have absorbed our ethos. I am disappointed in Bass.

"I think you're trying to imply," I tell her sternly, "that Robby fired Drums and replaced him with Erik Hammer from Lyontämer, and I think that sounds improbable. But."

"Your head and your neck and the top part of your shoulders are inside of your ass."

"But! Even if the worst has happened and Drums is out and Erik Hammer is in. Maybe that's better for Robby?"

Bass settles back and hefts her chin up at me. "Fuck you."

"I love Drums! I'm not saying that I don't love Drums. He is an impeccable drummer. But is he as good of a drummer as Erik Hammer from Lyontämer? Can he support Robby's vision as well as Erik Hammer can? I'm not saying that the answer is no, but I'm saying that it's a question we have to ask ourselves. I'm sure that Robby is asking himself that. Erik Hammer has been rocking since before Drums was born. Robby and Scully are always pushing us to be better and more self-actualized. And frankly, Drums' self is less actualized than Erik Hammer's."

Bass collapses into the red couch and smothers her face with a throw pillow, howling into the throw pillow. "You're a Kapo and I'm the only one who cares."

I hear someone trundling about in the machine room, and I check to see if it's Scully.

There are more than thirty guitars on the wall in the machine room. They're for the session musicians and for us. Robby likes to manage every aspect of the production, so he has us use Scully's guitars. In the old days, before any of us except Robby of course were in Catalyst, when some of us (like Drums) were gleams in our fathers' eyes, Owl Skull was the state of the art Chicago studio. Al Scully had CD dupe machines when everyone else was still using tapes. Look, I'm not going to pretend that I understand all the ins and outs and the history of recording and Owl Skull, but this was the place to be for perfectionists, and there was no bigger perfectionist than Robby Coulson of Catalyst. Legend has it that he recorded all the parts on Purr Capita himself, and that legend is true. I am reverent of the machine room and the tools that Robby Coulson manipulated to sculpt the most important artifacts of art in the twentieth

century. I am reverent of pristine Owl Skull and of gray, fat Al Scully who is still here, fiddling with a shelf of servers. I am reverent that I get to be an essential part of the hardest rocking rock band of the twentieth century. "It's the twenty-first century now though," Bass would say. Well, poop in your soup, Bass. I remain reverent.

I greet Scully softly in an attempt not to startle him. He grunts and does not look up from his work. His wide turtleshell glasses rest on the tip of his nose and he is focused on a column of green, flickering, important-looking lights.

"We'll get started in a minute," he says, his back to me. "Robby called and said to start on Ode to Tiresias without him. He'll be here in a minute."

"Is Erik Hammer playing with us today?"

"He is."

And that is that. We play Ode to Tiresias live six times with Erik Hammer on the kit, and he really does kill it. Steady as a metronome, and he knew the song already. Drums never shows up, and no one acknowledges his absence except for Bass's burrowing wild eyes any time I meet her gaze. Bass sounds a little loose today. I think I am fairly tight.

Around lunch, Robby Coulson comes into the control room and talks to Scully for a bit while we rock. He looks deflated, hunching in his prison-stripe sweater, with a big bandage on the side of his neck. I cannot hear the conversation, obviously, but I take the bobbing of his glistening, Charlie Brown head in time with our rocking to be a good sign. Ode to Tiresias remains the hanging meat of a song, all atmospheric and movement without our skeleton to give us shape. After that take, Robby comes into the main room, all smiles, and we shred the motherfucker. I'd be surprised if half the South Side didn't lose power from all the electricity we were bringing into that room.

At the end of the take, Robby tells Bass and I that we were loose and sends us home for the day. He and Scully and Erik Hammer could record the other parts. It seems an inappropriate time to ask about Drums. Bass and I leave, and I pick up Erik Hammer's bag of chips from the blue chair in the lounge, which is stuffed with no fewer than eight roaches of marijuana cigarettes, and throw it in the garbage. Once we are out in the sun with the door closed behind us, Bass makes a slicing motion with her thumb across her throat, and then gets on her moped and rides away without a helmet.

Erik Hammer proves to be an odd duck. I have little opinion about him one way or another, except that Robby appears to enjoy his company and their budding friendship—it's possible that they're old friends, as I've learned that aging rock stars all tend to know one another and to relate to one another's anecdotes—and anything that inspires Robby spurs us to rock just slightly harder. Erik Hamer and Robby have

an undeniable chemistry. I am very interested in hearing the demos, but Robby works on them with Scully every night after he sends us home for being loose, and I never find an opportunity to ask about the demos or Drums, who does appear to be gone. But not me and Bass. And not Erik Hammer!

Among other charming traits, Erik Hammer has reverence neither for the Owl Skull nor for the history of Catalyst nor for our new album *The Ursine Sepulchre* nor for his own nor anyone else's bodies. Some days, he does not show up at seven in the morning, and when he does, he is often stoned or hungover, and one weekend he does not show up at all. When he returns from his bender, he is accompanied by a woman who never takes off her sunglasses, and while Bass and I are tuning up in the main room, he and the woman walk right past us into iso room 3—which has glass doors, by the way—and he goes to town on her.

The way we made the last album—my and Bass and Drums' first with Catalyst; Robby's tenth—it was very professional. Robby gave us the blueprint of an album, and we built it on grids and struts. We consumed no drugs, little alcohol, and were far too fatigued to even consider sex. Robby and Scully mixed the album, and then it was gone, out of our hands. It could have been tighter. It was not well received. But what could you expect? For about five years in the 90s, Catalyst was the biggest band in the world, but Robby was too singular for the masses. The hipsters never had his back. I have his back, and so did Drums, and in her way, so does Bass. I am not sure how Erik Hammer is going to have Robby's back when he is so distracted by his own fifty-year-old thingy.

Robby comes in every day, gaunt and exhausted. It is clear that he is working without us, rerecording our parts. Sometimes he sends us home and tells us to practice. Other times we finish a take, a take that sounds to my own plebeian ears like every other take, and Robby says "ok" and disappears into the control room with Scully to work on it. That absence of remarkable error is the keenest of compliments.

Despite—or perhaps because of—his predilections, Erik Hammer is never less than perfect. He can drum like Thunder God Rick Allen, machine-gun speed metal frenzy; he can drum like Gene Krupa, jazzy and serpentine. He can brace or break the back of any song on a whim, before even Robby knows what's needed. He really makes one concede the pedestrian quality of Drums' drumming.

Speaking of Drums, he's been in the news! Or rather, Robby has been in the news via Drums. Bass has forwarded me several articles:

- Drums: "Robby Coulson Is Impossible to Work With! I Quit!"
- 26 Times Robby "Control-son" Lived Up to His Name
- "More Like Robby "Cunt-Troll-Shun," Says Former Catalyst Drummer
- Unedited Rolling Stone Interview with Erik Hammer from Lyontämer: The Word "Cocaine" Over and Over Again
"I don't like these," I email back to Bass. "We need to Stay

Positive and make Catalyst the best band it has ever been." I send her some articles of my own:

- Best Albums of 1993: Catalyst's Purr Capita Declaws the Competition
- Nine Lives: Catalyst's New Double-Album Tops the Charts for Ninth Straight Week
- "Temple of Bast Changed My Life." Scott Stapp opens up about his biggest influences
- Robby Coulson Takes Out Full Page Ad in New York Times for Release of Second Solo Album: "I Want Catalyst Back."

I add a little note on that last one:

"Bass: I know you're worried, and I am too. But we have to remember that we are part of music history. Robby could have picked anyone from any of those auditions, and he picked us, three nobodies, because we were the best and we brought something essential to Catalyst. Robby believed in us and still believes in us. It's the least we can do to believe in him too! Love, Your Friend, Guitar. P.S. Please stop sending me these."

At 11:30 p.m. I get a little knock on my door. I'm in my robe. I was reading, and I wasn't asleep yet, but I very easily could have been. It's Scully of all people at the door. Never seen him outside the studio before, and he says I should get dressed, Robby wants to make a demo right now. Am I ready to record Lament of the Highborne right now tonight? Well, sure. Well, get dressed is what I should do, and get in his big Jeep. What a night already.

Erik Hammer is in the big Jeep's backseat along with another craggy, older guy with fine, orange, baby's hair. Scully tells me I can take the front seat. I say hello to Erik Hammer from Lyontämer and introduce myself to the other gentleman. He snarls at me like a pit bull, and I startle. He laughs and puts out his big flaky hand for me to shake. He's MadCow Mueller from Great Redeemer, of course.

MadCow Mueller used to play bass guitar in Great Redeemer. I ride in silence in Al Scully's big Jeep through the Loop at midnight on a Wednesday. He takes us the impractical way to Owl Skull, down Wacker between the black glass towers and the river. We slip past the big Deco Carbide and Carbon building, forest green and gold terracotta, now the Hard Rock Hotel, and Erik Hammer shares a cackle with MadCow Mueller, their red, matte eyes scanning the building's shaft knowingly. There's a story there to which I'm not privy. I have some stories from that Quizno's on State Street from when Louise used to work there, after band practice in Adam's mom's Bronzeville apartment, after shows at the Subterranean or Ronny's Bar where people would just wee right there on the floor in front of you, in-stores at Championship Vinyl and Laurie's Planet of Sound. We would end our evenings with the kind of burned-out intimacies over toasted sandwiches these arena-filling chuckleheads could never dream of.

Robby is already at the studio, working on his laptop with his big, black headphones on his big, bald head. The bandage he's had on his neck the past few days is off, and a red, egg-shaped boil glares at us, threatening to spit at any second. Robby grins when we come in and embraces us each in turn, all bones and angles. He smells like orange juice, and I try my best to avoid touching the boil, which is prominent. Robby chooses some of Scully's guitars for us, and we follow him into the main room, Scully remaining at the controls.

"Mark it," says Scully through the monitor.

"Lament of the Highborne," says Robby. "MadCow Mueller live test. Five six seven eight."

What I would like to tell you, friend, is that we do not sound like Catalyst that night. I would like to tell you that egos clash like the boulders of the Hellespont, and the song—such a complex and delicate ballad—collapses beneath the weight of three thrashing, aging pros, flailing against their rusting legacies. I would like to say that this pantheon of rock gods, like so many before them, is worthy of no praise. I would like to say it ends with a come-to-Jesus for Robby, a revelation that everyone but him seems to have had two decades ago: there has never been a Catalyst; there's only ever been Robby Coulson and also his session band.

But friend, the truth is we all come to Satan that night, and it is metal as heck. The boil doesn't burst. Three of the four of us sound like a real band.

We wrap around four, and Robby leaves with his mates in his Prius. My ears are filled with a mournful whine I can't seem to shake out. I want to stick around to talk to Scully, but he seems to be dodging me, checking levels when I'm in the main room, checking mics when I'm in the control room, restocking the chip machine when I peek my head into his office. I eventually go outside. It's November windy, and I make myself small on the leeward side of Scully's big Jeep and wait for him.

"Oh! It's you," he says, coming out. "I didn't realize you were still here. You didn't want to party with the guys?"

"I think I'm too young," I say, and he laughs. I asks if he wants to get something to eat, and he does. I know just the place.

"This Quizno's is super goddamn pleasant," says Scully with his mouth full. He enjoys a Chicken Carbonara Sandwich, and I enjoy a fine Meatball Sub. The fluorescents make it bright as day in here, and even in the middle of the Loop, the outside world is asleep. Hardly a car on State Street except the limos ferrying rock musicians north and then south.

"Do you know how long it's been since I've had a Quizno's?"

"Nope."

"I go to this little deli in Hyde Park four times a week. It's this little old Sicilian husband and wife who own it; been going for twenty

years. They do everything for you. Extra meat for free. They make their own condiments and fresh bread every day. Got this big Italian sub that's just... seriously, just not half as good as this fucking Quizno's. I had no idea."

"Oh, I know. Say, Al, I wanted to ask you about MadCow Mueller."

Scully waves me off with both hands, mouth overflowing with toasted sandwich.

"I guess I just want to know if Bass needs to be concerned. About her job security."

He swallows and washes his sandwich bite down with Orange Crush. "No," he says. "Bass doesn't need to worry about anything. Neither do you. Are you guys worrying together or something?"

"Well, no, I wouldn't put it that way. Concerns have been expressed. After Drums was let go. You know."

Scully grimaces. "You don't know the whole story there. The shit he's saying to the tabloids? That's not even a tiny little part of the whole story. There was shit going on, let me tell you, that people are not privy of. It hurts Robby's feelings real bad when people mouth off to the press. It's unprofessional."

"I guess that's a relief," I say. "Not that I didn't love and respect Drums. But it's good to know that he was let go for foul-ups on his own end. And not because, I don't know, Erik Hammer was looking for a job." Scully reaches across the table and clasps my hand gently. His sympathy is practiced. "You tell whatsherface she's got nothing to worry about. Robby and MadCow are old friends. They just wanted to jam and record it. For prosperity. In fact, you're probably better off not even mentioning it to whatsherface. That's how little of a deal this is. Not even worth bringing up. Her place among Catalyst? Totally secure. Robby's always had a chick bassist. And MadCow Mueller? Well, he is a man. So your friend? Good to go. All set. Not a thing to care about."

"That's a relief to hear," I say. But I am beginning to doubt. There is a small part of me that fears Scully is only telling me what I want to hear. Some smaller, scarier part that says Bass may have been right all along.

"You're worried about the band. I know you love the band. Listen, the band, why it's like that Meatball Sub from Quizno's you got there. Ok? Catalyst is the Meatball Sub. Robby, well he's the meatballs, of course. But you've got to have the other parts! Erik Hammer is the bread. Your friend whatshername, she's the Italian spice, whatever you call it. You're the other things on the Meatball Sub. So many ingredients! And yes, when people order that sub, they're thinking about the meatballs, but it would be fucked up if you just gave them like a plate of meatballs and nothing else, right? Or a meatball sub that didn't have Italian spices—that's your friend—and had like fucking Russian spices instead, right? Because that's a different sandwich. A sandwich no one wants to eat."

It's hard to argue with Al Scully. I buy us milkshakes at

Coldstone Creamery and he drives me home.

I only get a few hours sleep until it's back to the studio for me. No one is around except Bass who is napping on the red couch. I wake her up and she throws a pillow at me. I tell her everything about the secret jam session with MadCow Mueller and all the things Al Scully told me at the Quizno's. She hugs me.

"You are such a good friend. I'm sorry I didn't tell you when Robby took me and Erik Hammer to jam with Conan Bernstein last week."

I remind her that Catalyst has always had a female bassist, and she reminds me that they have also always had a male guitarist. We will watch each others' backs.

"All we have to do is get rid of Erik Hammer," is how Bass answers the phone. I can hear a party in the background, loud electronic music and people shouting.

"Hi, Bass. What can I do for you?"

"It shouldn't be that hard to get rid of an old metalhead with burned-up brain cells, right? Those guys died by the hundreds in the 80s. Overdoses, probably. Does Erik Hammer do heroin?"

"Oh, god, barrels of it. That's not the point. You can't seriously be suggesting..."

"No! Of course not. I'd never suggest that. And shame on you for even considering such a thing. I'm just saying. If it happened on its own accord, it wouldn't be so bad, right? Like, let's say Erik Hammer overdoses to death on heroin and dies. That's sad, sure, because it's sad when a person dies, but on the scale of all the people who might accidentally die, well, better him than, like, a Cambodian baby, right? I mean, he's objectively lived this rich life filled with incident. You know, it's actually surprising that he's lived this long! At his age and at his degree of sustained partying? Every day is a gift for which he, let's be honest, is not as thankful as he should be. In conclusion, while I find your suggestion to encourage Erik Hammer to do too much heroin and/or spike the heroin he's already doing with like a household cleaner or Raid or something to be patently immoral, I am saying that if such a thing were to occur naturally, I would shed tears, but not all that many tears. I assume you agree?"

I give her a moment to compose herself. My ravioli is getting cold. "If you commit murder, I'll turn you in to the police."

"Yeah, that's what I figured. Do you want to come out to the Skokie Applebee's and party with me?"

"No thank you," I say as diplomatically as possible. Like all Applebee's, it is a cesspool of sin and degradation. "But if you need a designated driver, you know who to call."

"Nah, it's cool. Erik Hammer's here. His dealer's got a limo. Bye-eeee!"

Bass has ended the call. I return to my ravioli, but my appetite is gone. I take my little Breedlove Pacific to my zen pit and put my feet up, study the sheets for Lothbrok's Song—we're supposed to have it down to debut at the Metro surprise show Monday—and I try to drift. I slip into the Viking empowerment the track suggests: the serenity of the march across the icy blue stream, tap-tap of the berserkers and shieldmaidens marching to honorable death. I can almost feel the Nordic wind in my bones, that absence of fear that honors Odin. I glance at the lyrics sheet, my harmonies highlighted:

Yeah, yeah, Lothbrok's song
Vikings, vikings, Lothbrok's song
Vikings, vikings, viking song
Woo, yeah, viking, viking

I hit a bum note and sigh. These post-Drums songs are almost all viking-related. The urban malaise and poetry of Catalyst's early years are long behind us, of course, but even that mid-period of theremins and ambient jazz was better than this. The soul is obscured. The structures are as strong as ever, the work ethic is as strong as ever, but there's nothing here to fall in love with. Nothing to fall in love to.

I put the guitar away, the sheets away, and find welling up within me an irresistible urge to self-soothe. I flip through my records to the Catalyst section—I have all the LPs, EPs, imports, most bootlegs, and the deluxe reissues of albums I already owned—and find It. Reverting to this now feels both blasphemous and holy: the original Purr Capita vinyl with crunched corners, scratched all to hell. I bought this at a Sam Goody in 1991. I owned it on tape and CD also. I had to repurchase it on CD because I used to play it twice a day in the car, on the way to and from high school, and the underside warped into a gasoline-colored coaster. Purr Capita played on my headphones while I waited in the gym in my high school cap and gown, and four years later on my headphones in the football stadium in my college cap and gown. I played it while I lost my virginity. I played it over and over on my solo move to Chicago, on the way to my wedding, on the nights my first and second daughters were born, and on the way to the courthouse to sign the divorce papers. They wouldn't let me have my CD player in rehab, but Purr Capita was there for me still, in my head, singing me well. It's my oldest friend. Even if Robby doesn't know it, he's the only one who has understood me my entire life, loved me and forgiven me and told me I was strong.

I lower the needle gently onto the outer groove and wait for the vinyl crackle that may as well be part of the album. The fake-out snare roll before Fever Stalker starts. Then the groovy bass line, then the twin guitars roar to life. Robby Coulson screams an invocation to rock. The greatest guitar riff in rock and roll history. I've been playing that riff, in one capacity or another, for twenty-five years.

Bass and Erik Hammer don't show up to Owl Skull the next morning. Robby and Scully are furious. I call and call, but Bass doesn't answer. I leave a voicemail. I can't cover for her. I hope she's alright. I

hope she didn't do anything stupid.

We wait for a few hours. Robby's boil appears to bulge and throb as his exasperation intensifies. Finally he tells me to go home, he'll record everything himself. I volunteer to record my parts; I'm here after all. He tells me to sit down on the big red couch. He has something he needs to tell me.

"I've been thinking a lot," he says solemnly, "about what this band is supposed to be. What do we represent? What do we contribute to the world of music and art?"

I have been thinking the same things! But I don't say anything. I nod and allow wisdom to ferry me like a drowning man to shore.

"When I was your age," he continues in what is already one of the longest and most engaged conversations we have ever shared, "I would get in these screaming arguments with the band. The Original Guitar—I hated him. I honestly did. Original Bass and I dated briefly. There was a little bit of a love triangle." He laughs diplomatically. "Imagine the media if that happened now. Every little thing I say, scrutinized and published. But back then. I was nobody. You know?"

I do know.

"Anyway, I would get in these screaming fights with Original Guitar over arrangements and production. Our visions, honestly, were very similar. I think it made it harder to squabble over the details. I was very persnickety back then."

"Surely not," I say.

"It's true. I just couldn't get the stars to align. They fought me every inch of the way. They fought me to compromise. And I remember getting to the point where I thought, 'Just fuck it. Let them do it their way. It's just a record.' And I think Original Drums could see that I was so fatigued. He had been in the business a lot longer than me, and he knew that feeling of wanting to give ground. So he pulled me aside, and he told me an old story: The Silkworm and the Spider were weaving beside one another."

This was not the story archetype I was expecting. So much of Robby was already theoretical, I feared for my comprehension should he continue his descent into abstraction.

"The Silkworm was working very hard on a beautiful shroud," he continued indeed, "but he had been working for many months. The Spider, on the other hand, had just started that morning, and he was weaving his web with incredible speed. The Spider laughed at the Silkworm, and he said, 'Silkworm, look at my fine, transparent web. It's beautiful, delicate, and I only started this morning. Do you concede that I work much more quickly than you?'"

"The Silkworm continued toiling and shrugged off the Spider's insults. 'I concede that you work faster,' said the Silkworm, 'but your web is nothing but a trap for the harmless and stupid. When people see it, they tear it down and sweep it away. My shroud is slow, but it is valuable and treasured.' The Spider thought about the Silkworm's wisdom, and

do you know what he did?"

I shake my head no.

"He ate the fucking Silkworm." Robby smiles and places his hand on my knee and uses me as support to stand. "You always got it. Head on home and let Bass and Erik Hammer know. I'll see you at the Metro on Monday."

Robby and his boil take several guitars into the main room, prop them, and sit behind the drum kit. The tape is off, but Robby starts to play around, nothing resembling a song on our list, a jazzy little beat he seems to be composing on the fly. I leave him and try unsuccessfully to call Bass.

The midnight before the Metro show, Bass finally calls me back. I am desperate and furious. Where is she? Where is Erik Hammer? What is she thinking?

She's thinking I need to chill the heck out because everything is fine. She's in Vegas. Erik Hammer is also in Vegas. She is now Mrs. Erik Hammer. No, they won't be able to get back to Chicago by tomorrow night. Stop hollering.

"But we have to be Silkworms!" I plead. "We have to do this right and see this through to the end."

"Hang on," says Bass. "My husband Erik Hammer from Lyontämer wants to talk to you."

I hear a feminine giggle and a gruff chuckle. "Hey, brother, when are you coming to Sin City?"

"I'm really disappointed in you, Erik Hammer. This is really irresponsible. You're going to tear Catalyst apart, and it seems like you don't even care."

"Aw, man." He coughs. "Listen, man. It's just a band. This is love, brother. You just let Robby know that we're happy and together, and when we visit Chicago, we'll all jam."

"No, you listen to me, Erik Hammer. Robby and I are trying to be Silkworms here, and you're a Spider. Just a mercenary Spider who cares about having a good old time and to hell with anyone who's in your way. We are trying to make something important, and you're standing in the way for no reason."

Erik Hammer cough-laugh. "He told you the Silkworm story, huh? Let me tell you something about old Robby Coulson, kid. He's no Silkworm, for starters. You think putting his old band back together was an artistic endeavor? You think reunion tour after reunion tour—when, you know, he's the only one from the original band—is about making something that lasts? Robby is about making one thing, brother, and that's greenback dollar bills. We already put in enough studio time to get royalties from the album. He's going to redo it all himself like he always does. You should probably just take it easy. Come to Vegas. Enjoy yourself. You're worrying about somebody who's been planning to fire you since he met you."

"Bass wanted to spike your drugs with Raid." I hang up.

I call Robby, and he doesn't answer. I call Scully, and he doesn't answer. I send an email to Robby that everything is probably fine, but we're short half the band for Monday, so if there ever was a time to call in the big favors, perhaps this is it.

I call Louise.

"Hey," she answers sleepily. "Nathan?"

"Hey," I say. "I'm sorry it's so late. We haven't talked in a while. I wanted to see how you and the girls were doing."

"Are you off the wagon?"

"No, no. Nothing like that. I'm so on the wagon. I drive the wagon. I've purchased several other wagons that I lend out to friends. I own a wagon-leasing franchise."

"Mm," says Louise. I hear her husband grunt in the background. "It's very late," she whispers.

"I'm sorry. I just wanted to see if you and Adam and the girls had plans on Monday. Tomorrow. I'd like to stop by and say hey to everyone. We could go to a movie. My treat."

"It's a school night," she says. "Probably not Monday. Is everything alright? Can we talk about this sometime during a daylight hour?"

"Oh, yeah, of course. Everything is good. I just miss you guys." She pauses long enough that I wonder if she disconnected. "The girls miss you too," she says. "Goodnight, Nathan." "Goodnight."

"Where have you been?" cries Scully, chain-smoking in the alley behind the Metro. He looks grim, more scattered than usual. "I been trying to call you all weekend."

"I tried to call you all weekend too," I say. "There's a problem with Bass and Erik Hammer."

"Ah, who gives a shit," he says. "Robby's in a bad way. He's either gonna play the best show of his life tonight, or he ain't gonna play ever again. You know what I mean?"

"Drugs?" I ask.

Scully points to his neck, the spot where Robby's boil has been winking at us for the past few weeks. "It hatched."

"Is he okay? What does he need me to do?"

"Play a solo set. Warm up the crowd. Keep 'em entertained until he knows if he'll be able to go out or not, and he'll just do a solo acoustic set. Low energy. If he can."

"For how long? What am I supposed to play?"

"I don't know; you're an artist, right? Don't you have some cache of your own songs you've been itching to debut? Don't you have, I don't know, ambitions?"

The house lights dim as I take the stage and the crowd chants Robby's name, continuing as the stage lights rise, as I strap on my acoustic guitar and wave and smile. The stage is set for a full electric band, and as

I speak into the microphone, they keep chanting for the actual rock star to come out.

"Hey, everybody," I say with as much enthusiasm as I can muster. The flood lights in my eyes obscure the disappointed faces, but not their chants. Catalyst crowds are nearly all men in their 30s and 40s. I get excited when I see the younger fans, those who came late to the party and, despite all the years of bad press, still found the truth and beauty in the back catalogue.

"Hey, as you can see, I'm not Catalyst." I say. Boos! Boo for not Catalyst! "I'm going to play a few cover songs for you before Robby takes the stage to bring it on home."

This, for some reason, provokes a frenzied cheer, and I hear on the monitors a familiar but altered voice say "Let me take it from here." The eleven-foot wolf spider who ambles onstage at the Metro instills in me a profound sense of melancholy. "Thanks for covering," his enormous mandibles whisper to me off-mic. "I'll meet you after and we can get juice drinks." I pat his cephalothorax and hold back my complex tears.

Robby's new legs probe along the red-lit boards. A stagehand carries out a low, cushioned harness, and Robby hefts his thorax atop it, hovering as he extends his legs off the stage in four directions. The crowd is wild about the harness. He clamps a guitar in his two right anterior tarsal claws, another guitar in his left anterior tarsal claws, a bass guitar in his left posterior tarsal claws, and a pair of drumsticks hovering above the kit in his right posterior tarsal claws. His primary and secondary eyes catch and diffuse the parcan lights like disco balls. While it's pleasing to see a friend achieve self actualization, it's disappointing to know that he will no longer require the services of bandmates.

"Thanks for coming out tonight," Robby chitters into the custom chelicera microphone. "We're Catalyst, and this is a song about falling in love."

Robby's right posterior legs freak out and machine-gun the snare intro to Fever Stalker. His left posterior tarsal claws thump, thump, thump the opening bass line as his right and left anterior tarsal claws, playing lead and melody guitar respectively, rev like muscle car engines, an alternating twin riff, each bar building the heavy foundation. When the song plateaus, Robby's legs rock in perfect sync. His bristles quiver as he howls the first verse into the darkened sea of salt-and-pepper ponytails, undulating in time with his hydraulic thrumming.

Tonight, from the wings, I will enjoy an undocumented emotion and not dwell on the contradiction of disappointment and pride. In the morning, I can direct my attention toward classifieds, internet searches, meetings with managers of bands lacking strings and frontspiders and etcetera, but tonight I am in one of the great Chicago rock and roll clubs and my attention is on the latest iteration of my all-time favorite band. My favorite band is relevant again. I was in that band for several years. Robby seems fulfilled; he's playing the old stuff.

ELIZABETH MORRIS

SNOW IS FALLING

The fire is dying. Jonesy snores on the braided rug. I read the same page again. It is page one; I have read it four times now. Is there something between the lines that I'm missing? If I can focus, I can find it. Focus. The room is so still, the silence broken by the merest hiss from the wood stove and the rumblings of my old dog. Almost nothing. No traffic passes. No TV, radio, or telephone jangles. I don't hear my name called. No one's in the kitchen popping open the fridge, sponging a counter, bagging garbage.

I see a lightness at the window, pale: moonlight on the snow crust.

Focus. What should I do? What can I do? Forget should. Write the letters. Sort the clothes. Feed the fish. Walk the dog.

"Come on, Jonesy; let's go out."

He balks when he sees the snow, but my will is stronger than his. My boots crunch in the snow, breaking the silence. I welcome the crunch and the cold. Jonesy drags me to the privet hedge, then a bush. One snowflake, then another. I tip my head up, mouth open in the time-honored hope for a taste of winter. Eyes closed. A sigh. Mine?

A new smell opens my eyes. Smoke rising from my chimney, down-drafting into the shadows of the trees. Black, white, shades of gray; almost no wind. Dog's breath, my breath in the cold night air.

Dong. Trinity's church bell tells me the time. Must go to bed; I'll be lucky to get six hours sleep. I'll be lucky to sleep at all. Work tomorrow; first time in a while. I send thanks through the snowflakes to my team at the bank, covering for me. Jonesy breaks my trance with a jerk on her leash. She has no thanks to convey and wants the warm rug.

I do sleep, heavily. I dream of a man; no one I know. He is tall, broad-shouldered. His scant hair is pulled into a greying ponytail. He tells me he's a Viet Nam vet. I tell him I don't like pony tails on men. He smiles and takes my elbow. I awake as we walk by a river on a brick path with empty benches.

Work is gentle. I keep my head down. A colleague brings me soup from the bank's cafeteria. I manage to build piles, make notes; tomorrow is another day.

Jonesy whines when I open the door. There's a puddle in the kitchen. The garbage smells. One goldfish floats on the scum. I welcome problems I can deal with. Simple things, rote things. I hear your voice, softly, Mom.

Things collude. I involve myself at work and pay my bills. The drycleaner calls and reminds me to pick up two skirts and a dress. Six or eight house sparrows chirp and irritate each other at my bird feeder.

FedEx delivers a package from Amazon, which I leave in the hall closet, unopened.

When it begins to smell bad, I clean the refrigerator, tossing several exotic lettuces gone soft and slimy.

Several times I dream of the man with the pony tail. Once he's with a woman. She has short black hair, and she smokes. He's rubbing against her. From then on, I think of him as Randy.

In another dream, I'm at a play at our local Little Theater. I'm having a panic attack but am sitting in the front row, so I can't leave. Randy has a part in the play, but walks off the stage and once more takes my elbow and walks me to the exit.

Another night. My glass is empty. The fire is embers. Again it snows, but this time it's noisy—the wind blowing the heavy wet snow against the storm windows. Trees creak, and two plows lumber down my street. I think of tomorrow's chore of shoveling through the mountain they've deposited at the foot of my driveway. I'll shovel alone. Jonesy whines for a walk, but for a while I sit in my corner of the couch, relishing the casual noise. I listen for your step, your voice, your breath. The lamp at my elbow seems to grow dim, and I rise with Jonesy for a very short, wet walk.

Later I let this old dog sleep in my room, and she pulls your sweatshirt off the chair where you left it, nestling down for the night.

Randy takes a vacation from my dreams for a few weeks. When he returns, he's older, maybe sixty, and he's stooped. But I know it's Randy by his pony tail and kind smile. For the first time he talks to me. He tells me he's a sailor. "Have you ever been sailing?" he asks.

When I shake my head, he continues, "Come sailing with me." I don't speak in this dream, but somehow he knows that I won't or can't. "You could sell your house, you know. We could move on—escape into the world."

In the morning I think about escaping into the world, and I wonder what that means. I have no reason, no need, no desire to sell the house. But I can move on. I determine to sort your clothes on the weekend. And I do. A pile for the Salvation Army. A smaller one for the trash. Some things for me: your beautiful scarves, the sweater you knit, all four of your flannel nightgowns. Jewelry I'll sort another day.

On a warmish clear morning, Jonesy and I take a long walk in the woods. It's not yet spring, but it's a welcome break. Snow fills the hollows. Ice melts where the sun flits through. I let Jonesy off her leash; like a pup she hunts diligently for an interesting scent—another dog? Squirrel? A young friend? We encounter one other walker. He has a dog too, a younger version of Jonesy, also a basset. He and I make small talk about the path, the unseasonable thaw, and our dogs. I notice how gray Jonesy is around her muzzle, how slow compared to this pup. Even her eyes seem dull. I excuse myself from the conversation as I feel my eyes fill: I couldn't stand to lose Jonesy.

In my last Randy dream—though I don't know it's to be my

last—he again takes my elbow. He lifts me from a wall I’m sitting on and walks me to a group of people watching a parade. As he holds my elbow with his smooth hand, I long to hold your hand again. Somehow Randy understands and taps the shoulder of the woman in front of us.

She turns. It’s you, my darling girl, my Tina. My Tina Bellina, My Tina Wigglesworth. My Ducky. We three hold hands, you and I and Randy, and we dance in a circle, slowly, slowly, slowly.

Half asleep, half awake, memories flood—dancing together at a family wedding, holding hands at that scary movie, clutching each other on a roller coaster, skin against skin when you were little and I a young mother. And now I cry and howl aloud. Just one more day together. Just one night by the fire. Be here this once to walk with me when the snow is softly falling. Be in the next room when dawn’s pale light creeps across our windows where tissues of snow are drifting. Just help me with this old dog.

JAMES NORCLIFFE

M. HULOT AND THE CANARY

It's a great scene:
M. Hulot arranging the sunlight
so that the canary will sing.

How the light splashes over Montmartre!
M. Hulot swings the casement
to catch it, to fill the glass to dazzling

and in that dazzle the canary glows
like a golden throistle and sings.

The window M. Hulot sees
is an on-off switch, a yes-sing no-sing
light-swing shade-swing thing
enough to make the canary mechanical -
& M. Hulot (bless him) divine, a king.

ED O'CASEY

ASK. IF YOU'RE UNSURE,

ask. It shouldn't hurt. Besides, we don't
think

anyone will answer.

I don't want anyone to answer!

If someone does, that means you haven't
been alone this whole time. She tells me

about all the mean, horrible
thoughts she's had:

sleeping with her father to get
back at her mother, drowning
the children one at a time, laughing

at people for their haircuts.

You realize what
it means, of course—cutting off another
woman's left breast—it's just not something

you should have to—burying her
Pekinese up to its shoulders in the

front yard—live with. You have to store
the children in the basement to keep

tender, and so
they can be worked
through—picking her friend's nose—dinner by dinner.

If I'm an open book—fake
barf on the movie theater balcony—

ADAM REGER

CRUELTY

Peter was working on a series of critical essays about adult cinema.

“Porn,” he added when Jess did not respond.

“Right.”

“It’s an incredibly under-represented field of study,” he said over coffee and pie at a late-night diner. They had been drinking, going from bar to bar. It was the start of the summer, their first proper date.

Jess was 31. She was on the short side, stocky, with straight, glossy auburn hair. She owned her own house, she was the managing director of a decent-sized nonprofit promoting science education. Peter was younger; she wasn’t sure exactly how young. He was a caterer. She liked him too much already: she knew she was leaving herself open to him being a weirdo.

“What I’m mainly interested in is narrative,” he said. The waitress warmed up their coffees. Peter stopped talking and waited, looking down at his hands on the edge of the table. Jess thanked the waitress as she drifted off. Peter leaned in. He was not interested in films that began *in media res*. “Meaning right in the middle of the action,” he added.

Jess nodded. In college she’d taken a couple film studies courses. She understood what Peter was talking about as he described the way that adult films created a bridge from the everyday world—a pizza man delivers a pepperoni pie to a bored housewife; a student begs her professor for extra credit—to the porn world, which was very rigidly structured: several positions, usually no more than 15 or 20 minutes, ending always in an obligatory final act that he assumed, Peter said coyly, he didn’t have to say by name.

“You mean the cum shot?” Jess said, and laughed, covering her mouth. She’d paced herself at the bars, but was somewhat tipsy. She looked around the diner but no one had turned to look at them.

Peter frowned and poured creamer into his coffee. He had dirty blond hair, dark stubble, and cold blue eyes. Jess had met him at a wrestling show her friend Roy had said would be funny. And it had been: at the back of the place, an old Moose lodge, a wall of hipsters and jokers stood jeering at the wrestlers, and the wrestlers, circling and lunging at one another in the middle of the ring, cracked jokes right back. Peter had been standing alone at the edge of this throng and she’d liked the way he looked, had thought that he seemed cold, even cruel, in a sexy Germanic way, and she’d gone up and started talking to him.

He was wearing a bright fake-gold watch with a digital display. Jess touched it and said her father used to have one just like it when she

was little, and she and her sisters would take turns wearing it, pushing it as high up their arms as the watch could go, competing.

"Rite Aid," Peter said, touching the watch's band. "\$7.99."

"We stretched the hell out of that thing. He had to throw it away."

Now, at the diner, Peter said, "Maybe we shouldn't talk about it. I know it's kind of . . . gross to a lot of people."

"No, no, I'm interested. So do you sit down and watch these movies start to finish?" She was on the brink of a hilarious, giggling mood.

"Sort of," Peter said. "I fast-forward through most of them. You know the '4X' button?" He stuck his hand out, pressing an invisible fast-forward button on an invisible remote control, to show her. As he watched, he catalogued each film, filling in a few categories on a notepad: how the movie reached what he called "pornological reality," then each of the acts or positions the actors performed. Jess nodded, keeping herself from asking whether he masturbated to all of these movies or just some of them. He kept a spreadsheet where all of this was recorded and indexed, Peter said. He wagged his fingers in the air before him, miming typing, and Jess was distracted by how cute he was.

The next week they went to the movies, a repertory house that was playing *The Third Man*.

"Are you really analytical when you go to the movies?" she asked as they walked along the street afterwards, looking for a bar to sit in.

Peter said that once he understood the purpose of a scene it was hard not to want to fast forward to the next one. She asked him if he fast-forwarded through Hollywood movies, too.

"I rarely watch Hollywood movies."

Jess managed to avoid rolling her eyes. "Any movies, then," she said. "Other than porn."

Peter seemed to flinch at the word. "Sometimes," he said. "It's a bad habit, but you just want to get on with it and see what comes next."

"That's like life, isn't it?" she asked. "You want to jump to the next thing, but you're stuck playing out each scene as it comes." He nodded, but didn't really respond.

They met again that week, a Thursday morning, for brunch. He was 26, it turned out. He's just a little baby, Jess thought, looking at him across the table in a black Polo shirt with a day's growth of stubble. An adorable little baby. They were seated outside, at a back patio, and the shadows of a tree branch wavered over his face.

Catering was just a job, not Peter's life's work, but it was the main thing he talked about.

"The good news is that there's lots of work over the summer," he said. "The bad news is I'm being sucked into the life of a professional caterer." The manager of the company liked him, wanted him always on the scene. Jess could understand why. Peter looked classy, expensive. It

probably felt like a rich person serving you hors d'oeuvres, she thought, taking a drink of her mimosa.

"Do you know what your life's work is?"

He hesitated. "Film, I think," he said. "What I mentioned at the diner, those movies. No one else is looking at them seriously. I've got a real opportunity to be the first, establish the field."

Peter was planning to apply to graduate school for film studies, he told her, but was nervous about being admitted because he'd sent his critical essays to a number of scholarly journals and been flatly rejected every time. "I don't think they understand what I'm doing," he said, looking off into a corner of the patio.

She was off this week, Jess told him, doing little odd jobs around the house. She'd moved in the summer before and all her money was still going into the house, along with most of her free time. The house was about two blocks away, Jess said casually. She'd bought in this neighborhood because of the school district, but didn't say this.

After brunch they went back to her house and she gave him a tour. He trailed her through the kitchen, the bedrooms, nodding and paying the house vague compliments. "Lots of storage," he said in the basement. In the living room he said, "Good spot to watch movies."

"Can you help me with something?" Jess asked when the tour had concluded, and led him back to the guest bedroom. When they got to the bedroom she lost her nerve and pointed at a large nail the previous owners had pounded into the wall at an awkward angle. "It's like the sword in the stone or something. I can't get this stupid thing out."

Peter sized it up, one hand on his chin, and asked for a hammer. Jess fetched hers from the toolbox her father had given her when she bought the house. Peter gripped the nail with the claw end of the hammer, ready to pull, then stopped.

"I'm not thinking this through," he said. "Do you have a dowel—a wooden rod?" To her surprise, Jess found one at the bottom of the toolbox. Peter used it as a fulcrum, bracing the hammer against it and pulling out the nail without damaging the plaster.

"Oh my God, my hero," Jess said. "How will I ever repay you?"

"It's nothing."

Jess patted his chest and went up on tiptoes to kiss him. He put his arms around her stiffly and they kissed for a couple minutes, until she felt him tightening up. He was not an expert kisser, but his stubble scraped Jess's skin in a way she liked. He was a tough nut to crack, she thought, but she was up for the challenge. Peter glanced at his gold wristwatch and said he'd better get going; he wanted to do some work on a new essay before an evening catering shift.

The summer arrived in full. She introduced Peter as her boyfriend at a work happy hour, and to her friends, Kerry and Melissa and Roy, and spent the night at his place. Peter had a small, narrow studio apartment with a long entry hall in which he'd been forced to put his dresser, so that you had to turn sideways to enter the apartment proper.

The walls were thin and Jess could hear the murmur of a television from another apartment as he poured her a glass of water and fetched her some shorts and a t-shirt to wear as pajamas.

Beside the foot of the bed sat Peter's television, the cable box and a combination VHS/DVD player balanced on top of it. On the other side of the bed, facing the television, was a small, worn recliner. On the seat were a yellow legal pad and two remote controls.

When they both were in bed, the lights out, Jess started kissing him. She was climbing on top of him when her foot jarred the television stand. There was a clatter in the dark.

"What was that?"

Peter reached out and turned on a bedside lamp. "A bunch of DVDs fell," he said, and got up from under her to collect them, looking through the discs. Jess saw a flash of lurid images on the cases: bare skin, black and blond hair; women splayed and posed, smiling at the camera; fishnet stockings, shiny leather, bright glossy lipstick. She looked away, focusing on a square of moonlight on the kitchen floor.

"Can't it wait?"

"These are the new ones I have to watch still," he said, frowning at the discs in his hand. "I want to watch them in a certain order."

"Right." Jess glanced at a short bookcase in a corner of the room, the shelves veiled by an oversized red beach towel. One corner had fallen, and she could see the spines of DVDs tightly packed onto the shelves. Peter's library.

He finished ordering the discs and set them back on top of the television and came back to bed, switching off the light.

"Good night," he said, and turned away. Jess stroked his back and spooned him until it became clear that nothing more would happen. On the Fourth of July, Jess invited her friends for a barbecue on her back deck. After the guests had left, Peter stayed and they sat out back drinking wine until a sudden thunderstorm drove them inside, running around the house closing windows. Jess stood inside the door of her bedroom and turned off the lights and called to him until he appeared, bumping against the doorframe. She held his hand and they watched the heavy rain rattle the window in its frame. She kissed him and nudged him backward toward the bed.

Peter tried to slow her down. Jess teased him. "How long have we been dating? Two weeks? Three?" she asked. It was nearly a month. Peter lay back, his arms out, as she undressed him. He had a beautiful, lean body. Rain clattered down and gushed from the gutters. Jess did all the work. She climbed on top of him and gripped his shoulders. Lightning illuminated the room and she saw that he was staring at the ceiling. It was several seconds before the thunder came. She felt it was a despicable thing she was doing, but she didn't care.

Peter remained flat on his back, impassive, until suddenly he took her hips and pushed her off of him, onto her back, her shoulders hanging over the edge of the bed, her head in the empty space between

the bed and the radiator. Jess heard a gasp—it was her, she was gasping. “Peter, what the hell?”

He didn’t say anything. He was on top of her, leaning into her.

She was beginning to enjoy it, half a minute later—enjoying this sudden sign of life as much as anything else—when he rose up, kneeling on the bed with his body leaning over hers.

“What’s—” Jess lifted her head. Something warm fell across her breasts, her rib cage and thighs. Lightning lit the room and she saw what he’d done. “Did you just . . .”

Her head fell back, her hair brushing the floor. She was looking at the radiator, stripes of light and dark, upside down. Thunder sounded, farther away now.

Peter went down the hall to the bathroom, the light flicking on, and she heard the rush of water in the sink. He came back with a warm washcloth and dabbed at her.

When the storm had passed the sky was calm and the air was cooler, but Jess couldn’t sleep. She looked at Peter, sleeping with his mouth open. Maybe she could help him. He was red and chafed down there, and she’d caught the scent of baby oil. She reminded herself that there was something the matter with everybody, herself included.

Jess examined a crack extending the length of her ceiling, where she’d have to get drywallers in to hang a new ceiling. You could see where the plaster would eventually fall. Her thoughts drifted and somehow she thought of Ms. Kavadlo. She hadn’t thought of her high school French teacher in at least five years. Ms. Kavadlo was probably in her early thirties when Jess was her student, though of course she seemed far older. She was skinny with a large nose, acne she covered with thick foundation and concealer, dark curly hair, glasses, and a habit of lightly touching each student’s desk as she passed by, asking, “Ca va?” She didn’t merit real scrutiny, and never received any until a girl in Jess’s grade reported seeing her at a T.G.I. Friday’s, wearing a blue dress and a daffodil in her hair, sitting with a chubby man in a blazer and a paisley shirt. The girls at Jess’s cafeteria table went wild imagining Ms. Kavadlo dating, picturing her sad life and her sad suitors.

Jess’s contribution to this frenzy had been that the man had athlete’s foot and farted in bed, but Ms. Kavadlo was so lonely she couldn’t cut him loose. “He keeps the bed warm,” Jess said, mimicking Ms. Kavadlo’s shrug and uplifted palms, her helpless smile, to shrieks of laughter at that table full of smart, cruel girls.

You just had to hope that Ms. Kavadlo, if she got wind of any of it, had been able to laugh off the pitilessness of teenage girls. Jess was about Ms. Kavadlo’s age now, and wondered what her blithe, sharp-tongued younger self might say at the sight of her and Peter together.

Jess kept meaning to talk to him, but didn’t. Things were going well: he suggested movies at the repertory theater, took her to baseball games and wine tastings hosted by the catering company. He texted her during the day and spent most of his free evenings with her. They made

love several more times, always at her house. Peter was quiet, intent and sometimes distant, but what happened on the Fourth of July didn't happen again.

At the start of August, Jess attended an all-day conference to the south of the city and was driving home, stopped in traffic half a mile from Peter's apartment. She fished her phone out of her purse and called him. Peter had the night off and was making some pasta, he said. She should stop by, and maybe later they could go down the street to the bar.

He met her in the building's foyer, dressed in a plain white t-shirt and athletic shorts, unshaved. She thought again of how handsome he was. Peter put his arm over her shoulders, asking how the conference was, and they walked upstairs. As they passed one of the other apartments Jess heard the droll voice of a TV actor say, "Hey, if you love something, set it free," followed by the rattle of a laugh track. Jess leaned in to kiss his cheek.

He was out of wine. It would be nice, too, to saute some vegetables with the marinara sauce or maybe make a side salad. Jess volunteered to walk down the hill to the supermarket. "I need to stretch my legs anyway," she said. "I feel like I've been sitting for about 16 hours straight."

Jess borrowed his house keys and kissed him on the cheek. She shimmied through the entryway and unlocked his apartment door. But when she opened the door to step out into the hallway she stopped short and made a small, surprised noise that came out of her throat. There was a woman standing there, her hand raised to knock.

"Jesus. You startled me."

The woman smiled, embarrassed. She had long brown hair and big green eyes. Jess guessed that she was in her early twenties. Her face was made up elaborately, with dark eyeliner and wet, red lipstick that glistened in the weak light from the hallway.

"Is . . . *Peter* here?" the woman asked, looking past Jess. She bit her lip and wobbled to one side, and Jess saw that she was wearing very tall high heels. More remarkable was her outfit: she wore a white lace apron over a short leather skirt and a blouse cut low to frame her tanned cleavage.

"Who may I say is calling?"

"His neighbor." The girl held up a glass measuring cup, smiling primly. Rapidly, the words tumbling over one another, she said, "I was baking a cake and I ran out of sugar and I wanted to see if I could borrow—"

"Sure." Jess smiled and took the cup from the girl's hands. "Wait here." She went back to the kitchen. She knew where Peter kept his sugar from the morning she'd woken up here, making coffee and scrambled eggs together.

Peter was stirring the sauce and looked over at her, raising his eyebrows, as she filled the measuring cup. "What's happening?" he asked.

Jess smiled at him and took a pinch of sugar and tossed it into the sauce. "Cuts the acidity," she said, and returned to the front door.

Jess handed the measuring cup back with a smile. "You can keep it."

"I'm sorry?" The girl shifted the position of her feet.

"You said you wanted to borrow some sugar. You can keep it."

"Oh. Right." The girl hesitated, casting another glance past Jess into the apartment. "Okay, well. Thanks."

Jess closed the door and pressed her eye to the peephole, watching the girl toddle on her high heels to the stairs. The blouse was cut short and showed off the girl's midsection, along with a tattoo of something ornate and flowery across the small of her back. In the summer humidity the door's painted surface felt tacky against Jess's forehead, but she kept her eye to the peephole until the girl had disappeared from view.

"Jess?" Peter called from the kitchen.

She walked back and leaned against the doorway. "I'm still here," she said. "One of your neighbors wanted to borrow some sugar." She waited until he turned around before adding, "Cute girl. Brunette, skinny, in do-me heels?"

"Oh. Maybe Andrea upstairs?" he said, digging the knuckle of a thumb into the corner of his eye. "She's probably having a party or something."

Jess looked at him, nodding, waiting for him to look at her directly. When he didn't, she said, "Peter, what is this?"

"What is what?"

"Why did your neighbor come down here dressed like a stripper?"

"I don't know. Like I said, maybe she's having a party."

She stared at him. He shrugged, eyes wide. On the stove the pasta boiled over and he turned to attend to it.

"On second thought," Jess said, "I think I'll just hang out here while you cook. It was a long day." She tossed her purse on the edge of the bed and sat beside it.

"Sure."

"Maybe I'll watch something while you cook."

"By all means." His back was to her, now stirring the pasta sauce with a wooden spoon.

Jess rose and went to the shelf in the corner and crouched and pulled the towel off, tossing it to one side. Peter turned.

"What are you doing?"

She began pulling out individual DVD cases and examining them. *Café Flesh*. *Blow Job Betty*. *Face Jam*. *Mile-High Club*. *Slutty Rapunzel*. One at a time, Jess thought, she could half-see the appeal, could maybe feel a little something, depending on the movie. There was a range, even in the discs she held in her hands, from the sensual and the erotic to the skeezy, the ones that made her wish she had gloves on. All of them together, though, fifty or a hundred of these movies, sleeves covered in

frank images of bare women, packed tight together on the shelves of Peter's library: it was repulsive, deadening. The cases and discs had a cheap plastic smell that made her temples throb.

"Jess."

"You've got such a wide selection here. It's hard to choose."

"You don't want to watch those?"

"Which is better: *Dirty Dirty Debutantes 304* or *305*?"

"I would never make anyone watch that stuff. Especially not you." He waited and when she didn't say anything he said, "Why do you think I keep them covered up?"

Jess ignored him. She was looking at the cover of *Cheerleader University*: half a dozen cheerleaders, dressed in royal-blue uniforms, posed on hands and knees atop a group of men, together forming a lop-sided human pyramid. The back cover pictured a redhead, naked, lying back on the 50-yard-line. "Root for the home team!" read some of the copy, which Jess skimmed enough to learn that the movie was set on "a junior-college campus *bursting* with school spirit." She rose and slid the disc into the DVD player, then crawled onto the bed and patted the place beside her. "Got any popcorn?"

"This is because my neighbor wanted to borrow sugar?"

"Shh. The movie's starting."

He frowned and turned back to the stovetop. While legal notifications and piracy warnings played, Jess looked at Peter's back, his shoulders tight. She almost felt bad for him. Then the movie began.

A busty blond cheerleader entered a locker room, waving her pom poms. Looking around to make sure the coast was clear, she opened a locker and withdrew cigarettes and a lighter. She smoked with pleasure for ten seconds or so, until a dark-haired man in a polo shirt and a hat reading "COACH" entered, catching her. "Now what in the hell do you think you're doing, missy?" he barked.

"I'm trying to quit," she said, stubbing out the cigarette.

"I've got half a mind to report you to the dean, young lady."

"You wouldn't—would you?"

"According to section 103.9 of the Student Conduct Handbook, I could get you kicked out of school over this."

"Isn't there something I can do to make it up to you?" the cheerleader asked, moving closer. "Some sort of *deal* we could work out?"

"Well," the coach allowed. Their lips now were inches apart. "I suppose there's *something* we could do to make this right."

They kissed noisily, with tongues, kissing for only a short time before she began working his belt loose.

"Good idea about fast forwarding," Jess called. She sped through the scene, pressing play in time to watch the coach help the cheerleader to her feet and then bend her over against a bank of lockers. Jazzy electronic music played in the background.

"Now would you say this music is diegetic or extra-diegetic?" she called to Peter. He didn't reply. She found the fast-forward button

Peter had mentioned on their first date, 4X, and the two figures leapt into hyper motion. The film cut to a blue mat spread out on the hardwood floor of a gymnasium, the cheerleader lying sideways with the coach behind her. Both had shed their clothes. The girl was covered in tattoos: paw prints between her breasts, a raven with jagged wings in the hollow of her back, an angel and a devil grinning up from the interior of either thigh. The coach had a large white bandage on one knee, and on his thigh was a tattoo of a pistol in a holster.

Jess thought to herself that Peter probably did not know what “diegetic” meant, and something in this thought allowed her to acknowledge the deep well of contempt she had for him, perhaps had always had. What was it she’d wanted from him? She’d been drawn by his looks, certainly, and by the prospect of his cruelty. But how honest was that desire, and how much real cruelty could she bear? Suddenly she didn’t know.

“It’s weird,” Jess said, “I don’t hear that party upstairs.”

Peter had his back to her, fussing over the pasta as if it required constant attention. The figures on the screen moved at frantic, jackhammer speed. The cheerleader opened and closed her mouth, scowling up at the coach, hair damp along her temples. Wouldn’t the other cheerleaders notice that their coach had been gone for a while? Jess wondered. The observation made her feel tired of herself and she didn’t bother saying it aloud.

Jess pressed play on the remote control, returning the movie to regular motion. The cheerleader and her coach were reaching the end of their time together. The girl emitted mournful sighs and coos, her voice climbing to the upper registers, a tremolo sound. The coach’s chest was slick with sweat.

His bandage must be damp around the edges, Jess thought. She raised the volume higher, until the television’s speakers rattled and the noise filled the apartment. Then she turned it higher still, compelling Peter to turn around and face her.

ALEX REYNOLDS

HAPPY ACCIDENTS

"Wouldn't It Be Nice" plays in the Star Market. I shiver before a freezer full of frozen waffles. My hands rest on the cart handle where leftover germs form a flypaper film. My daughter, Ella, waits at the front of the store in the play area where the carpet is the perfect shade of purple to hide vomit and urine. I'm not usually the parent to chuck my three-year-old in the playpen because she picks the waffles, but today I've uttered shit into the open area of my purse, and I don't want her to hear any more unrepeatabe sentiments. I've had one month to recuperate from what my mother calls, "the ordeal."

"Miss?" someone asks.

I am "Ma'am" now. The voice can't be for me.

"How are you today?"

Thomas, a checker and bagger, looks at me. He's three to five years younger than I am, college age. We chat at the register on Wednesdays and Fridays, and he's sure to ask whether or not Ella is enjoying her Yoplait products. I know his name from the tag he wears on his collared shirt.

I imagine how I look. My eyes are the color of a frosted Grey Goose bottle, and when I am wide-eyed and unsmiling, I look as if I am actively acquiring cataracts.

"I'm doing alright," I say. I tell a partial truth. "I just want the best waffles."

I don't make eye contact. Instead I squint into the glass, now foggy because I opened the freezer door before I was ready to make my choice. "Do you have any recommendations?"

"The Homestyle Eggo Waffles are the best sellers."

Thomas is smiling when I peek up at him. He points to the Eggo section. I see Homestyle, Buttermilk, Blueberry, Chocolate, Strawberry, Mixed Berry, Whole Wheat, Half-Fat, Low Fat, and Fat Free waffles, all packaged in a shade of yellow that too closely resembles the yellow of caution tape.

"Do you keep a store record?" I ask because I want to know about the Star Market system. Bureaucracy is everywhere. Who am I to say that they don't have a professional Frozen Food Analyst in the back room? I had a friend in college who went on to write greeting cards. The company sent her metrics each month, so she knew if sympathy cards with white lilies sold more than those with monochromatic roses.

Thomas leans against a freezer. He's moved closer to me. "I work up at check-out, so I see which items are selling fast."

"Oh," I nod. I wonder if my bearings are about to break and

leave me bent over at the waist, catatonic. My husband, Kevin, worries that I have been too still and withdrawn.

I say, "That makes sense."

"It's just the job." He shrugs. "I don't know if I've properly introduced myself before, but I'm Thomas." He extends a hand and I shake it. If he feels the tremor in my fingers, he chooses not to comment.

"I'm Christine," I say and point to my shoulder where my nametag would be if I was still employed. As it is, I'm a stay at home parent.

Thomas nods. Maybe he already knew my name. He would if he had checked my receipts. I don't want him to go, but I don't want him to notice the scabby, chapped creases between my fingers. My eyes sting so I crush my fingernails into the skin of my palms to distract myself.

Thomas sees something. "Do you need some fresh air? I can save your cart. I'll roll it in the back."

He is concerned, and I am grateful. If I was nineteen, I would think Thomas was charming. I would be shy. Today, I don't have a reason to feel abashed. My hair is flat, and I haven't used a blow dryer or curlers in twenty-three days.

"Okay," I say, and he takes my cart.

I follow him to the dairy section, and wait as he rolls the cart through saloon-style doors leading to the store room. When he returns, I amble along behind him. I can't call it ambling, really. I float. I bump into people because I don't look at them. Just yesterday I was told off at the Home Depot because I ran into a guy who carried lamps in both hands. Nothing broke.

We pass through a door that opens to the break area outside. There's a single picnic bench too close to the dumpster.

"You can sit here," he says. Thomas stretches before he settles.

I slide into the opposite bench. For weeks, I have been speaking only in script. "Good. How are you?" "I am feeling better." "Thank you for your concern." If I speak in earnest, I fear the gears in my jaw won't allow me to return to a diet of conciliatory phrases consisting of three to five words each. Ella is the only person who has seen me cry in the car, but she isn't old enough to tell Kevin or her grandmother.

When I look at Thomas, something bubbles inside of me, and it won't fizz out. I wrap my arms around my waist and say, "I had an incident a few weeks ago. In a parking lot."

"In our lot?" Thomas asks. He doesn't look away from me or behave strangely as if he needs to be on call with the suicide hotline or the paramedics. He waits.

"I was at a mall, Central Plaza. A man pulled a knife on me. He held me against my car and told me to shut up, but I'd already screamed when I first saw the knife. Mall security came. I was lucky that they were patrolling two lanes away."

"You'd be luckier if it hadn't happen to you," he says. "Was your daughter with you?"

I shake my head. "She was at home." I look at the teal dumpster. In a dream I would slide away or lose my voice. Thomas would look at me like he'd look at a child who'd been hit by her parents. Then he'd fade away. Some people have falling dreams, but I have paralysis dreams. I can't run. I can't fight. I can't speak.

A choking sob comes next, but I try to pass it off as an attempt at deep breathing. Thomas reaches over, takes my right hand, and rubs his thumb across the veins and the knuckles. I squeeze his hand and lay my head on the table. My bent left arm makes a comfortable pillow. Through the honeycomb holes in the table I see gum, assorted in a variety of shades and colors, smashed on the cement below. Spearmint is Kevin's favorite flavor. He hasn't touched me in two weeks because the last time he did, I jumped and yelled at him for sneaking up on me.

My eyes are startled open by a slamming door. I look up and see another young man.

"Thomas?" It's one of Thomas's coworkers. He wears a green smock. "What are you doing? We've been paging you."

"She needed some fresh air," Thomas says.

The new arrival looks at me, creates an explanation for the situation. He could be anyone. He could be the brother of Thomas's girlfriend. He could be the son of Kevin's boss. He asks me, "You aren't Christine Tate, are you?"

"Yes," I say, and I know that sorry luck is at my side.

"You're being paged too. Your kid is crying up front."

* * *

On the drive home, after I apologized to the sour grocery store daycare employees, I think of *Rosemary's Baby*. I watched the film with my dad when I was fourteen. Later I dreamed about the scene when Rosemary wakes up with scratches. She's been drugged by the satanic neighbors, and when she wakes, her husband tells her that he had sex with her after she passed out because he didn't want to ruin their chance of conceiving a child. He's dead now, my dad. He died six months before Ella was born, so she won't be forced to sit with him and watch horrific films. She and Kevin will watch *Air Bud*, and she will not have nightmares.

I look at Ella in the rearview mirror. She doesn't seem to bear any resentment about my slowness to rescue her from the playpen. Instead she smiles as she toys with a stuffed giraffe named Mr. Spots. His neck is starting to slump because she's rough with him. I wonder if I'll have to replace him again. The first Mr. Spots was spoiled by puke after Ella ate a cup of bad applesauce. Raising young children is easy in the fact that their cherished friends can be bought and replaced at Toys "R" Us.

When I get back to our apartment, I find Kevin is already home. He's munching on Chex Mix in the kitchen, snacking, so he won't eat

much of his dinner. I arrived too late.

When he sees me, he says, "I got a call from the grocery store about Ella."

"I listed you because I don't have a cell phone." I carry brown bags into the kitchen. When I unpack, I find that the yogurt I bought lost its coolness in the storeroom, but I figure that because it was unrefrigerated for less than four hours, it will be safe to eat.

"Are you alright? I told them to call me back in ten minutes if you didn't show."

"I took care of it," I say. I leave the refrigerator door open while I ferry cold items onto the shelves. "I'm sorry you thought you had to come home early."

"I'm always glad to see you two," Kevin says. He goes to a bag I haven't emptied and starts processing the items. I pick out the ingredients to cook stir fry and Kraft Macaroni & Cheese on the back burner for Ella.

"I talked to your mom," he says.

I want to throw my car keys. I want to throw a pan. I want to throw the box of Kraft and watch pasta shaped like Spongebob characters spill out onto the floor.

"She called you again?"

He wants to roll his eyes at me, but he won't. He's afraid to set me off because he knows that even anger will lead to crying, another lonely jag of mine. An annoyance.

"She was just checking on us," he says. "She called the house and no one picked up."

My mother thinks that I lay in bed and wait for Kevin to come home. She depends on him to parent me. "I do leave the house."

"She wants to take you to lunch on the Cape tomorrow. I thought that would be fun for you. I can work from home and watch Ella."

I nod. If it's my mother, I have no choice.

We eat dinner properly, and I do the dishes, put Ella to sleep after rereading a book about unicorns aloud to her, shower, and step into bed. I reach over to the side table and pick up my notebook along with the book the Kevin bought for me, called *Reclaim Your Life: How to Heal from Post-Traumatic Stress*. I complained that the severity of my incident hardly merited any resulting "post-traumatic stress," but Kevin asked me to give it a chance. I run a diagnostic check on myself. Tonight, I write: *I don't want to go to lunch with my mother. I want to be alone. I feel his elbow jamming into my shoulder. I am losing grip on household objects as follows: spoons, forks, knives, toys, toothbrushes, tubes of Colgate toothpaste, pill bottles, bath towels, washcloths, and car keys. He said he would happily kill me.*

I swallow and open to the bookmarked chapter called, "Overcoming Terror in Everyday Situations." I miss the last chapter because it taught me about calm, mindful breathing. It starts in the belly. On page thirty-three, the author and trained therapist, Margie Lynn Caldwell, writes, "Recognize the situations you are avoiding. Jot them down." I would rather list my frustrations. I am angry that my family members are checking on me, constantly. *How'd she seem? Has she gained*

weight? Lost it?

I close my notebook and try to read on. I wonder what kind of trauma Margie has experienced to qualify her to tell me how to process and prioritize my fears. If it was something stupid like almost falling off a bridge as a small child, I envy her. I envy those with experiences brought about by nature or circumstance, not another human with hands poised to wound, to take, and to do so willingly in order to attain an end, to take my cash, or maybe my entire person if he had been in the mood. I would not have been the first woman to be kidnapped in a parking lot. If I was lucky, they'd find my bones on a roadside months later, maybe years. This would give Kevin ample time to remarry and find new mother for Ella, a woman with a good singing voice and softer eyes.

Kevin steps out from the bathroom after his shower and goes to the closet. He pulls his work shirt from the heap he cradles in in his elbow and finds an empty hanger. He smooths the shoulders and secures the buttons.

I set the stress books to the side and lie down. After Kevin folds and hangs his pants, he lies down next to me. Our bed is a Queen size. We didn't pay for the California King because we didn't think we'd want to be far from one another. He joins me in bed, and his knees roll into the backs of mine. My skin is tender after my shower, and the hairs on his legs irritate my skin. His left arm comes to rest atop my shoulder. He shifts to find better comfort, a better fit. If I was thinner, I'd fit inside his frame. I am getting larger. I have a new habit. I finish the food Ella leaves behind. I eat cold oatmeal decorated with food-dyed dinosaur shapes encased in waxy, sugar eggshells. I drink liquid yogurt that contains twelve grams of sugar per container. Sugar sits on her enamel and mine. It eats. It dissolves. In the past, I've said "no" to these products, but now I do not want to tolerate the disappointed downturn in her face. I say "yes" so I don't have to say "no." I wonder if my husband watches me scavenge our daughter's food.

Kevin moves his arm, and his fingers land on my stomach. I tense. They slide my shirt toward my breasts until each tip finds bare skin. Electricity is absent, but old conversations come to mind. Kevin has said that he would, someday, want to have another child. "So Ella won't be alone," he explained. At the time, I mentally added the condition, "On purpose this time." I wonder if he thinks I am not enough for my daughter. The pair of us will not suffice. It is true that we are likely to die before she does, but by that time, won't she have found a companion? His hand stays on my skin until I shift and struggle to settle under his arm. He takes it back to his side, and I hear him pat his pillow down and roll onto his stomach. I measure my breathing and try to align my inhalations and exhalations with his, but mine come too fast and won't stay in sync.

* * *

The next morning, I drive to Dedham to pick up my mother for our luncheon. When we make it to the Cape, we find a restaurant by the water. Once we are seated, I ask, "How have you been, Mom?"

"I have been well, but I want to see Ella. Kevin too. When will you let me visit?"

She takes a sip of water and leaves pink lipstick imprints on the glass. Today her chosen shade is Fuji apple pink, the color I find on Ella's cheeks when she is angry.

"Soon, Mom. I've needed time to myself. I don't get much rest with Ella."

"I know," she says, "I am a mother too." She looks around, and I debate whether or not my mother has taken some kind of injectable to the face. I don't have to wonder about her belly. Tight Ralph Lauren shirts display the evidence. Her stomach is flatter than mine, nipped and tucked to hide the effects of her only child.

"What are you going to eat?" I ask. I know she'll have a salad.

"Just something light," she replies.

The waiter comes to take our orders. In a moment of weakness, I parrot her request for a goat cheese salad. I don't order the side of clam chowder that I wanted because I need to feel like I am in control, like I did not eat three waffles drowned in maple-flavored corn syrup for breakfast. If I am careful, she won't look too hard for the extra five pounds that have amassed on my body in the last few weeks.

"How are you, Christine?"

I wish I'd nicknamed myself Chris. At times, I want none of the formality of my full name, but my parents never gave me a pet name.

"Kevin keeps asking me that too, and the answer is always the same. I'm okay."

I take big gulps of my water. Anger isn't my go-to emotion, but now it fizzes and creates a stickiness in my stomach.

"Kevin has this habit," I say. "He's done it since we first started dating. If something falls from my plate while I'm eating, he watches when I reach for it. He wants to know if I'm vulgar enough to eat off of the table."

"I'm sure that's not true," she says. I know she wants to laugh.

"He still does it, but it's worse now. He watches me when the phone rings to see if I'll startle. If there's a knock at the door, he turns to me. If a horror movie comes on, he changes the channel." I wonder if I will cry in the restaurant. I've done it before.

"I'm sure he's as concerned as I am. You're not yourself, and people who know you recognize that. We love you, Christine. That's why we worry."

I nod. I want to love her and her to love me, and I don't want to be petty, to be envious of the way she shrank when she had problems with my father. She slimmed, became more beautiful. "I love you both, but I don't want to be belittled."

She doesn't respond. I drink more water and watch the white

clock on the wall behind her until the waiter brings out our salads. There are three chunks of goat cheese on each plate, presented like miniature scoops of ice cream and kindly anointed with olive oil and herbs. My mom gives an *mmm* to signal her approval and thanks the waiter. As soon as he's gone, she rolls two of the cheese chunks off onto her empty bread plate.

"Why'd you order a goat cheese salad if you don't want the goat cheese?" I ask.

"I only want a little bit."

With my fork, I split the first mound. I plan to eat all of the cheese on my plate.

"Christine, Kevin worries about you. He hears you crying in the shower at night. Why don't you try talking to him?"

I push away the wilted leaves in my salad with a too firm grip on my fork. "You never talked to Dad, so you shouldn't criticize me on that point." I'm baiting her.

"Kevin is a better man than your dad. I locked myself in the guest room so many times after you left home. He was horrible to live with."

"It was probably just the cancer talking," I say, but I know it isn't true.

I never know what a daughter is supposed to say in these situations. Instead I wonder what Kevin would do if he went off his rocker. Kevin isn't as colorful as my father. He has an MBA in Business Management, and the worst I can imagine him doing is sitting outside Cracker Barrel in one of the rockers he loves, probably the one painted with the American flag. He'd pretend to be the big, bad Southern dad with his gun in his lap, poised to intimidate Ella's suitors.

"Christine, you struggled when you found out you were pregnant, just like you're struggling now, but look how far you've come since then. You're a good mother, and I know you can get through this too."

The goat cheese goes sour in my mouth. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Things work out in the end. This chapter will end like that one did, when you pick up and start again." She nods and takes a bite of lettuce, impressed with her speech.

I remember my book. I focus on breathing, mindful breathing, deep breathing, breathing in the exhaled breaths of happy people. I want to taste the apple pies they've consumed and the aspartame-sweet mint gum they chew afterward. Gum is for people on dates who can't brush their teeth in between dinner and the drop off. It's for jovial, love-struck people who don't jump at the sight of the sun reflecting off of metal surfaces.

* * *

After I drop my mother off in Dedham, I go to the Star Market. I park far away so that I won't have to squeeze into any spots that are flanked with cars on both sides. I watch other people in the lot. They blissfully push carts and talk on the phone. I unbuckle and check that each of my windows is rolled up. Every time I step out of my car, I feel the sensation of metal against my neck, and this time is no exception. This is what I don't like to write about in my notebook. I feel his grip, the *clunk* of my skull against the driver's window. He put his thumb and pointer finger under my jaw like he was checking for a pulse. My fingers slid down the rearview mirror. My knees hit the gravel. A pen jabbed the skin under my index fingernail when I dug in my purse for my wallet. I couldn't remove the ink spot it left behind for a week.

As I walk to the store entrance, I keep my car keys at the ready. A cold current of air conditioning hits me when I step inside. Thomas is at the register. He sees me and nods. I stop next to the cardboard vat of Freeze-Pops and smile back at him. His eyes return to the high school girl in his line. She preens while she speaks to him. His head bends toward her, just as it has bent toward me.

I pick up a basket and head to the International Aisle. I choose a cheap version of garlic marinara sauce and plain spaghetti noodles. In aisle three, I pick up crackers for Ella and a loaf of Texas Toast for Kevin because it is his favorite type of bread. *Remember the seedless jelly*, I think as I wonder how I should act during the checkout. After I find the jelly, I head to the front of the store and aim to appear relaxed, cheerful, or at least as if I am only following routine.

Thomas is working at checkout number four, so I join that line. An older man waits in front of me. He thanks me after I put a divider behind his goods, and I hope he doesn't feel my energy edging him out and away. I put my items on the belt, place another divider behind them, and wait. I forgot peanut butter.

After niceties, the man pays with a credit card, shakily signs his name, and leaves the line. My eyes drift from the candy, the gum, the cigarettes, to Thomas.

"How are you today, Christine?" he asks.

My face is probably wilted, turned down. Sometimes my dad told me I was too stern for a little girl. Mom wanted him to let me be. I try to brighten my expression.

"Good. My mom and I went to the Cape today. I had a nice time. How are you doing?"

"Alright, just working hard. Been here since nine."

"Oh," I say. He wants to go home. He would rather be there than here talking to me, a woman stretching out the checkout process by withholding her credit card.

"You deserve a raise." I strain to give a small, pretty laugh.

"Thanks, that's the dream."

The black conveyer belt feeds my items to Thomas. He scans them quickly, hardly looking at what he swipes over the glass barcode

reader. I was careful to avoid items that could embarrass me. I needed Tums. I needed feminine products. I needed sleep aids, but I didn't want to buy anything obscene, especially not another hot compress or box of Betty Crocker mix. I've already baked coffee cake, German chocolate cake, snickerdoodles, and angel food cake, but none made me smile like their brand's shining housewife.

"Thomas, I'm sorry if I got you in trouble the other day. I shouldn't have gone out there with you." I try not to make eye contact. I don't want to feel studied or pitied.

"It's alright. Don't apologize," he says as he scans my lavender shampoo. "Paper or plastic?"

My embarrassment balloons. He won't look up from the scanner. I say, "Paper. Isn't that the right choice?"

"I think so. They're supposed to be better as long as you recycle them," he says. When Thomas looks up at me, all he says is, "That'll be thirty-one seventy-seven."

I fish out my wallet. There's enough cash inside, so I pass over two twenties and wait for my change. As he opens the register, I watch Thomas handle the cash. He has soft eyes and a clear complexion. He's handsome. There isn't anything special about me. I am the woman who nearly panicked in the frozen food aisle.

Thomas places the change in my open hand without touching my skin.

"Thank you," I say with a smile. I gather my bags, and clamp my teeth around the blubbery skin on the inside of my lower lip. When I walk outside, still biting, I decide to shop at another grocery store.

* * *

I stand over a pot of boiling spaghetti. Pasta makes you well. Pasta fills people who prefer to eat like children. I don't make meat to go with the dish, just the plain red sauce. This is how I'd eat spaghetti as a kid, and Ella likes it this way so Kevin will smile. Tonight, I will use whitening toothpaste to scrub the marinara stains from my teeth. The dentist tells me I have ridgy teeth. Food gets stuck in the cracks, plaque forms, and coffee, tea, and wine attack like guerillas. Maybe my heart has fissures and ridges too. Emotion forms plaque that creates holes and the inside rots, ruined by the sweet and the acidic substances alike. My body can't handle the wear and tear of ordinary life. *I am unfit*, it cries. *I should go to the gym*, it cries. I should see a doctor.

Around six, the door opens. Kevin doesn't call out a hello, so I listen to his footsteps. He doesn't come directly to the kitchen. I wonder if he prefers to be alone. He's never had a problem managing Ella without me. I'm messier than the paint spinner his sister sent Ella for her birthday. I make messes. Messes make me.

Kevin comes into the kitchen. I turn to give a "Hi" that sounds

soft before I go back to tending my vat of swirling noodles. He walks over and stands behind me. His arms wrap around my waist, and his chin drops onto my shoulder. It's worse than a Barilla commercial. I always know that's contrived. It's television. This I can't judge.

"I have a surprise for you," he says. The words are loud. His mouth is next to my ear.

"You don't have to do anything for me."

He backs off and pulls his cell phone out of his pocket. I hope that he hasn't ordered pizza because I have a sufficient supply of carbohydrates for the three of us on the stove. He dials a number, turns to me with his phone to his ear, and smiles.

In the living room, a song plays. It's a digitized version of "Für Elise." I remember the tune from my high school era piano lessons. Kevin nods at me. I beach my stirring spoon and turn to him.

"What is it?"

"Go see," he says.

I follow the signal to the couch. I know what it is. I'm now the owner of a cell phone that I won't know how to use. It'll beep and ring and make me jump, but Kevin is looking at me in a way that seems loving, so I search. *Mindful breathing*, I think. I move the decorative pillow I purchased for the sake of its size without much care for the embroidered, "Live, Love, Laugh," and find a Nokia phone underneath. I recognize the model from a weekly Radio Shack ad. The phone was on the front page, lit up with a graphic of two hands reaching for each other in the clouds, Michelangelo re-appropriated. I pick up the device, press the button that shows a green telephone, and say, "Hello?"

EVA-MARIA SHER

VARIATIONS ON A THEME OF BLACK

I

The worm—and I know you think you are one—after all has his job.
Slip out of your basic black. Find yourself some dirt and dig.

Let the shadows fall where they may. Allow them to cling to the folds of
your shirt. It's okay. There is—after all—the yin and yang of things. The
tree on the hill beyond the horizon casts its shadow under a full moon.

II

Follows the radiance of white. The hard sun arcs in the empty sky.
The Arctic is melting fast. A small, black shadow clings to your feet in
desperation. You shovel mountains of snow from your front walk. What
can you do but cover your face and go inside?
What does it mean to give and take?

III

Enter the psychiatrist. He has the knowledge of black and white and
every gradation in between. His fingers are pale and slender. His pen
is black; the paper on his clipboard is white. The small black ants of his
writing leave thin traces. (Your thoughts or his?)

Your fingernails are dirty. Inside your skin crawl ants of agitation. Is
it the Lisinopril? The EleveX transdermal patch? The OxyContin? You
have begun to dream of hemp.

IV

Enter the guy on his horse. The character with the black hat. You know
who he is. You know what he does. The man with the white hat lags
behind. Has he lost his appetite for winning? And the women with or
without stilettos. What about them? And the mothers?

V

Scarecrows are black. Bones are white. Is there no room for gray? You
must ask for what you really want. The horses keep galloping.
Same apocalypse.

VI

Midnight. A song (wrapped in silence) unwinds in your ear. The moon
tips his pale horn, drips light into your palm. Four swans (oh, swans!)
gliding.

KEITH STAHL

DOCTOR FISH

If Rebecca grilled me, I was taking Tristan to the aquarium. I wasn't lying, really. I would take our son to the aquarium, but first the kid had to eat. We'd grab a Happy Meal in Times Square, tramp down to Something Fishy, and while Tristan and the owner Chenguang got lost in the Hamburglar's maze I'd slip into the Treatment Room for my little nibbles. That's what I was calling the fish pedicures now, *my little nibbles*.

I wished I had brought Everyone Poops to distract my son from planting tiny lip prints on the greasy window. Here I was racing to get seats on the river side as the train pulled out from Poughkeepsie, but Tristan could have cared less about the view. That earthy, green cascade into the Hudson, sailboats speckled like white brushstrokes. It was all LIPS LIPS LIPS.

In the heat of Manhattan I squeezed Tristan's hand. "Daddy, you're hurting me." Something Fishy was boarded up! A laminated newspaper clipping taunted me from the locked door, brooding about fungi and bacterial infection. I'm an infector, not an infectee. A state senator gleamed at protesters in the front page spread. Since when does PETA's jurisdiction extend to fish? Maybe they do starve the fish, but my feet were here to feed them. Imagine the chant: "Go fish!" Bulging veins. Of all the things to protest.

A man loomed next door outside a strip club, cracking knuckles through fingerless gloves. He looked like he'd been chewing a black Sharpie, sidling up to me, pot-belly and cigarettes. He mumbled in my ear, "Doctor fish?"

I hustled Tristan down the subway steps with an address in my hand. "You can eat your McDonald's on the subway," I said. "Won't that be fun?"

On the island of Mykonos four months before this, Rebecca moaned that the prospect of fish suckling my disgusting toes made her want to vomit moussaka. Did that stop me?

The Mediterranean cruise was my version of Al-Anon. I call those people *The Brain Washers*. They warn Rebecca to detach with love (from me, of course), even though I attend AA meetings and leave the Big Book displayed so it's obvious I've been reading it. She sighed one night that maybe we should talk about separating. Which means, of course, because I'm the guy I should move out. I've avoided talking altogether, hoping it'll blow over. I wait up on her Al-Anon nights, later and later, Tristan asleep in his room, watching Mets' games to their bitter end. Baseball's incredibly hard to watch sober, especially the Mets. Then I endure looping SportsNite recaps of the game I just sat through, dash to bed at

Rebecca's headlights in the driveway, pretend to sleep. When was the last time we said good night?

We were a Family, ambling along the stone pavement of Chora, gyros wafting on the humid breeze. Tristan and I escorted Rebecca into dress shops, played hide and seek in the clothes racks, *Isn't mommy beautiful in that dress?* Cartier forbade us entrance because Tristan was sticky-sweet with Nutella. Then the door opened and a blast of cold air poofed Rebecca's sun dress like a movie star. She actually laughed. When was the last time she laughed like that? Out of control. Not sarcasm.

I was the one making her laugh, really. Because this trip was my idea. Is it love when you want someone happy, but it has to be you making them happy?

Cruisers thronged the Mykminnows Fish Spa. Tourists were marinating their feet in fish tanks. A woman crooned, "Ooh la la!" A guy dressed like a fish thumped me on the shoulder, beckoning with his fury fin, "Doctor fish?" Rebecca seized Tristan's hand. I knew the signal. She walks and I follow. But I sort of wanted to try the doctor fish. That's when Rebecca said the thing about the moussaka, rubbing *Onychomycosis* in my face because she wanted to get to Little Venice. I reminded her the doctor said treating my "disgusting" toes would involve messing with my cholesterol medication, that I was better off just going with it and wearing sandals with socks. Soak away, she said. She didn't care. She and Tristan would go to Little Venice without me. I said fine. Go without me. Whatever. I'd already seen real Venice.

The fish spa exuded low tide and cucumbers. I peeled off my socks. Flaking toenails, curly and brittle, yellow and green. The woman attendant stoically endured my decaying feet like Rebecca coming to bed at night.

"Fifty euro," she said.

I hovered my feet above the tank. The minnows clustered like a silver cloud. I gripped my chair, held my breath, and the woman solemnly nodded. I plunged both feet into the fish tank.

Savage, hierarchal, gluttonous orgy. Frenzied exfoliation to the death. Hundreds of mouths nibbled my feet. I wanted to jump. But I didn't jump. It's like heroin; you have to endure the initial shock of the needle to get to the good part.

That's when it happened. I levitated. I drifted through the spa like smoke. The hoopla of splashing tourists faded to a distant carnival funhouse din. I frolicked in azure, one with the minnows, then glided high above the island of Mykonos. I shot past the rings of Saturn. Nebulous clouds peacocked against the deep black of space. The fish guided me through a wormhole to our evolutionary past. Next stop: God.

Then I crashed.

The spa woman cawed, "Naughty, naughty," her mouth a toothless, God-sized black hole. She pointed to her watch. She was saying, "No time. No time."

Then she said, "Fifty euro."

I dug into my wallet for the American Express, but she said, "No, no, no."

I pulled out. I had no more cash. I swear, the fish pouted.

Back on the ship Rebecca was barricaded in the bathroom, making herself up for dinner. It was formal night so she'd take forever. Tristan had crashed on the couch. I finally remembered the combination to the safe that was in our closet. It was my sobriety date.

"I'll meet you guys at dinner, okay?"

Nothing.

"Okay?"

"I said okay."

I slunk off the ship. I blew two hundred euros. The Mykminnows woman gave me a freebie because I was such a good customer. By the time I made it to the dining room back on the ship, Rebecca and Tristan were finishing their dinner.

"I got hung up at the excursion desk."

Rebecca waived her wine glass like a trophy. "I had wine."

After my first DWI Rebecca never drank in front of me. Then it was, Do you mind? Now she was drinking to punish.

"Three glasses."

I couldn't find doctor fish in Crete, or Sicily, or Rome. When Rebecca and Tristan stood in line for gelato, I secretly soaked my feet in Trevi Fountain, but it wasn't the same. Then a policewoman told me to stop.

On the flight home we ordered soda from the bar cart. I asked for peanuts and pretzels. "I won't tell if you don't." The attendant shoveled me package after package, playing it up, pretending to make sure nobody was looking. The attendant was all smiles, but Rebecca just stared at the seat in front of her.

We used to get tanked on these European flights. Rebecca mimicked the bobble-headed flight attendants, *Coffee? Kaffee? Tea? Tee?* I giggled against the window, *They'll hear you!* The absurdity of everything was our little secret.

"Actually," Rebecca said looking up from the seat, "I'll have a Bloody Mary."

Rebecca was looking good, wearing her hair shorter and her clothes tighter. Who was she trying to impress? Her lips teased the plastic cup. I remember those lips. I can taste them. I was fine with her having a drink. Not everybody who drinks is an alcoholic.

First day back in the states, I located Something Fishy in Manhattan, near Port Authority. I burned my sick days within four months after the cruise riding the train in from Poughkeepsie for my little nibbles. So that meant traveling to the city on Saturdays, taking Tristan with me because Rebecca works on Saturdays.

The address the guy outside Something Fishy had given me was down a cul-de-sac. Like Sesame Street on Garbage Day. Tristan scrunched his face at pockets of rancid air. "Hey, little man." Who said

that? I descended the steps of a basement storefront. The sign said Salon, but I wasn't sure. No mirrors, no fluorescent lights, just linoleum ding. A dusty dehumidifier droned and rattled in the corner. So much empty space. A single swivel barber chair loomed like an electric chair. Like an execution.

Tristan darted to the manicure table. Paints and brushes and scissors were piled like building blocks. Chenguang was painting her fingernails red.

"Hey, Bud! You find me."

She hobbled to the far end of the salon, kicked away a throw rug hiding a trap door in the floor.

"Do you mind?" she said. "I too old."

I squat and heaved the door open.

I didn't want Tristan witnessing my little nibbles any more than I'd want to be caught masturbating. I didn't want him blabbing to Rebecca, either. He was spinning in Chenguang's chair with the Happy Meal box on his head.

"Will he be alright?" I asked.

"He always alright."

I plodded down the stairs, heavy trap door slamming shut behind me.

It was like a Japanese steakhouse. Koto music pwaned from a boom-box. Businessmen reclined on rugs around an inflated kiddie-pool like hibachi. Water gurgled from one of those tiny indoor fountains you get at Walmart. It smelled like seafood.

A girl painted in a *Geisha 1* T-shirt serenely skimmed a film of dead floaters off the surface of the pool. *Geisha 2* poured in a fresh pickle bucket of hungry fish.

I closed my eyes. "These fish are primo."

Geisha 1 tapped my shoulder. "Sake?"

I heard a scurry overhead. Then a crash. Like a drum set tipping over.

The geishas froze. The businessmen gaped. Even the fish were holding their breath.

Tristan.

I heard shouts.

I was woozy getting up so fast. I bolted up the stairs. Nobody else stirred.

The hatch opened. I raised my arms to block the blinding light. It was like a religious painting. The voice of God boomed like a beer hawker at Citi Field.

"New York Department of Health. This is an investigation. Please remain where you are situated."

I blitzed past the health inspector. I knocked his clipboard to the ground. I crunched through the upended manicure table.

Tristan was lounging in the barber chair, coddled by two female cops. They were fawning over his purple fingernails. He saw me, twisted

to get down, but the officers restrained him.

"Is this your father?"

Tristan hesitated, like it was a trick question. Like he had to think about it.

"Yes."

Chenguang was a grey cloud. They drove her out in handcuffs.

"Bud, we're cutting you a break. Get your son out of here."

"Can I just grab my sandals?"

Outside news cameras scanned for culprits. I hoisted Tristan to hide my face. My boss's clients might not appreciate their accountant, Bud Wassermann, ensnared by Operation Stingray. I scuttled down the sidewalk, socks squishing and bunching at my toes.

At the aquarium I contemplated Tristan's reflection in the glass. He was grinning at a barracuda, jaw protruding like the fish, all those crooked bottom teeth. He's mostly Rebecca, with the sad, droopy eyes sliding off his high cheekbones. Maybe it's wishful thinking, but I still see myself in Tristan. And I'd be damned if I dragged my son down with me. My shock at seeing Something Fishy boarded up? That was *withdrawal*.

I swore off doctor fish forever. No better than the casino, the ice cream sundaes, the online sex. No better than Facebook. A drug is a drug.

An eerie shadow erased our image in the glass. Everyone gasped. Silence. It was like a church in there. An oceanic whitetip shark drifted by. The primordial killer, perfect in its terror, suspended in evolution. But I wasn't looking at the shark like normal people. I was looking at the pilot fish. Happy, little zebras clinging to the man eater, nipping its flesh, pecking at the dorsal. The shark rolled its eye like Nosferatu.

Little nibbles. It's all I could think about on the train back to Poughkeepsie. We had to sit backwards, and it was sickening. We weren't on the river side, so I had to watch the banks of the train tracks whizz by like film through a projector, only everything was in reverse. Urine-scented air gushed warm from the lavatory like a bellows whenever the door sucked open and closed. The faint *chink pwa* of iPods. This was worse than detox. I needed the bathroom. I needed to wake Tristan to bring him with me, *Daddy's a little sick*, because I couldn't leave him alone on the train. Not after Operation Stingray.

But I white-knuckled it. I made it to the end of the line, and I've never been so happy to be in Poughkeepsie.

In the car I pondered Tristan in the rear-view mirror. Everything I'd put him through. I owed him something. I owed something to my son.

I pulled into Po' Town Pets.

"How 'bout an early birthday present?"

The bell tinkled and the floorboards creaked. Yips and chirps and squawks. I breathed sawdust, the mulchy aroma of dry dog food and ammonia. I breathed through my mouth, let my eyes adjust to the earthy darkness. Planked walls and wooden beams. It was more hoarder's se-

cret than pet shop. Dog pillows rose to the ceiling. A mountain of kitty-litter, fifty-pound bags, teetered over Tristan's little body. A wire wrack bulged with chew toys and dog collars and leashes. Tristan reached for a squeaky zombie foot, knocking a floppy mallard to the floor.

A tired voice drifted from the back room, "You can leave it."

Rick lumbered up behind the counter. It was more like a judge's bench. Chest hair grew through his T-shirt, every bulge and spread and ovulation right out there, outy belly button, a mid-life Where's Waldo? who needed a shave.

He led us into a room, a big closet, four walls of glowy fish bubbles. Rick knew his fish, but I didn't like him crouching close to my son, hand gangling on Tristan's shoulder as he pointed out the Electric Yellow Cichlids and Peppered Cory Cats. He sounded like a pedophilic Mr. Rogers, "You like the Long Fin White Cloud? Can you say 'Otocinclus?'"

I learned aquariums are more complex than multiple K-1 tax returns. Marine or freshwater? Planted or fish-only-with-live-rock? There are nitrogen cycles and test kits, ultraviolet sterilizers, something called "biological filter medias."

"Look. The kid's not even four, yet."

"Oh, yeah? When's your birthday?"

The bigger the tank, the more the fish. But even a small tank would run over two-hundred bucks with all the equipment, so I settled for five gallons. Five fish. Tristan selected a Crown Tail Betta, a Red Cap Oranda Goldfish, a Maingano Cichlid, and a Green Cobra Guppy.

"You have one more."

Tristan's eyes floated from the Tiger Barb, to the Blue Paradise.

Rick hunched in anticipation, little green net like a lollipop. He decided to entertain me with a story about the Roman emperor Tiberius who had little children swim between his legs. Tiberius called the kids his "little minnows."

Tiger Barb, Blue Paradise. Tiger Barb, Blue Paradise.

I asked Rick if he sold pilot fish, but was informed they're salt-water and I'd need a whole different set-up.

"No biggy," I said.

Finally Tristan pointed at one of the tanks.

"Blue Paradise it is."

The new aquarium glimmered in the corner of Tristan's room. The air filter breathed like the wind. Distant. It was nice. I love holding my head under the surf at the beach with the tide coming in; breakers sift pebbles and sand and it sounds like a sizzling skillet underwater, breakfast in bed, all the comforts of home. It was Rebecca's Al-Anon night, and I tucked Tristan into his Shrek comforter and lay next to him to read. The books are strictly ordered: *Where the Wild Things Are* first; *Everyone Poops* last. Always. One night the Mets were coming on and I skipped *Are You My Mother?* Tristan demanded I start all the books over. He'll make a great accountant, one day.

Tristan cackled at the defecating animals like he has a thousand

times before, and I laughed because my son was laughing. The book isn't funny anymore, but I guess laughing's part of the ritual.

It was time to turn out the light, but I opened a Dr. Seuss book I bought at the pet store. Tristan squirmed because Rebecca's in charge of book purchases, but by promising another round of *Everyone Poops* I coaxed him into *One Fish, Two Fish*.

Tristan raised his head for a closer look at the character's furry feet poking through the bed board; Ned's bed is too little. Tristan coughed out a little laugh, fell back into me. It was a father-son moment, but all I could think was how the tickle of Tristan's face on my arm was a little like the fish. The minnows. The doctor fish.

I hovered outside his door. Tristan called me back in.

"Daddy, will you check the closet?"

I banged around for monsters, but then I was quiet. Something was cowering in the corner. Behind the stuffed, man-sized Barney.

A microwave oven, still in the box. Unwrapped bedsheets. Flat-screen TV. Brand-new Keurig. All the comforts of home. My wife's new home.

"No monster," I lied.

My skin burned. I was inverted. I was inside out. I said good night in my most fatherly voice, turned out the light, closed the door.

Rebecca would take Tristan away. It was as certain as death. No court awards custody to a father who needed ninety days of rehab at Saint Joseph's.

I floated around the house like a jellyfish. In the family room loose Legos sucked up action figures like quicksand. Tangled yo-yos. *Don't Break the Ice*. I ran my hands along Tristan's bumpy finger paintings taped to the fridge with my eyes closed. I stepped on Tristan's sneakers to get the lights to flash. I tried to imagine the toothbrush holder without three toothbrushes. Tristan's Spiderman toothbrush. His tiny teeth.

And there was Tristan.

"Daddy, I can't sleep. Can you turn off the bubbles?"

I explained that fish need bubbles, need air to hiss through the filter and that the heater has to hum to keep the fish warm. The fish would die if we turned off the bubbles. It would be like God turning off the air. It would be like the sun not coming up. I told him bubbles are like fish lullabies.

Tristan wanted a lullaby.

I sang, "Octopus's Garden." When I got to *We would be so happy you and me*, it was like having a baby carrot stuck in my throat. *No one there to tell us what to do*, and my eyes stung like they were open under water.

Then Tristan said softly, "Sing me a *real* lullaby."

A real lullaby.

So I sang, "You Are My Sunshine," Rebecca's lullaby song, the most depressing song ever written.

Finally I collapsed into the living room couch. It hissed like it

was deflating. The Mets were losing. Dickey walked the bases loaded and couldn't buy an out. Rebecca once followed the Mets with me, even tracked their pitching rotation.

Ball one.

Maybe the couch would suck me under the leather, make me disappear.

Ball two.

I should have called someone, but I lost my AA phone numbers.

Ball three.

I'd handle this. It wasn't like we had booze in the house.

Ball four.

And there was Tristan. Again. Sometimes he slinks from bed and lurks.

"Daddy, I can't sleep."

I ripped the fish tank from Tristan's room, sloshed it down on the living room coffee table. I'd figure this out tomorrow. He had to sleep. No lullabies. No books. I tucked Tristan in, gentle but firm.

I gruffly towed fish water off the living room floor. There's this Always Sober Bud who counts drinks, warns me not to drive, scolds me from the rear-view mirrors of police cruisers. I can't hide from Always Sober Bud, but he is easy to ignore.

I waited until the fifth inning to be sure Tristan was asleep. I examined my toe jam, rationalizing that fish were the only power that could peel through all my layers. It was purely medicinal.

I dunked my feet.

But the fish didn't bite. They ignored me. I wiggled my toes and they swam away. I tried tricking them, chasing them with my right foot into the left. I cornered them, splashed my feet near the surface like bait. They just pursed their lips and popped little bubbles. Try some! Open the tunnel; here comes the train!

I lunged for the laptop, found out I needed *Garra rufa*, the doctor fish, from the rivers and streams of Turkey. They feast on human flesh. But of course, they're illegal now. Thank you, Senator Jeffrey D. Klein. I linked to Action News' coverage of Operation Stingray. No comment, as cameras badgered Tristan and me from behind.

"Daddy, I can't sleep."

I yanked my feet from the tank, and for the first time in my life, the first time in Tristan's life, I yelled at my son.

"Jesus, Tristan! Are you spying?! Get out, Tristan. Just get out!"

I tried to hide my feet with a towel. Tristan's eyes filled. It was like running with scissors but it was Tristan who fell on them. The shock on his face, to be stabbed by his own father.

Et tu, Daddy?

Tristan dashed to his room. Always Sober Bud stabbed me over and over with my own scissors. I sank to my knees, sopping up my spill again. I tried to pray, muttered a broken, little, "Fuck." I'd make amends. The ninth step, I think. Maybe it's the tenth. I'd rest on the edge

of Tristan's bed and admit that I'm not Daddy Superstar.

But when I neared Tristan's door, I heard that rhythmic, nasal whistle. I was too late. Tristan was fast asleep. I was addicted to fish, my wife was opening a Walmart in Tristan's closet, and my son just cried himself to sleep because of me.

Rebecca clanked around downstairs. She punches the refrigerator door shut just enough to rattle the ketchup and mayonnaise, snaps the kitchen faucet to FULL-BLAST and clatters the pipes by making the water abruptly STOP.

I don't get her anger. I stopped drinking. I babysit Tristan so she can attend Al-Anon, so she can work. Only so she can move out?

She glowered over a bowl of granola like a dog and its bone.

I couldn't make eye-contact.

"How was your meeting?" I asked.

"What's up with the fish?"

"We have fish now."

I opened the fridge and saw three bottles of wine. We hadn't had alcohol in the house for two and a half years.

"What's up with the wine?"

"We have wine now."

Maybe she was baiting me with the wine, pressing me to implode, Order of Protection, out of the house. Make life unbearable so I'll abandon ship. Punish me. Or maybe she just wanted a glass of wine at the end of the day. Like normal people. Like the old days. Before I blew us out of the water.

She dropped her bowl into the sink, not quite a slam, just enough, and went upstairs.

I squeezed the neck of an opened chardonnay, swirling the wine like a genie in a bottle. I twisted the cork. It felt like pulling the ring from a hand-grenade, but no deafening explosion or shrapnel. Just that harmless pop, that hollow echo. The wine smelled like a sticky barroom floor, and I pictured Rebecca getting ready to go out, sheathing her ass in that tight, black dress. I imagined a strong hand incidentally brushing her bra-strap through Lycra as she perched on a barstool. I saw her reclined at some intimate after-hours party, laughing women with perfect teeth, The Brain Washers. *What kind of candle are you burning? Wild Sea Grass.*

I poured myself a glass and ferried it to the living room. The Mets flickered in extra innings. The aquarium glimmered. It was like being surrounded by a halo.

But I drifted to sleep, and when I woke the next day that glass of wine was still on the end table, untouched. I poured it down the drain.

I went a week cold turkey. Cold fish, I joked with myself. But then I was jingling the door to Po' Town Pets, Rick grinning over his judge's bench like a knowing accomplice.

"What's the biggest tank you've got?"

"Fifty-five gallons."

"I need an Eheim Classic canister filter."

"Got it."

"And an Azoo titanium heater."

"Got that."

"And the fish..."

I tinkered with dog biscuits.

Rick cleared his throat. "What about substrate?" he said.

"I don't need a substrate."

His voice quivered, barely audible. "You won't be wanting fish food either, I take it."

I shook my head.

"I'll need a thousand now, and a thousand when you get the Garra rufa."

I had been right about the Christian-fish bumper sticker on Rick's Hyundai.

I set it up in my home office. It's not much of an office, just a section of basement, my plywood fortress. I keep it padlocked, but can't lock it from the inside, so there would be no fish pedicures with Rebecca or Tristan in the house. I thought about adding an inside lock, but Rebecca might have gotten curious. I was only going to nibble on those Saturday nights that Rebecca and Tristan spent at her mother's.

Like tonight.

I moved papers from a card table hiding the tank, lifted the table away.

"Hey, guys."

I slid my desk out, slid the couch in.

I picked a CD, Handel's *Water Music and Music for the Royal Fireworks*. I cracked a Perrier, kicked off my slippers, rolled up my slacks. I draped my feet over the side of the aquarium like a giant fish-hook.

"Ooh. You guys are hungry."

I closed my eyes. They opened at Rebecca's flickering shadow. She teetered in the doorway, extending her arm like a gate to keep Tristan out.

I shot from the water. I stood on the couch. My arms aren't long enough to hide my naked feet.

"Get him out, Rebecca. Please."

Rebecca dropped her arm, allowing Tristan to timidly peek around her.

"Oh, Bud," she said. "Are you making...chin?"

I stood tall and looked directly into Rebecca's bloodshot eyes.

"You mean 'gin'?"

"That's what I said."

"You're slurring."

"I'm allowed to slur. You're not allowed to slur."

"You were driving, Rebecca."

"Are those...fish?"

"With Tristan!"

I'm sitting on the couch, unfurling my pants. I've added it up:

the drinks in the restaurant, the drinks on the plane, the wine in the fridge, coming home at three in the morning.

My wife is an alcoholic.

But I'll take her to her first AA meeting. I'll show her the ropes. I'll be her temporary AA sponsor until we find her a permanent one. Maybe that woman, that old-timer, the one who knits. And I'll do better. They say sobriety is like a boat. You can't have one foot in the boat and one foot on the dock or you'll fall in. I've had one foot in the boat and one foot in a bucket of fish. Rebecca and I, we need to get into the boat together. We'll all get in the boat. The Whole Family.

"Now you're addicted to fish."

"Rebecca, you need help."

"You people think everybody is an alky. You're jealous."

"I wouldn't trade my sobriety for anything."

"Would you trade it for me?" Rebecca saunters to the edge of the tank. "Would you?"

"Can we all go upstairs?"

"You wouldn't?"

"You don't want that."

"I don't know what I want."

Fish water sparkles in Rebecca's eyes.

"What's it feel like?"

"Let's go upstairs."

"What's it feel like, Bud?"

Rebecca kicks off her heels.

"Come on, Reb. Let's go."

Rebecca pours herself onto the couch. She dips one painted toe into the tank. She glances from me to Tristan, me to Tristan, slowly sinking her foot into the doctor fish.

"My God."

She plunges the other foot in, spilling some on the floor.

"My God, Bud."

"Rebecca, come on."

"Tristan, honey, take off your shoes."

"Rebecca, please."

"Come here, little man. Sit next to Mamma."

Tristan jumps and squirms at first, like sitting in a church pew. Then he follows his mother's lead and reverently turns his feet over to the minnows.

My wife closes her eyes.

"I could get used to this."

It's late, past midnight, Sunday already.

"Aren't you joining us?"

"What?"

"Aren't you *joining* us?"

I've never seen her this drunk. She'll regret it in the morning, act like nothing happened. If I see her at all. We've been sleeping so far apart

in the king-sized bed that we come and go for weeks without waking each other up. I feel her warm spot sometimes, to guess how long she's been gone.

Rebecca holds Tristan's hand. I want to hold Tristan's hand. I want to hold both their hands.

I take off my slippers and roll up my pants.

"Move over," I say.

JAKE TRINGALI

INSIDE A SALEM PARLOR

you will not fuck with the goddess

goddamn hoodie-wearin' child, and her friends, my red runes
of slaughter'll spill over your broken rabbit's foot. no,
you can't get a neck tattoo, princess, and there is no such
thing as the modern vampire

precious, just shop, and applaud yourself in my parlor, buy
that bundle of wildwood sage, to bring home and burn next to your
picket fence, skyscraper condo, euro cottage, subzero fridge,
whatever, i've got work to do

my practiced skills linger, occult and otherwise, you continue
to cackle as your manicures dare to touch my grimoire, my
folio, the scented candles that we really made in the summer backyard
as the ladies laughed darkly

tell your cheering nuggets to sit the fuck down, follow yo momma's
tramp stamp and exit, take your mall dye kit wit' cha, back
on the bus, fuckin' tourist, light up that clove ciggie,
whatever, I've got lots of work to do

Cambridge, MA
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