

BY NOW IT SHOULD SOUND LIKE MUSIC

by

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STATEMENT OF DISSERTATION APPROVAL

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ABSTRACT

In my dissertation, *By Now It Should Sound Like Music*, I explore connections between inheritance and writing, and how we experience different kinds of inheritance in our bodies, families, and spiritual lives. Although my primary genre for this project is the essay, many of these pieces have a story to tell. My look at inheritance is as personal as my immediate family, especially my father's adoption, and the turbulence following my grandmother's spiral into Alzheimer's. But I also follow stories and figures far outside of my own experience, such as composer Olivier Messiaen and Mother Teresa. The self is unpredictable, exciting quarry to track. And the self, by itself, is rarely enough.

I investigate my Evangelical upbringing, especially the stories, songs, and cultural products like the sinner's prayer and the altar call that were part of my early spiritual formation and embedded in family relationships. In part two of the manuscript, I reach beyond the Evangelical culture of my youth to Catholic and Orthodox expressions of Christianity. In search of wisdom, transcendence, or healing, I look to spiritual places like the rocks of southern Utah, the painted monasteries of Romania, and the dehydrated carnival of Burning Man.

By Now It Should Sound Like Music includes many different types of writing, from the protein scripts of our DNA to the lakes and canyons inscribed by glaciers. In these essays, the material shape and heft of words as objects, and not just meanings, are items for study in their own right. Music is one of the most important kinds of "writing"

in the collection. Musical notation aims at precision but, like writing, allows room for interpretation in the birdseye of a fermata, or the suggestiveness of a metaphor.

Music's other side, silence, is the backdrop of this project. Many of the essays are a reaction to silence: a silence imposed because of illness, death, physical distance, or a severed relationship. A priest I like once explained that the Bible is not the revelation but is a record of the revelation. This manuscript is no Bible, but these essays record. They function like afterimages of things seen and unseen. They function like echoes.

*For my parents, Tom and Susan,
and my brother, Isaac*

The self is a cloister full of remembered sounds.

—Wallace Stevens

The echo is, to some extent, an original sound, and therein is the magic and charm of it. It is not merely a repetition of what was worth repeating in the bell, but partly the voice of the wood...

—Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

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VOICE MAIL FROM THE SEEING PLACE

For Marjorie (1918-2008)

The broccoli was cooked into its afterlife. I fumbled in Nana Sheets' kitchen for two cans of corn. When I visited Nana, she was usually in a bathrobe, knocked over like a bowling pin on the couch, watching *On Golden Pond* for the 400th time. Hanks of her short brassy hair poked out in all directions from the crown of her head. Her hair spiked straight up in front; she was always in a state of Hearing Shocking News. The steroids for her asthma plumped her face into a prednisone mask.

Are you still in there? my dad would ask when Nana glassed over. She'd laugh and say, *I'm still here.*

Christmas, though, Nana was up and dressed, in a beige blouse with a thick elastic waistband and creased polyester pants. When I opened two cans of green beans, Nana panicked. *Don't you have bacon?*

No bacon, I said.

Nana had insisted on ordering a standing rib roast from Tower Foodfair. My dad knew his sister, Jeanne, wouldn't help cook it even though by then she was living with Nana. My parents had driven over early Christmas morning to help Nana slide the roast in the oven.

What about the meat? Nana asked while I stirred the corn.

It's cooking. Relax, Mom, my dad said. The poinsettia cloth napkins waited like folded hands on the table. The roast emerged charcoal on top and sunset shades of

raw in the middle. Dad wasn't quite sure what had happened to it, but he carved it up anyway. *An eighty dollar piece of meat*, he said.

Who made this cranberry salad? Nana asked for the third time. She was much better with the Deep Past.

We did, Nan.

Christmas Eve, Nana and I had clamped the medieval meat grinder on the edge of the kitchen table to crush the fresh berries. That afternoon was a flash of the Good Ol' Nan, who watched over my shoulder to make sure I chopped the pecans finely enough, that the diced celery was uniform. Anything connected to food was more likely to velcro itself to her short-term memory. She would miss her pills, but not her sweet rolls. She would not forget the cup of Shoney's potato soup on the kitchen table, even if it hid in a paper bag.

As we sat down to eat, Jeanne emerged from the basement with a basket of sorry-ass, sad little dinner rolls. She didn't even spring for the bakery kind. I dropped the basket on the table and a couple of rolls tumbled out. I chucked them back into the basket like a clown.

Nick, Dad said. He shot me a look like *have some dignity, will you? It's Christmas*. I cupped three rolls in my hands and pretended to gnaw at them like a hungry typewriter. Pasty flecks of roll shaved onto the table. Jeanne exploded; my mom laughed too.

Nick! Dad repeated.

Nana giggled and asked: *Honey, are you hungry?*

Here's a memory I hold out in front of me: when I was younger, Dad's patience stretched like a circus tent. On the two-day drives to Sarasota, I played in the backseat of the car with the Woodsies, a family of three squirrels who lived in a plush log complete with plastic wood-looking furniture. The Woodsies feasted on Dad's ear wax. They wanted to drive the car. They patted the back of Dad's head with their plastic hands the size of my fingernails. *Get those rats out of my ears!* Dad shouted, but he was smiling.

They're not rats!

That summer when Dad was out of work, we went to the beach every day. We lived in my mom's parents' winter home, the one with the icy, screened-in swimming pool. Nana Sheets sent me a package, four dolls she'd sewn, dolls a little taller than coffee mugs: one boy and girl with brown yarn hair, one girl with yellow yarn, and my favorite, a boy with a striped shirt and silky copper hair of embroidery thread. Those dolls made me miss Nana so bad I cried in Mom's lap under the orange trees.

All summer I fed the seagulls with stale bird bread from the Publix supermarket. My parents and I picked fruit off the backyard trees. We could hear the lung rattle and hack of our next door neighbor, Dale, shouting for his wife, Juanita, to bring him a beer. We cracked each other up, eating our late lunch on the card table by the pool, *Juanita!* I growled at my mom. *Can I have a Coke?*

In Greek tragedy, the chorus says what the actors cannot say. It is the running ticker of the real register of things. The chorus punctuates episodes. When a new character needs to be checked out, or a wayward one needs it told to them, cue the chorus. It was once the kernel of drama, to the point that "asking for a chorus" was the

same as asking for a play. Tragedy evolved as an actor talked with the chorus leader. Later two or even three actors would be set in motion like a juggler's hankies. Eventually actors took over and dismantled the scaffolding of the chorus, folded it up like flimsy tent poles and stashed it away in the basement of culture in case someone else came along and wanted to use it as an antique, a period piece, a festival of anachronism. Euripedes closed the distance between actor and chorus, collapsed the whole thing like a telescope folding in on itself. The chorus outlived its usefulness.

My mother and brother dance first to the left, then to the right. I can't see them dancing because I am on a cell phone, hundreds of miles from the theater. Mine is a thin phone, too small for a camera. But my mother and brother sound a little out of breath when they talk, so I know they are dancing. They are the chorus, not the principal players. It is easy for them, for me, to tell Dad that Nana has to get out of that house, or get Jeanne out of that house, or she'll die. But we're not the ones who'd have to pick Nana up like a sack of corn and buckle her into the truck. Of all the characters, I find my father most sympathetic, though Jeanne also commands a measure of pity. By her antics it is easy to forget she's fifty years old. It seems more fitting to cast her as a lost teenager, a gangly pitiful rudderless girl.

Nana was thirty when she and Granddaddy collected my dad at the hospital. Jeanne was a surprise, eight years later. My father claims he has no interest in finding his birth mother. I am fascinated by the idea of this phantom family. When I was little, Dad joked that he was from Krypton, and he would refer to his secret powers and to my

grandfather Jar-El. *Tell me about Jar-El!* I'd shout and clap my hands in our booth at Pizza Hut. My dad would shush me in a mock scold. *Don't let anyone overhear!*

My dad's adoption makes me think about what we carry in our blood. I thought about this too when I watched *Rivers and Tides*, perking up when Andy Goldsworthy discussed the iron in small, brown, unassuming river stones. In the documentary, he pulverizes the stones into red powder and forms a pigment ball he plunks into the current, watching the bright rivulets batik the stream. The iron in rock, Goldsworthy says, is the same as in our own blood. I wonder, too, what pulses through the heart's byways, what is written on the scrolls of our DNA, those double helixes in the fiesta of the body, spiraled like the crepe paper streamers on my pink Huffy bicycle when I entered the Fourth of July bike parade at Ritter Park. I decorated my Huffy with tinfoil stars on its white plastic basket and playing cards clothespinned to the spokes. Miranda's mom freaked that I wrapped the bike body in a rainbow of streamers instead of sticking to red, white and blue.

One summer afternoon I left Huffster on the driveway and my mom ran over its front tire with the minivan. We called the bike Clown Bike because the front tire warped, the wheel folded over as though waving howdy. Topsy Huffy wobbled as I rode. I pictured myself part of a circus act.

The Christmas I first met the Huffy was balmy for West Virginia, maybe 60 degrees. I wore my cowgirl boots, a denim skirt, and green knit toboggan hat. I was, as usual, recovering from an earache. My mother would not negotiate about the knit hat. I wore it down over my ears as I drove Huffy in manic hourglasses on Nana and Granddaddy's Etch-a-Sketch of a patio.

My thinking bleeds like Goldsworthy's iron in the water. I cannot look at Nana's present without seeing the past. The Ancient Greek way makes sense, superimposing history on the future, two different hues creating the color of the present. Around 6th century BCE, Pythagoras described history as one Great Year, *Magnus Annus*, which would eventually repeat: another iteration of the planets' positions, all the same damn people and their kooky events. Consider the body language of the Aymara, indigenous to Bolivia, Peru, and Chile, who gesture behind them to refer to the future, who hold their arms in front of them, close to the body to express recent events, way out for ancient times.

All I can do is sit here and listen for the phone, with a Mickey Mouse ViewMaster in front of my face like a mask, tug the lever and advance the cardboard disk to the next frame. The past out in front, see?

NEXT FRAME [Nana carries pots from the stove to warm the garden hose water in our plastic Sesame Street swimming pool.]

NEXT FRAME [Nana spreads margarine on Roman Meal bread before adding peanut butter and jelly so the sandwiches won't stick to the roofs of our mouths.]

NEXT FRAME: [Nana sits beside me in the TV room on the plaid yellow couch across from the picture window and the patio. The first book she teaches me to read is a slim stapled paperback called *Ted*. Each page has a primitive line drawing of a hapless cub in a square panel, and a line or two of text heavy on short vowels. *Ted is a cub*. Etc. Basically Ted plays, gets capped by a bad man, and soaks in a tub while his mom brings bread and jam. Nana's precisely filed fingernails hard as flint, perfect for back scratches, make her long patient schoolteacher fingers even longer, as she points word by word.]

NEXT FRAME: [Nana and Granddaddy feed me minty Life Savers in our blue pew at Highlawn Baptist Church. I chomp the candy and kick my feet against the seat in front of me. I doodle on the church bulletin. I am fond of the handbell choir, young people dressed in matching white robes. The bells wait on low tables. Then the robed young people stand at the ready, an upside-down bell in each hand, the bells' round mouths open to show their clappers like silent tongues. The robed young people extend their arms to ring the bells with a wrist flick, then retract their arms in an arc. The robed young people jingle out hymns like a big white polyester-blend acne-prone calliope of love.]

NEXT FRAME [Nana and I hunch at the turquoise sewing machine. For a brief season in high school, I want to sew, and Nana helps me make a pair of jams, upping the ante with pockets and an elastic waistband. I choose a colorful fabric, a print with piles of vegetables. Nana does not abide shortcuts. It takes me forever just to cut the pattern out of the thin shushy beige paper. I iron seams flat. I pin and hand-stitch the hems before touching the turquoise machine with its racy pedal. We work on the jams well after midnight, and then I sleep in the pink bedroom, Jeanne's old room. We work by the bright light of a lamp rather than the sallow overhead fixture.]

NEXT FRAME [Nana and Granddaddy stand and clap next to my parents in the center of the Huntington Mall where the fountains are. Brown indoor/outdoor carpet vomits over a hexagonal makeshift stage near the organ and piano store and the Frontier Fruit & Nut Co kiosk with its bins I frequent for their gummi bears, shoveling them into a plastic sack to be priced by the pound. In first grade I score the lead in my class's production of *The Little Red Hen* and volunteer Nana Sheets to make my costume. She

transforms my red dress with white dots into a body of felt feathers, like tongues of fire in red, orange, yellow. But the gold medal goes to the yellow pair of Totes socks with grippy plastic dots on the bottom that she stitches to look like three-toed poofy chicken feet, Foghorn Leghorn style. Mary Beth Foss, the duck and one of the hen's naysayer friends, wears a pair of orange swimming flippers.]

NEXT FRAME: [Nana slides her long scissor fingers into her voluminous purse, snatching fun-size Snickers for me and my cousin Melissa at the movies. The hiss and spume as she opens Pepsi cans for us from the same voluminous purse. After the movie, the three of us in her brown Buick, waiting to get out of the mall parking lot, me turning the radio to WKEE 100.5 FM, hoping an R.E.M. song would come on.]

I emphasize the Master in ViewMaster. The image isn't going anywhere until I pull that lever. I could play this game for a long time.

After lunch at Bob Evans, Dad helped Nana out of the Jeep and up the stairs to her house. Watching her totter up the stairs with Dad at her elbow, I thought of that children's book, *Love You Forever*, especially the last part when the adult son cradles his elderly mother. Children's books crack my face sometimes, the plaster flakes around my eyes and mashes under my tears. *The Velveteen Rabbit*, for example, I had a coloring book version of it when I was little and I filled in its delicate sepia lines with colored pencils. I cry even now at that story, though one might argue that the ending is happy, as the rabbit transforms from a condemned germbag stuffed toy into a *real* rabbit.

Last year my friend Erin and I went to Barnes & Noble because I needed a couple of gifts: *The Guide to Getting It On* for a gentle friend about to be married, and *Runaway*

Bunny for my neighbor's new baby. I found the *Guide* first, 5th edition, the one with the stylized spiky-haired couple making out in a four-panel design on the cover. I held the book under my arm and wondered if I would set off some kind of Weirdo Alert System as I moved to the children's section. There I reread *Goodnight Moon*, that's a pretty safe one. Then *Little Gorilla*, who grows till he's so big he can't fit in the frame of the page. But when I opened *Runaway Bunny* there was the mom rabbit with her waders and creel, her line baited with a carrot. Something burst open inside me at that love that won't let go, that octopus tentacular go-go-gadget arm love. Someone in Barnes & Noble was holding a thick black book in her armpit and crying over small square cardboard pages of bunny drawings. Someone in Barnes & Noble fumbled for the restroom so she could blow her nose.

When I was little, I wept openly at a broad category of what I then called *sad music*—anything sweepy and orchestral, Bette Midler *Wind-Beneath-My-Wings* kind of stuff. Theme music for the Miss America pageant. Strains of muzak at the Kroger supermarket. At the Kroger I sat in the basket of the shopping cart, death grip on the handle, facing my mom, pursing my lips, trying so hard not to cry. *Sad music?* Mom asked. Maybe I had an undiagnosed Andrew Lloyd Webber allergy?

Last summer I cried when my dad limped back to work after meeting me for lunch downtown. I imagined my dad's death, pictured him buckling in his cubicle, crushed by the weight of his disintegrating mother, flattened by the dark anvil of his sister and her crack-dealing boyfriend. My dad would drop like a puppet with the strings cut. His cubicle, The Cube, I could joke it's already a tomb, a box waiting for a body. My dad has a corner cube, pinned with price charts for hooks, cranes, hammers, and chainsaws.

Also in The Cube: a photo of George W. and Laura Bush, a large stuffed buzzard, and a boondoggle keychain shaped like a puppy that my brother made in one of his crafty phases.

I haven't seen Dad cry about his mother's slow implosion. *She can't die fast enough*, he said one afternoon, and I know it's his own black humor, that this slow letting go of his mother shreds his heart into a pile of heart shavings, that as her body softens, his love for her grows exponentially. He has time to think about what life will be like without her, this woman who brought him home from the hospital at three days old, who chose him when his own mother didn't want him, this crazy lady in blue satin pajamas who for a million dollars could not remember if she ate breakfast or not, she has poured her love into him for nearly sixty years, and when she dies he'll have to live on the reserves of that love for the rest of his life. Nana is an orphan, only her sister Myrtle is left. My dad will be an orphan again. Nana told me once, a few years ago, that no matter how old you are, it is always a fear and emptiness to know your parents are gone. This is the natural order of things, I guess, but we all know nature can sure be a bitch.

Actors in Greek tragedy always wore their masks on stage. Even if an actor were to appear naked, he would strip down to a costume under his costume to suggest "naked." Masks in Greek tragedy can be traced to Aeschylus in 5th century BCE. It pleases me to learn that the earlier masks were meant to be lifelike, whereas by the late 4th century BCE, masks were larger than life, mouths fixed in anger or laughter. So, too, with memory: at first memories align more closely with the contours of fact, and with distance they bend, elongate, blimp out as caricature, lose the fine-grain detail. They are changed,

and fixed as with epoxy. In later Greek and Roman theater, masks also anchored in front a highly stylized poof of hair, hair I read described as *so stylized that it has very little similarity to human hair*.

Nana left post-it notes for Jeanne on the table in the foyer, in her shaky long-legged schoolteacher script, the letters knee-knocking into each other and bracing themselves against the frame of the pale yellow paper, *Please be home by midnight*. Whenever Jeanne disappeared for a couple of days, Nana wondered if she'd been arrested. Even in a panic attack, Nana knows to call my Dad, whether or not Jeanne is in the house. Sometimes Dad can drive the five minutes to her house, give her more prednisone and a breathing treatment, and talk her out of her panic. Sometimes Nana insists on going to the emergency room, despite Dad's reminders that she hates the hospital, and they'll sit in the emergency room for a few hours until a doctor sends her home with more prednisone and a breathing treatment.

Where's Jeanne? my mom demanded as Dad took Nana's call at 2am.

Jeanne spent most of her hours asleep in the back bedroom, her white and pink childhood room, or in what my mom called The Hole, Nana's basement gallery of glass Jif jars, the highchair passed through four grandchildren and one great grandchild, a cradle, Granddaddy's golf clubs, a dead refrigerator, the washer and dryer, rakes and brooms, Currier and Ives canisters, ashtrays, Sue-Sue's litter box. Jeanne didn't always emerge from The Hole long enough to see that Nana got dressed, or showered every couple of days, or caught the pick-up van for physical therapy, or took her breathing treatments and pills. She put Nana up to calling my dad or Harriet when she was out of

Pepsi, even though Jeanne could walk or drive to the nearby SuperAmerica and buy some. Jeanne had lost a marriage, her job as a public schoolteacher, and close contact with her one living daughter.

She's got a lot of nerve, Mom said.

That's about all she's got left.

It was never so simple as Dad being angry with Jeanne. He fumed at her, then gave her a ride to the Tobacco Hut when her boyfriend totaled her car and she was out of cigarettes. Once I visited Nana with him and I asked her for some sheets for my apartment, knowing she had piles of linens squirreled away. I was trying to make a joke out of it, you know, sheets from Nana Sheets, but no one was listening. While Nana rifled through the hall closet, Jeanne emerged from her bedroom in a white terry cloth robe. She was perky and disjointed. I hadn't seen her in months. She was very thin, and I thought she wanted to hug me.

Somebody cut my hair! she said. I backed away.

I'm no good at cutting hair. I've never done it, I said. This was true.

Oh come on, it's a straight line, you can do it, she said.

No, really, I'll just mess it up.

It's a straight line.

Nana slid old folded sheets out of a tower stacked like smooth cotton flapjacks. Jeanne touched the brittle elastic around the edges. *Mom, don't give her these,* she said. I told her it didn't matter. Jeanne and Dad disappeared, while Nana took a couple more sheet pancakes from the hall closet and handed them to me. When Jeanne came back, her

thin black hair was cut in a sawtooth line, ragged like some unraveled thing, draped across her robe.

Things were partly OK, until Jeanne chained the front door so Dad couldn't get in with his keys. Dad clawed at the chain to unhook it. My brother held up his phone and I heard Dad howl. He could never be sure whether Jeanne chained the door out of spite, or absent-mindedness, or an impulse to hide various deeds of darkness, or what. The next time Dad visited, he brought wire cutters.

Distance is important for proper perspective on the situation. I live nearly 2000 miles away from Nana's house, so I hear more than I see. I can turn off the show like a radio.

If I back up a little, I find it interesting to study the Jeanne character. An example of Jeanne-logic: Before she and my uncle Keith divorced, Jeanne drove by Nana's late one night and wanted to check on her. Rather than wake Nana by ringing the doorbell, she dragged a picnic bench across the patio, the patio where my cousins and I used to play restaurant, filling plastic bowls with torn-up newspaper and square vocabulary cards like laminated Saltines. The cards had words in black type on one side (**[skate]** **[pan]** **[clown]**), and a picture illustrating the word on the other. We jockeyed to be waitress, the plum role. That night Jeanne scratched the picnic bench legs across the concentric wavy grooves of the patio, a rough sound file overlaid with the bark of a distant dog. Jeanne gazed at her mom through the window screen as though looking on relics in a catacomb. Nana found Jeanne's bench outside her window the next day and panicked that someone had tried to break in.

Another example: Jeanne called an ambulance and let Nana ride to the hospital alone. All the way in Utah I heard my dad ream Jeanne when she finally showed up in St. Mary's E.R. Nana, a woman with dementia, pushing 90, in her silk pajamas and saggy knee-highs, rode alone because my aunt couldn't be bothered to hop in the back of the ambulance, or maybe she was too high to care.

The chorus dances left to right. They leave me voice mail: *Did you see Nana lock eyes with the EMT as he placed the oxygen mask over her face like a lid on a cookie jar? Did you see her clutch her handbag to her chest with those bony hands?*

When the home health nurses started visiting Nana for physical therapy, my Mom or Harriet was there to greet them in case Jeanne was down in The Hole. One day, though, the nurses came unannounced and saw the dirty dishes piled on the counter and the sink, the trash slumped and smelling in the corner, Nana disoriented, wheezing, in her bathrobe, unwashed for three days. The nurses alerted Adult Protection Services, who scheduled a meeting with my dad and Harriet. Worst case they'd throw Nana in a state-run nursing home. *Don't upset Mom*, my dad said to Jeanne when he found out. My brother held up the phone and boy did Nana sound pissed once Jeanne blurted out that the APS people were coming. *I can bathe myself!* Nana shouted. *I can feed myself!* Mom took the phone and said she just didn't understand it.

When Dad asked Jeanne to get out of Nan's house for a few days, he was a monster. He was no longer just the overworked guy with bad knees who counted out Nan's pills each week and snapped the lids on the MTWRFSSu MORN NOON EVE NIGHT grid of compartments so he could have some slim assurance that his sister wasn't bogarting all the pharmaceuticals. He was not the one who talked Nana down when she

raged in the rehabilitation hospital or St. Mary's. Nana pulled out IVs, scooted down the hallway with her purse big enough for a bowling ball on her arm, my mild-mannered Nana whose strongest swear word was *golly neds!*, who wrote checks to the Billy Graham Crusade for decades. Nana shouted that dammitgoddammit she wanted out of that hospital, and the nurses knew to call my dad.

Though Nana had made a deposit on a room at Chateau Grove assisted living, she wouldn't leave Jeanne. Despite all the boxes being moved out of her head, Nana had some sense that Jeanne needed her protection, that she could get in trouble with the police. *Tom says it's not safe for me to be here with you*, Jeanne said to Nana before the APS people came. *Hold me, Mom*. Jeanne knelt by Nana's mauve recliner near the picture window. My mom took the phone and said Nana shot my dad a glare she'd never seen before, one cold, cold look from that old and smooth face. It was as though Nana willed herself not to hear the arguments between her children. Jeanne, on the floor, played the lowest card she had. I heard the words crackle on impact. *You are not my brother*, she said to my dad. *And you're not her son*.

From a seat in the *theatron*, literally the *seeing place*, those Greek merrymakers could hear everything. Masks amplified the voices, pitching them to the back row. You can hear the Latin *persona*, and our *person*, in the mask's vocal projection. As though we are born of our own sounds.

Second only to my parents, Jeanne called me more often than anyone else during my two years in the Peace Corps. These days she leaves me weepy messages railing on

my dad or asking for forgiveness. Jeanne calls me at 4 a.m. to tell me it's Nana's birthday, which I remember without her. She calls twice more and I turn off the phone. When I turn it back on later that day, she's left three more voice messages. *What would you do if it were your mom?* Jeanne asks me once about Nana. *Would you lock her away?* She calls me to tell me about this guy who likes her and made Belgian waffles for her and Nana. She calls me at 6:30 in the morning to ask where Anne Frank was from; firstly I am annoyed that she calls so early and then I'm embarrassed that after all these years of school I have to look up the answer.

Second only to my parents, Jeanne mailed more and heavier packages to me in the Peace Corps than anyone else. She sent silverware after I'd emailed that I'd moved on my own and had two forks. And also small rectangular box, the kind for a five-by-seven picture frame, sheathed in bubble wrap. I held it for a moment. Shit. I already knew what it was. Opened it: a framed five-by-seven of my dead cousin's last prom picture. The glass had cracked, clear chips rattled in the box. Allison wore a yellow strapless dress, a sunshine dress, and her hair in ringlets. In Jeanne-logic I'm sure it made perfect sense to send this. I propped it up on my book table for a few days and then took it down because it was creeping me out.

Jeanne sent me two empty photo albums, with post-its on them written in her thin, eager schoolteacher print: *One for you, and one for a friend*. As though I were a child. Something about the simple earnestness of her instructions pierced me. I wept in my large dusty living room with my new knives and forks, the balcony windows craned open, and tried to figure out which friend would get the book.

When I was home for a little while in the summer, Nana and I sat in the waiting room of the Huntington Internal Medicine Group clinic while my dad's cousin Harriet talked with the receptionist. Nana slumped in a wheelchair, her head in her hands. I made a mental note: if you bring your own white plastic trash can/puke bucket, you jump to the front of the line! Nana was sick to her stomach, but Harriet suspected a urinary tract infection. I wanted to say something like *Nan, you should really stop sleeping around!* but my internal save-as-draft function caught me.

HIMG, a new clinic, had an air of sterile disorganization. In the examining room, Nana's bed was four feet off the ground with no side rails on it. It was not a bed for sick people. A nurse bustled in and said Harriet and I had to get Nana up and into the bathroom for a urine sample. My job in the awkward choreography was to keep lots of slack between the IV pole and Nana's arm. I cringed at the thought of the kaleidoscope of germs dancing on a health care facility toilet seat, but Nana dropped right down on it. I knew Nana had been hitting the donuts pretty hard, but I was not prepared for the soft elephant sag of her body. Her arms, legs, feet, fingers still stretched long and skinny, as though all the years and sweet rolls had gathered in her torso. Nana held her head in her right hand. Just as we wondered if she was falling asleep, she lifted and offered the urine sample cup to the nurse.

Back on the high bed, Nana complained she was cold, and she couldn't keep her eyes open. She muttered that she was thirsty, so the nurse brought a cup of ice chips. I fed her a few ice pellets on a plastic spoon; she opened her eyes just a crack to see when I brought the spoon to her mouth. She ate like a little bird, softening the hard corners of her

mouth into a round o like a coin purse. She didn't move under the scratchy flannel blankets.

My dad drove straight from work to the clinic and sat with us until the ambulance was ready to take Nana to St. Mary's for more tests. *Are you still in there?* he asked his mother. *Yeah, I'm still here,* she said without opening her eyes. She didn't even remember she was breaking our hearts.

ONE SHALL BE TAKEN

It is snowing in West Virginia, dumping the white flakes down, clouds emptying bottoms-up like boxes of instant mashed potatoes. We don't get much snow here, and it's not going to last, but Christy and two-year-old Brooklyn dance under the white trees in their front yard and Jay tapes it. Christy and Jay, a youth pastor at a church in our hometown, are planning to move to India: Jay will teach at a Bible college, and Christy, a nurse, will work at the college and an orphanage. We're all from a small town a river away from Kentucky and Ohio. Christy takes the camera. Jay throws a snowball that lands by her feet. If she's healthy enough, Christy will go in February to Chennai with a medical relief team to help people displaced by the tsunami from the recent Indian Ocean earthquake. She will also travel to Kota, where she and Jay have been several times, to visit the orphans there, the orphans she calls her kids. This video is for them: she wants to show them snow. She wants to show them Brooklyn, her baby. When she's in India, she tapes the orphans to show us.

After two years of teaching as a Peace Corps volunteer, I am marginally employed and living with my parents. I plot my next move. Christy urges me to go on the three-week medical trip. They need non-medical staff, she says. I can fill out papers, I can color with kids while they wait to see a doctor, I can hug people whose work and villages were wiped away. I can shampoo kids' heads. I can touch untouchables. I remind her I'm Not Good In A Crisis. The medical work, Christy admits, is often only surface.

The team won't have many resources for follow-up care. But at least it's the surface. They treat lice, and scabies, and simple infections. They give what comfort they can. This is a difference between Christy and me: Christy goes, I don't go.

Christy and Jay live a mile from my parents, and I've come in the snow bearing cauliflower and potatoes and a bag of frozen peas. We'll do a curry, our suburban Anglo girls version of curry, a gesture at least to the country Jay and Christy have adopted. It is not new to call a cauliflower a brain, the florets branching into lobes. It is a meek vegetable, absorbing whatever you put with it. It provides a texture puzzle for the tongue, rounded ridges, nubs, soft but not slimy invertebrate soft. The recipe uses a whole head of cauliflower. By the time we add the diced potatoes, the mound of seasoned vegetables spills over the side of the skillet, so we enlist a second pan. I know I could halve the recipe, but what good is half a head of cauliflower/half a brain? Christy is on naan duty. She kneads a cup of yogurt into flour, she rolls the dough into flat patties and browns them on a hot skillet, then brushes them with butter. We make piles and piles of food for three adults and one child.

I've known Jay since junior high. Christy and I could never remember when we met, but our paths intersected at church camps and all-county choir. Christy has always been too pretty to have many female friends. In college she entered a city-wide beauty pageant on a dare and won a scholarship. Guys wanted to best her at sports and then ask her out, and it was unclear which part was more of a challenge. At Christy and Jay's wedding, the other bridesmaids and I clutched daisies and danced down the aisle of the 4-H camp hall, per Christy's instructions.

In the kitchen we listen to Simon and Garfunkel. Christy and Jay are people with

Bible verses and prayers taped to kitchen cabinets, and clusters of photographs of Indian friends, Bible college students and orphans, on the dining room walls. They were two church people with whom I could really be friends. They didn't judge my feelings of estrangement from evangelical Christianity, though Jay told me more than once that Christy felt "burdened" for me, which signaled that I'd fallen away somehow, and also made me feel like crap for adding One More Thing for Christy—weak, sick, exhausted in her ownership of all kinds of loneliness—to worry about. I knew Church was not uncomplicated for them, either; they were Baptist because of the local church where they worked, but they weren't diehard about the denomination.

The faces from India taped to their walls and cabinets had straight, white, beautiful teeth. Christy had told me that many people in India would be fortunate ever to see a doctor in their lives, much less a dentist. My associations with poverty, Eastern European style, involved missing and gold teeth. Mama Nina, my Moldovan host mom, once complimented my teeth and asked if they were real. Oh yes, I said, they're mine.

Brooklyn runs in and out of the room, escaping the curry cloud from the stove. Jay drives to the supermarket, and when he returns says that he could smell dinner from the driveway. Christy received a curry cookbook for Christmas, and we drool over the pages, we plot out the next months of our lives in curries. I plan to move away at the end of the summer, and Christy and Jay will be gone in the fall, so we know the time is fleeting. The cooking can't wait.

I stay the night in their guest room, and in the morning I leave them a bucket of leftovers and take a bucket with me. In the kitchen Christy moves slowly, as though she might shatter. Heavy doses of steroids calmed her intestines enough to get Christy out of

the hospital for Christmas and the snow. She takes enormous pills every day. This morning she suspects she has a bladder infection, so she pops an antibiotic too. It's never clear whether her medical training is a blessing or a liability.

“There goes your Olympic career,” I'd offered when Christy was in St. Mary's a few weeks earlier. She had Crohn's disease, and intestines were out of control. Sometimes she passed out in the bathroom from the pain; she kept a bottle of smelling salts near the toilet. Her father, Dave, had a colostomy years ago, the only cure for the disease.

“I don't want them to cut my guts out,” she said. She feared that trying to keep a clean colostomy bag in India would be a disaster. Also, she was 28 and wished for more children and wanted to have sex with her husband without a pouch of feces flapped on her stomach.

Christy was sick of Ensure, tired of sad pudding and lifeless soup. She said she was starved for nutrients and would I please bring some hummus. I filled the barrel of my food processor with two cans of chickpeas, a peeled knob of ginger, a few cloves of garlic, and a couple of spoonfuls of tahini. Easy money. She asked me to puree some cooked whole wheat pasta with a can of tomatoes. It looked as gross as it sounded, but Christy ate it with her eyes closed in pleasure, as though it were a feast in a fist-sized Tupperware container. Thanks to my facility with the “on” button of a food processor, Christy glowed a bit, like an illuminated lawn ornament, as though life and happiness were intensified for a moment in her hungry cells by some kind of metaphysical dimmer switch somewhere inside her.

Out of the hospital in time for the holidays, Christy invited me to a Christmas Eve service at their church, Fellowship Baptist, a wide, white sanctuary with sophisticated light and sound system. I sat with Rhonda, Christy's mom, and Ken and Lou, students from China who were studying at the nearby university, whose real names were not Ken and Lou but whose Chinese names were stumblingblocks for enough people that they gave us other options. They brought their infant son, Baby Ken.

After the service, Christy wanted to eat at The Super Chinese Buffet near the mall, one of few restaurants still open. Jay borrowed one of the church's vans and we piled in. The Super Chinese Buffet is an awkward remodeled Circuit City store, ill-fitting like the Banner Furniture store in an old Baptist church on Pea Ridge Road. You can cover up the brick cross built into the front with a BIG SALE banner, but you can't erase the church from the building.

It was so good to watch Christy eat, even if it was the Super Chinese Buffet, the red Jell-o squares, pale beige pudding, sad fantail of butterfly shrimp slumping under a heat lamp. I am two weeks away from my first marathon. I eat five times a day, and am never satisfied. By the end of the church service I am howling, I would gnaw the hymnals if I knew people weren't looking. Earlier that week I'd run through housing developments near Heritage Farm Village and was struck by the new fashion, circa Christmas 2004, of six-foot upright canvas holiday figures inflated by air pumps. I passed tall bobbing penguins, polar bears, santas, snow globes on yards with no snow. Living in Moldova for two years had created an enjoyable sort of Rip Van Winkle effect. I had missed the proliferation of wifi and Sleep Number beds, for example, and those motion-sensitive soap and paper towel dispensers in public bathrooms.

From the Super China Buffet, we drove through the nearby town of Milton to give out the candy cane award, a kind of Clark Grizwold honor for the gaudiest home holiday display. Ken, Lou, Baby Ken, Rhonda and I voted from the van's back seats. Christy strolled onto the winning porch with a foot-tall plastic candy cane and presented the award to the surprised guy in flannel who answered the door. I took a photo. The winner smiled, and Christy glittered like Milton's own Vanna White.

Christy may have felt desperately sick, but she was radiant all evening. At the Christmas Eve service, Christy, out of the hospital for less than a week, had sung at the front of the church. I get restless in church, especially in a Baptist church, but I wanted to be near Christy. She wore a jeweled sari, a red bodice wrapped in yards of olive shimmering fabric. It's a wedding sari, she told me. Of course we didn't know that in less than a year she'd be buried in it.

Just after New Year's, I ran my marathon in Phoenix. I stayed with a college friend, Damon, who reminded me that the guy who ran the first marathon, to Athens from Marathon, died after blurting out that the Persians had lost the Battle of Marathon. Damon hadn't started dating his wife yet, so it was cool if I commandeered the guest room. I brought a French press, because I knew he didn't own a coffee pot. When I discovered that he also doesn't own any coffee mugs, just a couple of crappy plastic ones from 7-11, I bought some mugs at Target and left them in his cabinet. The evening before my race, I was his date for a wedding with eight bridesmaids, and a reception that included a mariachi band, a mechanical bull, and a barbecue feed which was not the easy

carbs I should have been filling up on, but I couldn't help myself. This was one cool wedding, not least because I didn't know anyone but Damon.

In the dark early morning, Damon dropped me near the race start. I didn't know the course, or anyone cheering. Running has a way of making me feel not lonely even when running by myself. I learned from this race that if you want people to call your name, you have to write it on your race bib or shirt; sometimes nice people watching from the sidewalks of Phoenix, Scottsdale and Tempe yelled "bandana!" or "go blue shirt!" when I passed. I eyed the solidarity of Team in Training folks, many of whom had matching outfits and were raising money for cancer research. One thing I love about runners is that they don't shy away from accessories. There were people with photos in baggies pinned to shirts covered with puffy paint graffiti, people who wore race belts with multiple water bottles, like grenades of glycogen goodness. I didn't raise money for charity. I guess this race was for me. At the start, with thousands of people packed close, I realized my right shoe was untied. It was all asses and elbows packed in the start corral, so I barely had room to bend down and redo the knot.

"Are you running toward or running away from?" Adam, my then-boyfriend, asked me once. As my Nana Sheets would say, especially as her short-term memory started to flicker, "well, now you've asked me something." Despite Damon's words of warning, I found that a marathon wasn't about death. It wasn't even about suffering. Behold the Runner's High: o holy dopamine! I'm not saying that I'm fast or that I have strategy or game. Running just feels like something my body was built to do. Runner's High Brain tells you that if you had enough Gatorade and a place to pee now and then,

you could go forever (though if you've put in your miles, and you pass a pizza or barbecue place, or a donut shop, Runner's High Brain might be ok with you stopping.)

"I've never given myself an enema in front of anyone," Christy says. We have arrived at a new stage in our friendship. And technically she's not giving herself an enema "in front" of me. She readies what looks like a baster for a small turkey, and then I sit in the anteroom, next to the sink and linen closet and a large bathroom with a pull cord for help and a shower with a plastic seat, and try not to listen. I wait with my back turned, reading her copy Allende's *Eva Luna* and keeping one ear open in case she needs something.

Or I'm on the phone with the mother of a prospective Peace Corps volunteer; what are the conditions like, she wants to know. Is it realistic for his girlfriend to find a job with an NGO in Moldova while her son completes his Peace Corps service? Christy moans in the background. "Get the nurse," she says. I explain to the woman on the phone that I'm at the hospital with a critically ill friend and I have to go find a nurse but I will call her back.

Sometimes Christy only needs me to go away. Once she asks me to move the potty chair closer to her bed and to help her up. What else can I do? I ask. "Take a walk," she says. I take the stairs to the first floor, passing a statue of Mary and a wall of photographs of this hospital through the ages, to a windowless café area. The coffee shop part is closed but four vending machines look on. I get a cup of robocoffee with extra "whitener," which is not terrible. I study the crumbs on the tabletop until the coffee is

finished and I assume I've been gone long enough. I don't know which is worse, her pain or the loneliness of her pain.

One afternoon as soon as I arrive at the hospital Christy tells me she doesn't feel right. I've brought a couple of movies, which we never watch. "I don't feel right," she repeats. She looks flushed. We have to go from the third floor to the basement for chest x-rays. Christy sits in a wheelchair and holds a heavy bound book, like an accountant's ledger, on her lap. A nurse pushes the wheelchair and I follow behind with the oxygen tank, wheeling it like a vacuum cleaner. It is hard not to tangle the thin tube that stretches, like part of an aquarium, from Christy's nose to the tank. I cut the corners too narrow. The nurse deftly backs Christy's wheelchair into the elevator.

In the basement, Christy is gone for half an hour. There's a bulletin board in the X-ray waiting area covered with a construction paper pirate and a lumpy ship. A guy in grungy white parachute pants, ragged high-tops, and a neck brace sits in a wheelchair near the television. The man doesn't so much as nod at me. He ensures that our lines of sight never ever cross. Maybe he's in too much pain to make small talk. An episode of *Powerpuff Girls* is on TV. Buttercup, the green one, is beating the crap out of a squirrel. The man's pale chest hair is patchy around a four-inch scar down his sternum. Neither of us bothers to change the channel.

The times I stay overnight with Christy, I leave St. Mary's when Jay arrives in the morning. Christy keeps the air conditioning on full blast, maybe 55 degrees in the room. Christy wears a short sleeved t-shirt and pajama pants, her face flushed. I know to wear layers. On the way home, I stop at this lunch place I like for a "hillbilly flu shot," a hot

dog topped with chili and jalapenos. These days I take my food as hot as I can stand it, as though I could sweat out death, as though I could outwit the curse of flesh. I sink into a guilty glee, the sheer euphoria that I am not sick. I am not dying. At home I lace up my shoes and run the loop: over the bridge to nowhere, past the Wyngate assisted living community and the defunct brickyard, by my old high school, and the new post office where I like to talk to the moderately hot postal worker with that thick luscious drawl. I know it's cliché, but when I hear that guy talk I think "molasses." I think "honey."

"Let me ask you something. You got a car?" moderately hot postal worker asks me.

"Yes."

"So why do I see you runnin' all the time?"

I stopped by St. Mary's on my way to a yoga class at the nearby nursing school gym. Christy was to be transferred by ambulance to Cleveland for more tests, to check the possibility of doing the colostomy surgery. I found Christy alone in her room in the early evening. Jay had gone home for the day to take care of Brooklyn and some church business; the best he could do was to drive the six hours to Cleveland first thing in the morning to join her. Christy's mom was too sick to make it to the hospital often. Her dad wasn't really in the picture. There was a lull in church lady visits. I realized there was no way I was getting out of here in time to make yoga. Christy didn't ask me outright, but I knew she wanted someone to go with her to Cleveland, to help her sort through information and make decisions and in general just be a less-medicated, auxiliary brain.

I had no job or child or duties. I had just returned from the Peace Corps. I had managed to navigate bus stations in countries where I didn't speak the language. And yet getting home from Cleveland by myself was somehow a challenge I didn't feel like undertaking. I had no spirit of adventure when the adventure wasn't fun. As I dithered, Christy swabbed her backside with Mylanta to soothe the burning. Christy was embarrassed about wearing Depends because her insides wouldn't stay inside.

I don't know why I didn't go. Christy was full of grace. It's OK, she said. The nurses would take care of her, she said. She was even able to joke with the ambulance drivers, one of whom called himself Fetus because he looked so young.

I watched the ambulance pull away into a bitter January night. In that moment I felt guilty but not that guilty. Actually I felt hungry. I felt alive and wanted to peel out of that hospital. I bought a sandwich in the cafeteria and dodged the parking lot ice and drove home to my parents' house. They were sitting by the fireplace watching the news, my parents who are happy together, who can sit there and watch TV because their only daughter isn't dying. More and more I find that my emotions have a kind of unhelpful and misleading time-release, that in a provisional way I'm alright with a situation, or with a choice I've made, and then later or much later the real weight of it knocks me over. Choose wrong in haste, repent at leisure. Leave your dying friend in a dark moment and have the rest of your own life to think about it.

Christy called me in February from Kota, on the medical relief trip. She'd recovered enough to be able to go after all. I didn't know what time it was in India, but it was afternoon for me, and when my mom called me to the phone all I could do was listen

to Christy's hysterics about how Christians in India were persecuted. The orphans cared for by Hopegivers, a Christian ministry her church had partnered with, were attacked, Molotov cocktails lobbed over the orphanage walls. "My babies," she said. The children were terrified, with good reason. I behaved as though the persecution of Christianity had ended with the New Testament, as though once Saul became the apostle Paul, it was all good. I knew this wasn't the case; I heard from missionaries and human rights groups that freedom of religion is hardly a global standard, that in many places around the world, outward faith carries a high price. But listening to Christy was like watching a short clip of a movie somewhere in the middle without any setup, you don't have a synopsis, you are scrambling to figure out what's going on. Christy could have judged me: *This is the real world, dammit! Aren't you listening? Just because you don't want to get involved doesn't mean violence isn't happening.* But that wasn't her voice. It was mine. Her voice just wanted to tell me about her sadness, to ask me to pray for her and for the medical team and most of all for the scared children who weren't safe on the streets or, apparently, within the walls of charity.

Her hair is scarecrow-wild, her face bloated. Black socks slouch around her ankles. A wide hourglass of her backside shows through the gaps in the hospital robe she tries to hold shut with one hand. Her skin crinkles like a fleshy plastic sack, an old lady suit that's too big for her. I pass her in the hall at St. Mary's on my way to Christy's room. Weeks after the Indian trip, Christy has gained almost 50 pounds, most of it fluid. She's outgrowing her body and her pajamas. Four women from church visit her, and one pulls out a pair of blue underwear the size of a front porch flag. "Granny panties," Christy

says. “How sexy is that.” Her taut body is now a balloon body, the skin of her swollen legs stretched to ripping, the pores pulled out of shape. As though her body is not skin but plastic. If skin can scream it is screaming.

Christy is on Lasix to lose the fluids. She is catheterized and refers to the plastic liter-sized box into which her urine drains as her “purse,” as though we’re going shopping. Christy is still fighting the double pneumonia that set in after she started immuno-suppressant drugs, after the steroids stopped working. She is restless. She gets up to arrange the sheets and blanket on the foldout chair where I’ll sleep tonight. She insists I let her arrange the bed.

I’ve brought her a couple of recent *New Yorkers* and a plastic inflatable flamingo. “Fauna!” I announce. When Christy feels strong enough to write, she keeps a journal: “If I don’t make it, she says, I want Brooklyn to know I tried.” We don’t linger on this kind of talk. Christy has heard rumors, church gossip, that some people disapproved of her traveling to India for medical work. Why was she jeopardizing her health when she had a child at home? But to Christy, it was a useless question. The orphans are her kids. Months ago Jay submitted his resignation to the church for the end of the summer, in preparation for their move to India. There are rumors that Christy is faking her illness so that Jay can keep his job. “Who would fake this?” she asks. She is more amused than angry. “Tell me.”

Christy wants to walk to the cafeteria on the first floor. It’s a big trip, but the nurse says she can go. Though her lungs are damaged, her intestines for now are calm, so she eats whatever she wants. The cafeteria is open till 2 a.m. She chooses a corndog and a piece of sclerotic Boston Cream Pie, her second slice of the day. She takes my arm as we

promenade the food court, past legions of juices in coolers, the empty salad bar, the buffet of mashed potatoes and a thick-skinned gravy tarn under a heat lamp. WKKW, The Dawg, plays on the radio. I choose a chocolate chip cookie bigger than my fist, one dry, crusty cookie. It is better as an idea than a cookie.

In the far right corner of the dining room a statue of Mary, two feet high, stands on a table. She is shaped like an arch, like a keyhole, as though she is the portal to something good. Mary with a virgin blue napkin draped on her head, her hands outstretched to us. *Please do not sit at this table*, requests the sign beside her. Mary dines alone. We sit one table over. Near Mary hang fake windows with drooping shutters and window boxes of plastic flowers. The white wall shows through the quadrants of the window frames. “It’s worse than a blank wall,” Christy says, of this half-hearted attempt at cheer, the earnest bad taste trying to drive out the sterile grief of the place.

Christy assembles a mound of ketchup and mustard packets and squirts them into the rectangular carton for the corn dog. She closes her eyes after she tears open a packet, she smiles and hovers there as if telling herself a really good joke. It might be the Dilaudid, or the Oxycodone, the Ativan, or the Temazepam. She is a running ticker of non sequiters. She is talking out her head.

“I’ve got it all taken care of,” she says, holding the mustard packed above the table.

“What’s that?” I ask, slipping the packet from her hands.

“Thanks,” she says. “Brooklyn’s not here, is she? I was talking to her. The pizza delivery.”

“Do you want to stay here? Should we go up?”

“No, give me a minute.” She leans slightly to one side and then the other. Her eyes are closed.

“Do you need help?” I don’t want to stay down here too long. I don’t want her to tire out. I’m of no use when things unhinge.

“I’ll submit to your authority, just give me a minute,” she says. Now it’s the New Testament garbling out.

“You don’t have to submit to anything. I just want to make sure you’re OK.” She opens her eyes. She opens another packet of mustard and dunks the corn dog in the psychedelic mix. She points in the air with the corn dog. Her eyes close again. “Christy?”

“I’m sorry, I’m talking to everybody,” she says. “Tell me something funny.”

“Remember the time I ran over your suitcase with my dad’s truck?” Christy giggles, that famous laugh percolating out of her as she sets down her corn dog. I had dropped her off after a week of church camp in Flat Gap, Kentucky. It was dark, and I couldn’t see her suitcase in the rearview mirror as I backed over it. Christy and her dad called after me, but I had rolled the windows up against the dust from the gravel road. Once I turned onto pavement I heard the scraping: The muffler? There was no where well lit to pull over and check until the Kwik Stop on Route 60. Indeed, the suitcase handle was wrapped around the underside of the truck so tight I couldn’t budge it. I was already halfway home, so I kept driving, a car behind me flashing its lights in a warning, sparks trailing my dad’s blue truck on the highway. The friction burned holes in Christy’s clothes. It burned one eye and both ears off of Mr. Bear. It burned the leather cover of her white King James Bible but not the pages. *Do you remember?* I ask her. Back then we took the protection of the Word as a sign.

Christy's desire for more children of her own collapsed into a speck infinitely receding before her. Early in her marriage, Christy suffered several miscarriages, but she was hugely and gloriously pregnant with Brooklyn when I left for Moldova. By now, her insides were rags, her meds hardcore. Christy knew her one daughter was already adapting to life without her mother, already asking less and less often to see her mother, caught up as she was in the care of grandparents and aunts. Jay brought Brooklyn down to the hospital so she could have a movie night with her mom. "He chose *Dumbo*," Christy told me later. Oh the thought of Dumbo's mom taken on the train, her serpentine trunk caressing her little elephant through the bars of her captivity. "I know he means well," Christy said of Jay, "but *Dumbo*?"

Sometimes I forget that orphans still exist; I assume that, like polio or smallpox, the condition of "orphan" has been eradicated, consigned to the stuff of musicals like *Annie*, my childhood favorite, and everyone has a happy home, their own Daddy Warbucks to sing with them and buy them stuff.

My first real encounter with orphans was in Moldova, at the orphanage where my friend Vica volunteered. At the Halloween party, dozens of kids mobbed me for the bucket of candy I was passing out. Help! I strongly wished to hide under the table. Sarah, another volunteer, took the bin and tongs from me, and lo, the waves of children parted before her. A New York fairy godmother, Sarah doled out the gummi mouths with fangs, sweet little vampire mouths, reaching for each one individually with the tongs, and the children neither crowded nor mobbed. "You don't work with kids, do you?" she said, but not in a snarky way.

I can think of orphans in a more typographical way, widows the lone last line of a paragraph at the top of the page, and an orphan the first line of a paragraph at the bottom of a page (though dictionaries claim these are sometimes used interchangeably). Widow and orphan control are options on Microsoft Word. The word “orphan” makes me think of James, one of those practical books of the Bible, one that scandalized Martin Luther because of its attention to works over grace. Concludes chapter one: “Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this,/ To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.”

Widows (it’s hard for me not to type “windows”) I know. Both of my grandmothers and my great-aunt Myrtle had been widows for many years. They kept photos of their late husbands (“late for what?”) on top of the TV or the coffee table or near a wicker elephant, depending. They got moody on their late husbands’ birthdays, on wedding anniversaries. They talked more about the good times than the bad times. They liked it when I asked how they met (Nana Sheets: at a church service, Hazel: roller skating with friends, Myrtle: arranging a shop window).

My own father was an orphan for three days. He was named Thomas Michael Wise, born to Ruth Wise, before Ernest and Marjorie Sheets showed up at the hospital and named him Thomas Michael Sheets. So says the adoption certificate he found when cleaning out his dying mother’s safety deposit box. Somehow his having a name makes him seem less like an orphan, less at the mercy of the hardships of the universe, and more like Kal-El/Superman.

Once the respirator was removed, Christy told me she'd seen angels on the back roads of Kentucky. In July, Christy thought she was healthy enough for a week of church camp, the same camp in Flatgap, Kentucky we'd attended in high school. The camp site was remote, so when Christy stopped breathing one afternoon, Coy had to pack her in his truck and race to meet the ambulance in Paintsville, twelve miles away. Christy spent several days in intensive care, on a respirator for a lung infection she may have picked up in her travels and medical work.

After a few days in ICU, Christy didn't want to be left alone overnight at the hospital. She was heavily medicated and knew she wasn't thinking straight. Jay stood by her most of the day, but then he needed to take care of Brooklyn and couldn't rest if he stayed in the hospital around the clock.

Christy's dad had made efforts to reconnect with her in her illness. He stayed one night with her in the hospital and they took turns massaging each other's feet. In her childhood and into her teens, Christy's father kept the thermostat set on low-grade terror. She would have to sneak around the house to do normal, mundane things like get a cup of hot chocolate. I remembered Dave as an OK guy, who went with us to a modern dance performance at the university, who didn't have much to say but also in small doses seemed pretty laidback. Then again, I didn't live in Christy's house. In the same year, Christy had a miscarriage and her parents divorced.

Dave had grown a mullet, moved across the state line to Ohio, and taken up with a red-head nurse silver-tongued Christy could only call a "bitch"—a woman to step on Dave and put him in his place, the opposite of her mother. Christy had visited their trailer recently. Dave had taken up painting, she said. He had filled the trailer with paintings of

cosmic phalluses erupting stars on cool lunar blue and purple backgrounds. “I’ve never seen him happier,” she said.

One evening Christy insisted on massaging my feet. I resisted. She had passed out less than an hour before, after arranging her bed and my fold-out chair-bed. She was not made for sitting still. Christy had complained she felt light headed. She slumped into my folded-out chair. I pressed the nurse call button. Three of them came in. They did not look accusingly at me, exactly, but they seemed annoyed, as though Christy pushed their buttons all the time. A woman in a white cardigan lifted one of Christy’s eyelids and shined a flashlight in her eye to check for an overdose. Another nurse took her vitals.

I’m sure the nurses were tired and overworked. It was work too, on our end, to get Christy’s medications brought on time. Sweat beaded her upper lip when the meds were late. Her breath shortened. I didn’t insist with the nurses that they bring the medicines as soon as possible. I know Christy would have politely charged the nurses’ station to get something done if I were too sick to do it myself.

Loss can make us bitter or cheesy. Even in moments of sharpest pain--her body in revolt and her heart broken for the family she knew she was already leaving behind as she rode on into illness alone--Christy looked at my meager deeds, which on no count could be called sacrifices, with gratitude instead of judgment. She wasn’t oblivious or naïve; she just accepted with love whatever I could give, even if later I would realize how much I was holding back.

I need the comfort of the motions. Christy died at her mother’s house last night. Jay called and said they’d returned from Cleveland earlier that day and were visiting her

mother, who lives next door. Christy was too sick for surgery; they'd sent her home with more drugs to kill the blood infection first. I wept at my desk. I took my heavy body to bed. I must have slept with my eyes open.

In the morning I go to church. I need the familiar moves, the kneeling and standing, the rustling and fumbling of hymn book and prayer book, the belting out all six verses of a hymn that resolves itself into a minor chord. I need Raggs the priest to stand at the altar, where she gives me a wafer of Christ like a vellum poker chip, the bread of heaven. The chalice bearer bends with the silver cup.

At home I peel and seed a plump butternut squash and cook it into a stew with onions, cinnamon, and cumin. I don't have a pastry cutter or a food processor so I mash the flour, butter and salt together with a fork, with a touch of water, for the pie crust. It is not an artful crust. My grandmothers would turn angry dervishes in the kitchen if they saw it. It is forlorn, a lumpy, snaggletooth crust. But today I don't have the heart to finesse it. My mother calls while I'm sautéing the fresh tomato slices in olive oil and basil. "Are you busy?" she asks.

"I'm in the kitchen, where I belong," I answer.

"I love you," she says.

Later today I'll call Christy's mom, who has to brush her teeth in the bathroom where her daughter collapsed, then died. I escape to my bathroom window and ride out the crest of a sob. I blow my nose and wash my hands. The oven is hot. I layer the cheese, then the tomatoes, then the egg-milk custard in the troubled crust, and gently set the quiche in the oven. The clock is set. I taste the stew—too much heat, too many jalapenos. I always make it too hot, as though it's a test, as though I could purge the curse of flesh.

I visited Jay and Christy's house the summer after Christy's death. Jay was showing the house and preparing to move with Brooklyn to Nashville, where he had a teaching job with a church. Jay had a few of the college students over who'd once been part of his youth group. Brooklyn was holding court in her playroom. One of the kids stuck a tiara in Brooklyn's hair. She danced to her karaoke machine and stereo that looked like an old-fashioned juke box; the stereo played a CD of Christy singing, though it took me a couple of songs to catch on.

Brooklyn shook a miniature magic 8-ball. Say your wish, she said. I wished for health for my family. *Positive outcome.* And for peace in the world. *Yes.* After I fetched her some ice cream, Brooklyn crawled into my lap. Say your wish, she repeated. I wished for a cat. *Forget it.*

Sitting with Christy's latter-day image in my lap made me think of that creepy passage in Matthew about "the coming of the Son of man": *Then shall two be in the field; the one shall be taken, and the other left. Two women shall be grinding at the mill; the one shall be taken, and the other left.*

Facebook has polluted the way I think about the world, as though we have walls, invisible walls we can write on. I'm writing on Christy's celestial wall: *Christy, spirited away, I'm still at the mill, where are you?*

I visit Christy the night before I move to Utah. She has a staph infection from the pick line in her arm, a plastic tube like something from an aquarium through which she received her injections. "No wonder I feel so bad," she said, once she found out about the staph. It's her blood that's bad. Her whole body is bad. She is on expensive, high-octane

drugs. At her request I stop at the Dairy Queen for a mint Oreo blizzard, so sweet it makes my teeth hurt to think about it. I buy a medium, but she eats it with such rapture, I wish I'd bought the large. Two larges. Once the weeping starts, she holds my hand and asks me to leave. *You have a long trip*, she says. I kiss her warm forehead, I tell her I love her, which she already knows.

Christy calls me every few days, when she has the energy to talk. She phones one night, after I've lived in Utah for a month or so, while I'm hosting a little dinner party. Three of the four guests are poets, which is the right proportion for a dinner party.

Although much cooking lore advises the home cook to master a dish before serving it to guests, my impulses run contrary. I sit with my cookbook and plot out future menus—oh, the soups I will make! the bowls I will fill! the knobbly ginger I will peel and grate, the garlic cloves I will smash and dice, the scent lingering on my fingers till the next day. I like to read the recipes over and over, to imagine myself carrying out the steps. Sometimes I freestyle with recipes, but I like a recipe as a guide. The recipe is like sheet music—I can riff if I want but at least there's a melody to start with.

Tonight, the pilaf platter, three different kinds, it requires some labor but the cookbook promises a payoff: *Make this for a special occasion—it serves a lot of people—and your guests will talk about it for weeks*. I am that vain. I want them to talk about this tri-colored pilaf platter for weeks. The pilaf is a palette of warm color: the golden rice tinted with turmeric and flavored with onion, garlic and scallions; the orange of carrots mixed with raisins, the red of beets flavored with vinegar, honey and dill. It is a mound of color, a layering of tastes when the pilaf is topped with the stew. I make a stew of sweet potatoes, spinach, prunes and orange juice, inspired by Persian koresh. The recipe calls

for a heady blend of spices: coriander, cardamom, cumin, cinnamon, turmeric, ginger, cloves, and black pepper. The effect is something not unlike carpet deodorizer. The stew is pungent—not something I could eat every day. It’s a loud and celebratory dish. My hands are bloody. I peel the boiled beets, the skin comes off easily, you can slough it off with your fingers once the beets are cooked. The scarlet dyes the whites of my fingernails. The unpeeled naked scarlet roots are almost too hot to touch. I cut three beets into cubes. They tinge the whole rice bowl pink.

Nicole, the guests say, *you must have worked like a mule*. Yes, I am your mule! A mule for you! Christy calls after we’ve grazed awhile. I slip into the kitchen to talk. She’s traveled from St. Mary’s to a bigger hospital in Cleveland; she and Jay are there to talk with specialists about the colostomy. She has resigned herself to this. She is still weak, and her intestines are flaring up again. *I can’t go on like this*, she says. *I need my life back*.

The poets have finished all the wine and are digging out the cheap beer in the back of my fridge. Christy asks what I’m doing and I tell her about the party. *What did you make?* she asks. *Tell me*. So I narrate the tart roasted eggplant salad, the pilafs touched with dill fronds, the funky and aromatic stew. She’s on easy carbs these days: a can of Ensure. Toast. Pudding. *It sounds so wonderful*, she says. I promise to make it for her when I’m home at Christmas. When I call Christy back the next evening, answers, breathless, that she can’t talk, *I’m so sick*, she says. *I’ll call you*. I try to call again in a couple of days but can’t get through.

Of course if I had known that our last conversation would be our last conversation, I would have disbanded the dinner party early and sent the poets home with

kisses or beer or whatever they wanted from me. I would have put on a sweater and sat on the front stoop in the September desert night, a light scattering of stars above my visible breath, as Christy spoke to me from that hospital bed in Cleveland. We would have unrolled the future like bolts of luminous Indian silk. Maybe Christy and I never would have stopped talking. Maybe the conversation would have kept her alive, as though her body could not give out until we'd covered everything, until every book was read, every dish eaten, every mangled prayer healed and kissed, every orphan home.

PROVENANCE

The summer after my first year of college, I wondered if museum work was for me, so I accepted an internship in collections at the West Virginia State Museum. It was my first real job, after a stint of volunteering at another museum's gift shop. Early on I rightly suspected it would be a summer full of paperwork drudge, that Kalina and Lucia had cool names and cooler internships like designing new exhibits, while I jotted down the provenance of somebody's grandma's shawl from Tucker County and filed it away.

Part of my job was to bring order to the museum's clothing collection. I tried to learn the differences between an 1880s and 1890s bustle, to sort the cloche and toque hats. It was maddening, or it would have been maddening if I hadn't known I'd be done minimum-waging in August and heading two hours north to Morgantown for the fall semester. College is for self-discovery, and so is work. Lesson: trying to bring order to anything is not part of my skill set.

Charles, my boss, had Jheri curl hair and a parade of Hooters waitress girlfriends, but he never struck me as sleazy. He was not a dumb guy, but also not a particularly self-aware person or a deep thinker. He was from Pinch, West Virginia, which he pronounced "peench," but he was not a hick. He had an endless supply of sport coats. He didn't eye me the way he did the rotation of Hooters girlfriends, but he never made me feel like he wasn't eyeing me because I wasn't worth eyeing. Rather, there was this tacit understanding that he was hunting something different. Charles declared that when he

turned 40, he'd marry whomever he was dating at the time. He laughed at my jokes and he let me play the radio and he praised my "worth ethic," and a couple of Fridays he took me and Kalina out for two-hour lunches. At the end of the summer he bought me a small glass deer. *It reminds me of you*, he said.

Charles kept the museum collection under lock and key. He called it The Cage. Charles liked complaining to me in low tones about Jim, who also worked with us in The Cage. Jim was a guy flirting with retirement who'd once had Charles' job but had been demoted for reasons I didn't understand. Jim knew everything about West Virginia glass—Fenton, Blenko, Pilgrim. He was on friendly terms with every piece of glass in the museum's collection. He was a plump balding mole with broad fingernails and unreliable teeth. The bomb-shelter fluorescent lighting of the cage and its dusty labyrinth of artifacts was his natural habitat. Jim would corner me and unload a story, his whole frame shaking, the laughter reverberating inside the rafters of his body covered with a white buttofdown and pocket protector. He was a friendly whale, and I imagined some lonely Jonah inside him, jostled to nausea whenever Jim laughed, waiting for the day Jim might cough him free.

I thought a lot of weird things that summer. I wasn't scared to rummage alone in the far corner of the cage, among turn-of-the-century tricycles. It was not a dispiriting work environment, though as July dragged into August I started counting down my Cage Hours. Too much alone time with all that old stuff made your head get moldy. Our museum was part of the Division of History and Culture. Culture, "the tilling of land," is rooted in place and springs up in the mid-1400s, related to Latin "colere": "tend, guard, cultivate, till." The word and its kin took on figurative edges not long after, as education

was referred to as “cultivation” as early as the 1500s. Much later, in the 19th century, culture would take on the sense of “the intellectual side of civilization.” Sorting the dusty hats, I wondered if this is what culture distills into: moth-eaten boots, glass ashtrays and splintered spinning wheels? *Jesus*.

The summer of my first job coincided with my first boyfriend, Abe (“father of a multitude”) who lived 15 minutes from the museum. Abe’s father was a Baptist minister. Abe and I were both virgins. We never even kissed. He always had an air of one-upmanship, proud he’d been published in a role-playing game magazine while I had yet to publish anything. Our university is not prestigious but it’s the biggest school in the state. I was on a full ride, one of five scholarships given each year. Abe was always looking for confirmation of the gross clerical error that labeled me a winner.

We both lived in the honors freshmen dorm. Abe would walk down from his sixth floor room, which he called the penthouse, to find me reading. I had a British lit survey with Dr. Blaydes, and in fact her lectures did make me want to cut myself. Her class met in a bleak annex in the basement of Stansbury Hall, where the English, Philosophy, and Religious Studies departments shared a live-and-let-live attitude with Army and Air Force ROTC and their inspirational hallway posters like a jet flying poised for flight beneath the command to *Aim High!* I often looked at the jet on my way to class, past the vending machines and the ROTC guys playing basketball. Week after week, Dr. Blaydes failed to recognize my genius. Eventually I stopped reading for the class, but I pulled a B. *Aim High!*

Annie, my freshman year roommate, worked at Domino’s Pizza and would sometimes bring back a pizza with fresh tomatoes and mushrooms for me. She made

pizzas until she got a job at the cancer research center, a job almost unheard of for a freshman to get. Annie had sandy blond hair, and blue eyes with long floppy lashes. She was unaware of her beauty, which made the roommate situation livable, in fact really quite good. She also dated guys who were several rungs beneath her, including Marty the lacrosse player, a holdover from high school.

Annie was a Horse Girl. As far as Horse Girls go, she was pretty normal. She was also a townie, so she would often stay with her mom on weekends, in her room lined with shelves of model horses and a *Last of the Mohicans* poster. In the dorm we bunked our beds for more space in our shoebox-sized room. She hooked a bridle for her horse, Tex, over one corner of the bed, which was a conversation piece with my friends, particularly guy friends who came by my room while I was working on Spanish grammar exercises. I wrote compositions on my Smith-Corona word processor, the one with a small black screen and orange characters. After you told it to print, you had to feed it individual sheets of paper and endure the typing out, pretending that an astute ghost was typing your paper for you at the last minute. I had to time my homework so that I wouldn't finish my papers after Annie had gone to bed, a canopy of sheets hanging from underneath my bunk, surrounding her bed, so my desk light wouldn't bother her. I filled in the accent marks by hand on my Spanish compositions about my dream home or my family history because I couldn't figure out how to do it on the machine.

Once Abe brought me a rose before we went out to dinner. I put it in a plastic Mountain Dew bottle and set it on my little desk by the window.

You're glowing, Annie said.

I am not.

You are, definitely. She wanted me to trust her because she was a bio/chem double major.

Shut up, I said.

Abe had this weird vaguely horsey boy smell. He wore shorts all year round. His favorite colors were orange and purple, and he filled the shelves in his room with painted miniature Dungeons & Dragons figurines. I'm pretty sure he resented being attracted to me at all. At 20, Abe would claim he was already having a midlife crisis. Our friends and I would dismiss this as morbid talk. His mother, Waverly ("from the tree-lined meadow"), died of Huntington's disease in her 40s, and it was fifty-fifty that Abe had it. Abe said he would never have children because he wouldn't take the chance of passing it on: he would be a dead-end. Abe could be reclusive but also relentlessly social. He took pleasure in denying us his company when he knew for sure we wanted it. We had no choice but to indulge him. Sometimes he shuffled through the TV lounge in his house slippers as though he carried the weight of early death like a sickly, heavy lamb or a splintery cross on his narrow shoulders. If I were to draw the Abe of that time, I'd shade heavily under his eyes, lots of smudging or cross-hatching, not only because Abe procrastinated but because he must have seen more than the rest of us, the specter of his mother's suffering just visible in the periphery at every turn. *You don't even know you have it,* I said. *Maybe you're fine.*

Huntington's is named for George Huntington, who in 1872 wrote the first in-depth description of the disease. A DNA test for Huntington's became available in 1993, while Abe and I were still in high school. A few years after college, I heard from our friend James that Abe tested positive for Huntington's. James sat with Abe through the

post-test counseling. James also reported that Abe is losing his hair, perhaps something else he inherited from his mom's side. Abe downplayed the test when I first talked to him, but what else could he say. I said: *Abe, shit. Abe, I can't believe it.*

Huntington's Disease lacks star power. Its most famous case is Woody Guthrie, who died from complications of the disease in 1967. Families affected by Huntington's don't always want to self-identify for fear of discrimination at work or by insurance companies. Huntington's does not skip generations, so you don't have to look far to figure out where it came from. If you're in the 50 percent that doesn't inherit the disease from a parent with Huntington's, then you can't pass it on. The Huntingtin (*HTT*) gene sits on our fourth chromosome. Part of the gene includes a section in which genetic "letters," or DNA bases, repeat their C-A-G sequence, called a trinucleotide repeat. Everyone has the *HTT* gene, including the repeats. After a certain number of repeats, somewhere around 35, a mutant form of the Huntingtin protein (mHTT) is created instead of the normal version. It's this mutant form that causes cell death, and no one has been able to explain why. The more occurrences of this genetic hiccup or stutter, the earlier and more drastic the onset of Huntington's is likely to be.

The disease is also called Huntington's chorea, from Greek for "dance," to describe the jerky (but sometimes unexpectedly graceful) movements of Huntington's patients as they lose muscle control. People with Huntington's are often accused of being drunk because of their affected walk and speech. Huntington's is not the only kind of chorea. Sydenham's Chorea, known as juvenile chorea, chorea minor, or Saint Vitus's Dance, affects children, usually girls, who have rheumatic fever.

Saint Vitus is a patron saint of people with chorea. He is the patron saint of dogs and domestic animals, young people, dancers, Prague, coppersmiths, actors, and comedians. People seek his protection against epilepsy, storms and lightning, snakebite, and sleeplessness. Saint Vitus is also an American doom metal band, and *Saint Vitus' Dance* the name of the sailboat Sonny Crockett lived on in the 1980s TV series *Miami Vice*. Saint Vitus is one of the Catholic Church's Fourteen Holy Helpers. Unlike the more recent Hamburger or Tuna Helper, the Holy Helpers are saints whose intercession is thought to be particularly effective against diseases, a belief dating back to the 14th century and the peak of the Black Death.

Vitus's remains were supposedly moved to Saxony in the ninth century, so his "cultus" is particularly potent there. Medieval people, especially medieval German people, liked to dance around a statue of Saint Vitus on his feast day, June 15. The dance was thought to bring a year of good health. Vitus's power sounds like it could go either way, though, and that calling up Vitus's fury could lead to dancing mania, or choreomania, a craze in 14th to 18th century Europe. Sometimes up to hundreds of people would dance uncontrollably, and explanations range from religious visions and ecstasy to a coping mechanism for famine and other hardship, or a case of eating rye infected with psychoactive fungus. 16th century physician and alchemist Paracelsus was the first to label the frenzied dancing "chorea," wishing to scoot the nomenclature away from all this saint business.

Vitus's story splinters. Even the Catholic Encyclopedia shies away from a definitive version. But it may go something like this: Vitus' tutor, Modestus, and his nurse, Crescentia, who was Modestus's wife, were Christian. Vitus converted at a young

age, and the three traveled through second-century Sicily. Valerian, a local official, tried to test Vitus's faith, so the three headed out to Rome, where Vitus exorcised a demon from Emperor Diocletian's son. When Vitus refused to sacrifice to the gods, he was accused of sorcery and tortured in spectacular ways, including a dunk into a cauldron of lead (from which—miracle!—our Vitus escaped unscathed).

Sometimes Vitus is depicted with Modestus and Crescentia. According to saintvitus.com, "Saint Vitus is depicted as a boy with a rooster and a cauldron. At times he may be shown (1) with his Modestus and Crescentia as they refuse to worship idols; (2) being put into an oven; (3) with a palm and cauldron; (4) with a palm and dog; (5) with a chalice and dog; (6) with sword and dog; (7) with a sword and rooster; (8) with a book and rooster; (9) with a wolf or lion; or (10) as a young prince with a palm and scepter." I like this mix-and-match iconography, the many props for Vitus as though he's a Barbie with scooter, helmet, horse, tack, big hair, tiny purse, tiny shoes.

The anthem of Abe's death will be neurological degeneration, as the working parts of his body shut off like carnival lights. Huntington's disease will erode Abe's ability to walk, speak, eat, and remember. It may push him into dementia, and quite likely into depression. The disease won't directly cause his death, but rather its complications: maybe a fall, a heart attack, choking, pneumonia brought on by aspirated food, suicide.

I've lost two close friends, one in her mid-thirties, one in her late twenties. Both of them suffered unspeakably, both languished in hospitals. Both of them were gone within months of their diagnosis. It is a mercy that the healthy stretches of their lives

were not crippled by such specific foreknowledge of their death, that they didn't watch their mothers die as a template of their own losses. Abe might be my saddest friend.

Abe hasn't escaped the cauldron. If I draw Abe's future, the lion and Abe face off. It's unclear whether the lion will lick Abe's hawkish nose or maul him senseless.

Abe, Abe, there's still time for a miracle.

Abe, Abe, Abe if I see you again, I will definitely kiss you.

HAND AND NAME

I. Peaceful Mountain

Adam (“red clay”) wept over a newspaper article about the birthday of Tai Shan (“peaceful mountain”), the new panda cub at the National Zoo. I told Adam he was kind of like a woman. *I’ll take that in the spirit in which I believe it was meant*, he said. I meant he was sensitive and liked to talk, and he was even more google-eyed around kids than I was, and I was getting bad about it. For example, it was hard for me to keep reading once the young couple brought that baby into the coffee shop, that baby in a petal pink jumpsuit.

II. My Buddy

Even the loud grabby kids at the coffee shop, the whiny ones at the supermarket, I couldn’t help watching them, watching the mom or dad’s frazzled invisible love tangles follow their kids, love their kids even while wanting to stuff them in one of the tall coolers of chicken nuggets and frozen pies. At the supermarket I saw a middle-aged man in glasses, a fishing hat, and knee socks, with a doll dressed just like him, My Buddy-style, in a pack on his chest. Standing at the checkout, I knew that I was part of this man, and he was part of me. I wanted to follow him and his doll; instead I fumbled for my credit card. The man in glasses hunched to examine the Halloween candy display. He held the doll’s face close to the boxes. The doll was also nearsighted.

Children screamed through the supermarket. I pictured myself a plodding earth mother, round and expectant, rosy and fecund and strewing petals down the cereal aisle to prepare the way for my firstborn. Strange thoughts were taking over, they were camping out and getting comfortable, they were squatting in the furrows of my brain, building little thought-tarp villages, they were setting up for a little thought-music festival and the jam bands were doing sound checks and the industrious ones were weaving thought-hemp jewelry to sell for gas money home, and of course I love music too and I believe in freedom and I didn't have the heart to chase them out. The thoughts suggested I carry around a doll for practice. I could latch her on my back with a big batik wrap. One thing for sure: I'd get a wide berth at the supermarket.

III. Our Flayed Lord

If I say museums were a *locus amoenus* for Adam and me, I don't mean sweaty experimental trysts on priceless carpets but rather the electric pleasures of catching his hand, a quick kiss on the neck when no one was looking. One Saturday we spooled down the Guggenheim and blushed among Aztec artifacts. A clay and pigment Xipe Totec ("our lord the flayed one"), ruler of the west, disease, spring, goldsmiths and the seasons, watched our ignition. Xipe Totec is flayed and covered with his own skin. Without skin, Xipe Totec is gold.

IV. Hand and Name

I don't know all the available phenotypes for Jewishness, but I have learned that I am not any of them. In Israel, I dodged the light of the white stone, the gold glare from

the Dome of the Rock. Adam smoothed the lumpy blue kipa on his head. He said everyone could read him: *American Jew, not observant*. I added: *holding hands with a gentile*.

At the museum Yad Vashem (“Hand/Memorial and Name”), the last, lofty rooms inhale after the cramped exhibits of ghettos and railcars. Adam wandered through the Hall of Names, the crescendo before the museum’s Zionist climax: a balcony and a panorama of Jerusalem. I stood in a room full of light and photographs of survivors’ young families. I looked at those women, the tensile strength of their flesh. Bend the body as close as you can to death, and sometimes it still bends back.

V. Beautiful Song

Adam flashed slides from the excavated projector: a shot of alligators framed by a glass-bottom boat, a cabin at the beach, Adam’s mother, Carolyn (“beautiful song”), in a green headscarf after chemotherapy. *Those were dark times*, he said, looking at the light of his dead mother painted across the wall.

Adam wept, and I slipped my hand onto his heart. He carried grief that I felt like a grief-suit on my skin. He said, *I haven’t looked at pictures of my mother in a long time*.

WHAT'S THERE TO FEAR EXCEPT THE DARKNESS

Maybe the fear of becoming one's mother is a "thirties thing," as *Glamour* might put it, like a propensity to multiple orgasms or knowing more clearly what you will and will not put up with in your professional life.

Sometimes I do set up my coffee pot the night before, just the way Mom does.

My Mom is a Hot Mom, my past boyfriends have told me. Mom has blue eyes, blond hair, big knockers, little tolerance for clutter, and a great capacity for friendly chit-chat. I didn't inherit any of those things, so I'm not afraid of stepping right into her mold. She met my dad in seventh grade, their romance started in eighth grade, and they're still holding hands into their fortieth year of marriage.

I have inherited her worry gene, the one that compiles lists and lists of what can go wrong. Sometimes I salute the gene as if it's a person, named Gene, like "hey, Gene, lighten up" or "Why the long face, Gene?"

Our therapy friends tell us that it can be helpful to articulate our fears, to call them into a lineup instead of letting their murky fuzz-blots shadow the rooms of the psyche. It's another take on one of my favorite hymns, "Count Your Blessings, Name Them One By One." Let's treat our fears the way oily televangelists instruct regarding the blessings we want in our lives: name them and claim them.

Afraid of Being Alone

I was talking to a therapist once and I told him that I'd like to "change the tapes in my head," picturing my head like a boxy answering machine with tapes a little smaller than matchbooks. My parents still have an answering machine with such a tape, and it's my mother's voice that explains that you should leave your name, number and a brief message and they will get back to you as soon as they can. I guess I should say a "playlist" rather than tapes, right? I need to update my metaphors. My therapist and I were about the same age, and he laughed when I mentioned the outdated technology. Even my friends look at me funny when I say I don't need to download a song because I've got it on a mix tape somewhere. I get the look that asks "Didn't anyone tell you the 90s are over?"

My mom's West Virginia answering machine voice is one of grace. After my third bridesmaid gig in a year, Mom was the one who bought me a new set of cookware as if to say "See, you don't have to get married to get nice stuff." She says "it's better to be alone than to be with the wrong person." She says, "It's not a sin to be five minutes early." She says, "The secret to a successful marriage is having separate bathrooms."

One night a few summers ago I sat with my mom on the back porch. I wasn't handling a breakup so well. I would miss Adam. I would miss having someone to talk to about the detritus and small triumphs of the day, someone to take a look at my stove when it sparked, someone to open stubborn jars. I had made big plans for us. I imagined singleness like an airport, as though I were waiting in the Layover Lounge for my connecting flight. I had questions like: "how long will I be here?" And: "Are there any snacks?"

That summer, on my flight back to Salt Lake City, I expected a three-hour wait in Phoenix. Instead I walked two gates over to a flight at final boarding. The gate agent let me right onto that plane, without even time for a coffee. I was crying down the aisle to my seat beside a friendly dentist. I didn't mind talking to him, but I was empty and tired, and eventually he saw that I was more interested in my issue of *Harper's* than telling him about my studies.

"Do you hear that, she's going to be a doctor!" he crowed to his friend across the aisle.

"Not a real doctor," I said.

The dentist had his own practice and three young children. He seemed so accomplished, so grounded, so loud, I figured surely he must be older than I was. He said he was 29. I was 29 too, and what did I have to show for it? It was a mixture of embarrassment and pride. I didn't feel like I'd wasted my 20s, and I reveled that I didn't have a mortgage or a Diaper Genie. I could up and move to Japan and teach English at any given moment, I could change my name to Moon Dancer Express and apprentice with location-independent glassblowers and fall off the grid of existence like that center dot of light that persists then fades when you turn off an old TV.

Afraid of Being Orphaned

Abandonment by parents can happen for a variety of reasons. Take Oedipus, whose parents didn't off him outright, but passed him to a servant who was supposed to leave defenseless infant Oed on a mountaintop. To make things even more emphatic, Oed's feet were pinned together, as though the doomed babe might be able to wobble

away like those dogs you see in inspirational specials on TV. In these specials the family can't keep their beloved dog, so they give him away, but Scruffy runs for two days straight, following the scent of home, and shows up hungry and triumphant on their new porch.

The situation of Oedipus calls to mind one of my mother's favorite snippets from the book of Numbers: "your sin will find you out." That is to say: It's not God or cops or the youth pastor who will unveil your deeds of darkness, but rather the deeds themselves will betray you with their unmistakable odor, their undeniable fruit, tainting you like the ink that spurts from theft-prevention bubbles clamped onto clothes at the mall. The deeds, like the rocks of the Psalms, cry out if you are silent. As a side note, Mom also favors a paraphrase of First Thessalonians: "If you don't work, you don't eat."

For a different sort of abandonment entirely, consider Moses, put to float on the Nile in a pitch-daubed basket like a bathtub toy, in a desperate ploy for salvation.

I know my mom wouldn't leave me on purpose, but the motive doesn't matter so much once you have to reckon with the gone-ness of the person, a new tear in the retractable movie screen that pulls down over your heart, the screen that shows all those sentimental films the brain likes to play, and the brain knows the heart just eats that stuff up, the heart would keep watching movies about the Old Times all day long if you'd let it, like those TV marathons that splice together one episode after another of *America's Next Top Model*, so you can't get a real thought in edgewise and there you are already suckered out of another hour of your life that you don't get back.

I think of my mother's life shuttling through her heart, that organ with its mixed inheritance: her father's quadruple bypass at 57, her mother's mild heart attack and swift

recovery at 88. Hazel, my grandmother, had to sit out a few weekends of dancing at the Senior Center, but these days she's back in action. I took her to her cardiologist a few months after the attack. Nana was doing very well, the good doctor said. He was more worried about her weight loss than her heart. "Go have a hamburger," he said. So we stopped at McDonald's on the way home and shared a Happy Meal. I got the toy. Nana dusted some of the salt off the fries. She can't find unsalted Pringles, so at home she brushes the chips with a tiny clean plastic paintbrush.

Afraid of Killing My Mother

I'm not afraid of matricide for Electra reasons, nor is it a manifestation of self-loathing because on some level I believe Mom and I are the same person. Truth is my mom has chronic pain, and I'm clumsy, and sometimes she asks me to give her a shot of pain medication. "A shot of tequila, coming right up!" I say. "Not a real doctor!" I protest. For years she has suffered from debilitating headaches, with acute nerve pain above her left eye. No one is quite sure what's wrong with her. Some pain killers don't work, or shred her stomach, or wear off after she's used them for a few months. She has some morphine patches in reserve, but they make her nauseated. Occasionally I ask if I can have a couple. "Kidding, Mom!" Her doctor prescribes vials of Toradol, medicine the color of ginger ale. Mom says she should learn to give herself injections and continues not to do it. If she's desperate, I will.

I'm afraid of injecting my mom with beads of air that would destroy her brain or her heart. Once while visiting my friend Christy in the hospital, I asked her nurse to show me how to give an injection, to make sure I was doing it right. The nurse assured me that

I'd have to inject *so much air* to do any damage. To demonstrate he held a length of Christy's oxygen tube, like the tube in an aquarium air pump, between his outstretched hands: you'd need a *lot* of air, he explained.

To shoot my mom: scrub hands, express air out of syringe and insert into upended vial. Pull plunger and fill barrel of syringe with medicine. Tap the barrel and shoot a little arc of medicine into the air. Watch as Mom holds her waistband away from her lower back, exposing her flank. Wherever there's already a gray-yellow bruise, like the outside of a boiled egg yolk, stick the needle. Press the plunger with conviction. If you press too hard because you're nervous, Mom will say your technique is fine; the stabbing above her eye is sharper than a needle stick. Remove needle from her backside and replace its plastic cover, dropping the used syringe in an empty water bottle for collecting sharps to throw away. Swab the stick site with rubbing alcohol, and apply a bandage if it bleeds. When the tissue near her hip abscesses, give injections in her leg until the skin repairs itself.

Afraid of Going Blind

Hazel has her wits. She has a small waistline and the moxie to wear glittery holiday clothes most seasons of the year but the modesty not to try to "dress too young," as she puts it. She has a couple of wigs and three closets. One bad case of arthritis. One baby grand piano. And macular degeneration.

Sometimes her mascara or her pink lipstick veers, and the tectonic plates of her face don't quite line up. She doesn't drive after dark, and even in the daytime she limits herself to a small loop on Rt. 60, as far west as her doctor's office and the Kmart, and as

far east as the supermarket. Macular degeneration comes from *macula*, stain, and is hereditary. Nana sees serious floaters. At 90 she conceded that she should phase out her driving, declaring she won't renew her license when it expires in three years.

Nana doesn't read much because she has a hard time focusing on the letters. My mom is farsighted, so she can drive and watch TV. She can't read, though, because wearing her glasses triggers the eye pain and massive headaches. My livelihood depends on reading, so I can't think much about her condition.

While I'm home, she asks if I'll help her shop for bras because she can't find her size and she can't read the price tag and she's too embarrassed to shop for them with my dad or my brother, and it would be a day-long process with Hazel. No one understands my mother's byzantine filing system. She makes oversized abbreviations on her calendar and then can't remember what they all mean. She uses a one-subject spiral-bound notebook as an attempt at a phone directory, but it takes less time for one of us to look in the real phone book or for her to call 411 than to find the number again in those sheets full of her three-inch tall letters which lean sharply to the left, unlike her politics.

Afraid of Being Hard-Hearted and Sort of an All-Star B-word

I have been reading about Mother Teresa and taking notes. In my notes I abbreviate Mother Teresa as MT, which I hear as "empty." MT prays for her own heart and thinks about its shape. MT thinks about containers and emptiness. She says: "Pray that [He may] empty my emptiness." She says: "Be kind in words....Would that we could keep all our words in [Mary's] heart." In a letter to Father Neuner, she begs "that our hearts may be the crib Our Lady chooses for Her Baby."

In Sunday School my little brother made a manger from a section of a cardboard tube. He cut the tube in half and glued the halves together back to back, forming a kind of nativity parabola. In one of the parabola cups he glued a peanut with a smiley face drawn on it. We called him Peanut Jesus. Mom parked him in the crèche, that small open stable with beige plastic figurines and a rough floor dusted with mossy flakes.

If I'm not careful, I end up thinking too much about cribs and strollers. I say snotty things *sotto voce* when I'm running and have to cut a wide path around Hot Moms pushing a baby jogger with one hand and holding a dog's leash in the other. At peak times and weather, Hot Moms stroll two or three abreast, a cadre, a veritable brigade of Hot Moms. They take up the whole sidewalk, I grumble, though sometimes a voice inside says: "only if you're very lucky will that be you some day."

My neighbor tells her dogs, Gus and Washington, to "be sweet" instead of "don't jump" or "stop that" or "no, dammit." Maybe it helps that she's a very good psychiatrist. She corrects with a kind word, reinforcing the *sweet*, not the *no*. There's a tacit acknowledgement that Gus and Wash know how to be sweet; they just have to be reminded. I'm trying to train myself: "Be sweet," the voice says. I like to believe that inside me lies a vein of sweet and I just need to tap it, like a spile in a sugar maple.

Afraid of Some Darkness

A few years ago my mother visited my first apartment in Salt Lake City, and she mentioned my laundry situation several times thereafter. The coin-op washer and dryer squatted in the basement, where storage units waited like anchorite cells full of skis, space heaters, and unmarked boxes. My neighbors' failed paintings propped up against

the cinderblock wall. In one corner two rows of storage units intersected, leaving a blind spot in this room that was never locked. My mother imagined scenarios of kidnapping, enslavement, butchery, who knows what.

When I was in West Virginia for Christmas in 2007, a student from the nearby university disappeared. The student, Leah Hickman, worked at the Dress Barn in the Merritts Creek shopping center, five minutes from my parents' house. On TV reporters showed Leah's Myspace photo and wondered for days where she could be without her purse, cell phone, and keys, which were found in the apartment. A week after the disappearance, detectives discovered Leah Hickman's body stuffed in a crawlspace in the basement of her building. I sat on the couch by my mother, who watched the news and imagined me as that girl stuffed behind the hot water heater.

I do not usually shop at the Dress Barn because the name of the store makes me feel like livestock. But when the Barn closed for two days upon news of Leah's death, this during the busiest retail season of the year, I considered unstrapping my feedbag and buying something.

I felt safe in my building in Salt Lake. I assumed a neighbor would hear me and come running if trouble found me. I did manage to get my laundry done during the daylight hours. Why court the darkness?

In a letter to her confessor, MT writes that "darkness surrounds me on all sides—I can't lift my soul to God—no light or inspiration enters my soul.—I speak of love for souls, of tender love for God—words pass through my words [*sic*, lips]—and I long with a deep longing to believe in them."

Although an editor of MT's correspondence offers his own correction, I much prefer MT's idea of words passing through words, as though one word is the wall and the other the ghost that slips to the other side. I'm thinking of a paragraph as a dollhouse, and there are wall words and there are ghost, *geist*, spirit words that travel like the smoke of incense, the vapor of prayer. A dollhouse that opens down the middle, cracked open like a walnut. Tiny beds and lamps are there, perhaps the word CHAIR or LAMP. TABLE is a wall word, whereas LOVE is a spirit word. LEPER, SARI, SISTER = walls. DARKNESS, GOD, SOUL, PAIN, ABSENCE, BLASPHEMY, HOLY are spirits. Or instead of a dollhouse, words pass through a crèche, like my mother's barn of sticks.

IN THE TWINKLING OF AN EYE

Once when I was eight, I snuck under the lip of the bar that separated our kitchen from the TV room, and my dad hid in the garage. I can't remember why we hid, but I could hear my mom walking through every room. I could hear her open every closet, every door. She called for my dad, in her voice a thin skein of panic. It couldn't have been more than a couple of minutes before my dad came back inside. The joke was up. I uncrouched from behind the barstool. My mom laughed a tight laugh, she laughed at herself, she knew we were there *somewhere*, but she'd been scared, for a second, that the Rapture had come. My mother feared she'd been left behind in the TV room with Snuggles our cat to wait for the Great Tribulation.

Christ's second coming was much-discussed at church. Before the plagues on earth and the Day of Judgment, the Lord, according to I Thessalonians, "shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord." (I Thess 4: 16-7). The moment is described more poetically in I Corinthians 15: 51-2: "We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, [i]n a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed." A t-shirt in my Evangelical Wardrobe showed the outline of two high-top sneakers worn out as though they'd been

playing in a youth group basketball tournament all day. Rays shone from the shoes, suggesting the wearer both recently and vertically vacated them, caught up, as the shirt specified in a funky font: *In the twinkling of an eye*

In their 30s my parents started attending Elmwood Missionary Baptist Church. Mom had grown up Methodist, but she felt that in all those years she'd never really heard God's Plan of Salvation. She didn't respond publicly to an altar call at Elmwood, but one evening she asked my dad to help her pray and invite Jesus into her heart to be her personal Lord and Savior. She also asked to be re-baptized, by immersion this time, in a big green tub in the church's cinderblock fellowship hall. Her mom, my grandmother Hazel, was pissed, and considered a second baptism an affront and unnecessary. I guess the fact that she and my grandfather had bought the baptismal font for their Methodist church didn't help much either.

Part of what attracted my mom to the Baptist church was a desire for clarity, for what she referred to as a "know-so" rather than a "think-so" salvation. The sinner's prayer is designed for this. One example of a sinner's prayer, from the *Four Spiritual Laws* booklet produced by Campus Crusade for Christ:

Lord Jesus, I need You. Thank You for dying on the cross for my sins. I open the door of my life and receive You as my Savior and Lord. Thank You for forgiving my sins and giving me eternal life. Take control of the throne of my life. Make me the kind of person You want me to be.

The idea is that you pray this, or words to this effect, to seal your decision to follow Christ. I like the idea of closing decisions with seals, the wax blot on the back of a fancy envelope, or the exchange of rings at a wedding. The sinner's prayer can give you a precise moment of conversion. You can write the date and time and place in your Bible if you want to, as though it were a guest register at a small hotel or a log book at a trailhead.

You can mark that you were there. You could write down your decision as a mirror of your name being written in the Lamb's Book of Life.

Mom reminds me of my "spiritual birthday," August 1, when I knelt at my bed and asked Jesus to come into my heart. (Alas, she does not send me spiritual birthday presents.) I remember telling my mom that I wanted to be saved and go to heaven, and with my dad we prayed the sinner's prayer at my bedside one night. I knew I felt the stirring of the Spirit, a sense of unease until I Made Things Right With God. Looking back at my six-year-old self, I don't doubt the sincerity of my words and the purity of my belief.

I was baptized a few months later, though it was emphasized to me that baptism was just an outward profession of what had already happened inside. The church of my youth counted it heresy to rely on baptism for salvation. If you get baptized and you haven't accepted Christ in your heart, the thinking goes, then you're just a wet sinner. The water has no effect on your soul. It's sort of like the wisdom we heard in drivers' ed: pouring coffee into someone who's been drinking doesn't yield a sober person but a caffeinated drunk.

Critics of the sinner's prayer point out that for much of Christian history, the seal of belief was baptism. Look, they say, Christ Himself opted to be baptized by John the Baptist. The sinner's prayer credits the believer with too much agency, they say. Belief is necessary, but if Jesus comes into a person's heart, it's not because of magic words but because He chooses to move in. When Jesus is asked in the New Testament, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" the answers involve loving God and neighbor (neighbor defined broadly, as in the good Samaritan) and being willing to leave everything behind

to follow Him. There's no mention of a special prayer. Steven Francis Staten has excoriation, and unfortunate clip art, on his web site about the evils of the sinner's prayer: "If you prayed the 'sinners prayer' for your salvation, you are still lost in your sins, because it is not what God said to do," he claims. Staten borrows a phrase from C.S. Lewis, describing the sinner's prayer as "a great cataract of nonsense," a blind spot to the text of the Bible and to church tradition, a "modern apostasy."

Jesus gave out fishes and loaves, but he didn't give an altar call, at least one documented in the gospels. Presbyterian minister Charles Grandison Finney (1792-1875) is considered the father of the altar call, paving the way for Billy Graham and other evangelists. Finney popularized the "anxious bench" technique, designating an area where anxious sinners would sit and be preached to, though the bench appeared as early as the mid-18th century with minister Eleazar Wheelock's "Mourner's Seat." Altar calls were already a hit in Methodist revival meetings during the Second Great Awakening, in the 19th century. The altar call was both a kind of crowd control, with interested sinners often cordoned off to one area in the church for additional counseling. It was also a kind of focus group, inviting sinners to self-identify and position themselves to receive extra attention.

In college I read Langston Hughes' essay "Salvation" about an altar call moment in his childhood when the minister drones on, stretching those elastic hymns into verse after verse, while the minister assures the congregation that there was still a lost lamb out there, and wouldn't that lamb come to Jesus before it's too late? In the essay, Hughes realizes that in fact the minister means him, that this repeating loop of invitation, the hymns, the tears, the swaying, it's all being held out for him, and he figures if they're

ever going to leave that church, he has to get off that pew and appease them. Part of the pathos of the essay is that in the very moment when Hughes the narrator expects to see Jesus, Jesus doesn't come. Hughes weeps, which his aunt takes as a response to the Holy Ghost, but Hughes confesses he deceived all the people in that church.

I hadn't been to a service quite that extreme. But as a child I assumed all churches everywhere had an altar call, some kind of coda at the end of the sermon inviting people to come forward and accept Christ as personal savior, or to repent of backsliding, or to renew a commitment to Christ, or to pray for a lost loved one. Sometimes you came to the altar to lay your burdens down. God, the Baptist church liked its object lessons. One Wednesday night, my dad helped the teacher of the adult fellowship class make a point. My dad put bricks in a shoebox and slung the bag across his back. This is how we approach the altar, the teacher said. We bring our burdens to God, we set them on the ledge of holiness, and then we take our burdens right back instead of leaving them with God Almighty. He cued my dad to walk away from the altar shouldering the same box of bricks with which he'd approached the altar in the first place.

To an Evangelical, any service without an "invitation" or altar call is suspect. When else do people hear the message of salvation and have a chance to act on it? The hymns for invitation tend to be short. The songs emphasize the urgency of the decision, that this might be the last chance one has to accept Christ: "Just as I am, and waiting not/ To rid my soul of one dark blot/ To thee whose blood can cleanse each spot/ Oh Lamb of God, I come, I come." Or the popular "Have You Any Room For Jesus?": "Room for pleasure, room for business/ But for Christ the crucified?" which asks you not only to reflect on questions like this but to "Swing your heart's door widely open/ Bid Him enter

while you may.” Have you any room for Jesus? the song asks. I shift my weight from foot to foot, thinking: does Jesus have a reservation? Is it under His name? And will that be one King or two Double beds? Is non-smoking OK? Would Jesus like extra towels for the fitness center?

An altar call stretches like a quavering net of song to rescue or seize, depending on your perspective. It’s a net with several verses, so you can let out its extra folds. The minister speaks over the organist slowly spilling chords: If you died tonight, do you know for sure you would go to heaven? What if you had to face Jesus before that NASCAR race ever gets started on TV this afternoon? Have your sins been washed in the blood of the Lamb? When God looks down on you, does He see your sins, or does He see “Paid In Full” written in red with the blood of Jesus? And you, Christian, if you’re sure you’re going to heaven, are there people in your family or at work who are headed for an eternity in the fires of Hell? Why not come up and pray for them? Christian, you may be saved, but are you living like each day is your last? Are you giving your all for Jesus?

The pastor and some of the deacons would be standing by to pray with anyone who came forward. Some of the ladies of the church were on standby, too, as the pastor would prefer not to kneel beside a weeping woman at the front of the church (though better before the eyes of the congregation, where their conduct could be monitored, instead of one-on-one in a pastor’s office). After a week of revival services with a guest preacher, or after church camp, the altar would bustle with people going forward to renew their commitments. And it did feel powerful to pray in front of the church. You could be disburdening yourself, laying before God not a slain unblemished goat or the firstfruits of your garden but your heavy heart about someone you love. You could be casting your

cares on Jesus, for He careth for you. I have been “under conviction” and the feeling lifted when I went forward to pray. Yes I could have taken care of the matter privately, but the willingness to pray at the altar made my prayer feel more definitive, as though my prayer was now italicized or in boldface type.

An altar call is noisy and potentially manipulative of the emotions, and maybe it also does some good. My mom believes there’s something about publicly praying, even though you may be praying silently to yourself, that furthers your commitment. Everyone knows it takes some effort to overcome the inertia of the pew, that you’re opening yourself up to the looks of others. In a snarkier moment, I try to imagine what different people might be praying for. In a more judgmental mood, I might consider that they’re repenting of some dark deed. I admit that on occasion, when someone comes forward to pray and Do Business with God, on what feels like the fifteenth verse of “Just As I Am,” the thought has flashed through my mind *could you please hurry, or the Methodists will get all the tables at Applebee’s.*

The sinner’s prayer offers a crystallized moment of decision. Like the text of Jacob Ciccolella’s note to me in third grade: Will you go with me, circle yes or no.

Are you lost or not? Are you blind or can you see?

The million verses of a hymn of invitation nudge the sinner to get off the anxious bench and Decide Right Now. It’s not unlike the time clock on the Home Shopping Network that tells you how much time you have left before the featured cubic zirconium pendant is no longer available. I was reacquainted with that moment of compression when I adopted a kitten. Half a dozen people are lined up to check out at the Yuppie

Puppy, a pet rescue, vet and boutique that's now a Thai restaurant. A woman brings in her cat, Barack, who has some respiratory issues. The guy who's helping to clean out the cat colony does so in an incredibly distracted way, and then he starts bitching about Obama, and eventually the cats are pooping on the floor and scooting toys on top of it in their best attempt to cover their waste, bless their hearts. The pet adoption form asks: Will you be responsible for your pet for the rest of its life? Maybe I should sleep on this decision and come back tomorrow morning. But the kitten I want reaches his orange paw through the chicken wire of the cat colony as I leave. And another woman starts looking at him. Oh no, sorry, he's already adopted, I say, and scoop him up. I think I might pass out as I fill in all the paperwork. Will you be responsible for your pet for the rest of its life? My vision starts to gray out a little bit at the edges. The Yuppie Puppie doesn't have any to-go boxes, so I hold the kitten close to me, under my left arm, as though I'm going for a kitty touchdown. He purrs, ready for adventure as we climb into my friend's getaway car. Will you be responsible for your pet for the rest of its life? And yet when I sign the form, yes I will take care of this orphaned cat, I will love and cherish him in sickness and in health, I feel peace and joy. Bluebirds of love explode from my heart. I can't take my eyes off the tiny orange fluffball with gigantic ears and paws, who immediately disappears under the living room couch and emerges with cobwebs strung across his face like a furry haunted house. Yes, spooky cat. There is room in my heart for thee.

As a child, I would worry that I was telling lies when I didn't mean to. After swimming one afternoon, I felt a weird shape on my leg and I tried to explain to my mom

what it was. It was a diamond, it was a circle, it was a square, no it was a diamond. I kept bothering my mom to update her on which shape it was. I was so afraid of lying, even accidentally. I was so afraid of saying it wrong. My mom had great patience to listen to me, but that afternoon when I kept interrupting *Guiding Light*, even I could tell I was overdoing it.

My grandmother Hazel thought I went to church too much and that it kept me from having fun. I spent a lot of time with Nana. I raided her stash of costume jewelry which I didn't recognize was "costume" and wore without irony. "It spends the same," I said at the mall, a perfect echo of Hazel, when I bought a Madonna cassette at Musicland with pocket change and the cashier balked at accepting so many coins. "It spends the same" Hazel would say when I asked for bills after she'd offer me a handful of change or a prescription bottle full quarters and dimes.

Nana took me to my weekly piano lesson and then we ate dinner at Morrison's Cafeteria at the mall or somewhere in the food court. I'd usually sleep at her house, just up the hill from my parents. I often spent the night with her the year after Papa died, to keep her company. We both slept in her big lavender bedroom, on twin beds. But she didn't sleep much, and when her grief would overtake her in the middle of the night, we'd get up in the wee hours and work a jigsaw puzzle on the kitchen table.

I would eat ice cream and watch *The Cosby Show* and then begin the task of flossing my braces while *Family Ties* was on. Nana gave me purple wicker mirror that swiveled up and down. The base of the mirror was a compartment where I stored my small pouch of plastic threaders for the dental floss. I strung the floss through the big loopy eye of the threader, then drew the threader under the wire of my braces. It was a

cross between a handicraft and oral hygiene. These were the days when I'd set the kitchen timer each day to make sure I practiced my piano lesson long enough. I was very disciplined about flossing, very guarded about the fault line of my mouth.

Sometimes I'd sit in the pink bathroom at Hazel's house and look at the giant mirror bolted to the wall, the mirror with the scalloped edges like some ancient map or treaty, and stare at myself. I would tell God that I wanted to revoke the sinner's prayer, that I didn't actually want to be saved. I thought I'd test the Bible verse I'd read about nothing separating us from the love of God. Could God undo salvation? I wondered. But then I would get scared. I meant it after all, God, I'd say. I would pray a version of the prayer, and then another time or two in case it wasn't clear the first time. I would pray the prayer again and again, fearing that it didn't take, worrying that maybe I didn't really believe the words when I prayed them all the other times, worrying the prayer like a latch on a tricky door, like the hasp on a chest full of treasure.

Any bench can be an anxious one to the right mind.

WOULD YOU LIKE TO MEET MY BEST FRIEND?

My dad or my brother helps Mom with the jumble of bills. My mom can't see the figures, can't read the ledger, only signs the checks and stuffs the envelopes while someone else figures the slender balance. She includes a gospel tract in every envelope, a folded paper about the size of a cassette tape, maybe a flimsy full-color slick with a gaudy butterfly on the front, its joyful wings caught in mid-beat, *How to be born again!* printed above its head. My mom can't read the words in the tract, but she knows by heart the verses used to explain the plan of salvation or the Romans Road. Sometimes she orders tracts from catalogs and sometimes she gets them from a rack in back of the church. For a while she was using these tracts with a woman's cyan face and Mary Tyler Moore swingy hair on the front. She looked kind of like a flight attendant, or clip art from the 70s. My brother and I crack up. *Would you like to meet my best friend?* is printed on the front of the tract. "Would you like to meet my best friend?" I ask my brother, and hold out my hand, palm upturned like my voice at the end of the question. "OK, so they're kind of old-fashioned," Mom says.

In college I passed out a yellow booklet, *The Four Spiritual Laws*, skinny and long like a Matchbox car, and its green, square, updated cousin, *Would You Like to Know God Personally?* In high school I wedged tracts in library books before I returned them. I read Chick Tracts, the fundamentalist comic book ones like "This Was Your Life" about

the suddenness of death and the need to repent today, or “Why Is Mary Crying?” or “The Death Cookie” about the blasphemy of the Roman Catholic Church. My piano teacher left Chick Tracts on his bookshelves near the boring magazines; though he was Methodist, he didn’t shy away from waiting room evangelism.

I have since parted ways with the gospel tract. If I have any role in spreading the Good News, then I assume it involves love, including loving my neighbor as myself. This likely involves learning the neighbors’ names, which I’ve been slow to do, though I know Eric, the guy in the adjacent apartment, who has a cat named Shoshanna, and Jeremy the golf pro in the apartment below, who likes to play video games, especially the same one over and over, and the stripper who lived there before him who frequently exuded very strong feelings for someone who, much evidence suggests, is named David.

At worst, tracts are inaccurate and hateful and they make you want to cut yourself with the edges of the paper. At best, they are cheesy. But I also know people who read a tract and believed and experienced a new openness to love. Who am I to judge? I admire my mom’s loyalty to tracts as a vehicle of God’s message. In addition to including tracts in her bill payments, my mom sends them sometimes in notes, such as a thank-you note to my Jewish then-boyfriend written in her leaning-tower script. The tract had a perky menorah on the cover. *Do you know the Messiah?* She leaves them with a tip at restaurants. A few days before Christmas last year, we went to Mings, my parents’ favorite Chinese restaurant. The waitress already knew my parents’ order (they get the same thing every time, but this has been the case at their favorite restaurants long before my mom couldn’t read a menu). At the end of the meal the waitress brought out small cinnamon buns, which I didn’t understand. My mom fished for a tract. I looked at it—

Nemo, the clown fish from that awful animated movie. We had watched the movie one night when I was home, and I was so traumatized by the first three minutes of it, in which Nemo's mother is whisked away forever, that the lightheartedness later in the film could not appease me. Yet another one of those stories for kids in which mothers don't fare so well, if they're present at all. My brother bought a box of *Finding Nemo* fruit snacks after we saw the movie and I called him a monster. "You cannot use Nemo tracts!" I said. Mom usually keeps tracts in her purse in a small plastic sleeve, but this one got crinkled, so she decided not to leave it on the table. "Besides," she said, "I've left her several already."

I was raised to believe that everything can be a sign of God's love. And everything can be a tool of evangelism, of spreading the Good News as commanded in the Great Commission in the Gospel of Matthew: "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you..."

Assorted commercial ventures spring forth to equip the faithful for engaging The Lost in spiritual conversations. Consider Testamints, which help you "Pass the Word" with mints wrapped in Bible verses.

Or the EvangeCube Classic, a 7-centimeter puzzle that can be folded in different ways to reveal pictures of the Gospel, ranging from the more suggestive pictures of a celestial light with a human figure surrounded by darkness (our need for a savior and the separation from God caused by our sin) and more representational ones, like a cross, a tomb with a big stone in its mouth. There's even a panel about Christian growth, four

pictures surrounding a picture of a heart, which is where Jesus lives now if you've prayed sincerely to invite Him in and be the Lord of your life. The picture in the upper left corner is a human figure, kind of like the ones on street signs, kneeling, to emphasize the importance of prayer, and a picture of a white and dark-skinned hand clasping as a sign of growing together in fellowship with other believers. The EvangeCube comes in pink, blue and black models, too, and the Sample Pack comes complete with an EvangePen.

You can share your faith, for example, with stickers on car windows and bumpers:

Praying Calvin—a version of Bill Watterson's cartoon boy known for his hyperactive imagination and tiger companion—kneeling at the foot of the cross. A virtuous echo of Pissing Calvin, whose urine pours forth, usually onto a Ford or Chevy logo.

You have two choices for eternity: smoking or non-smoking.

Without the Bread of Life, you're toast.

In case of Rapture, this car will be unmanned.

In case of Rapture, this car will be driverless.

After the Rapture, give this car to my mother-in-law.

No Jesus, No Peace. Know Jesus, Know Peace.

Fear Him.

Got Jesus?

Got faith?

Got peace?

Patty Mallow was already out of the youth group when I was old enough to join, but I thought of her as my friend. Patty was more godly and less pretty than other girls in youth group. I looked up to her. Many years after youth group, Patty Mallow married a man named Wendell Wilkie and bore him many sons. One Sunday night after church, Patty stood around with some of the other church members to show them her new t-shirt she removed from its plastic bag. Patty was vexed about the t-shirt. The slogan *This Blood's For You* scrolled across the top and *Budwiseup* at the bottom, a play on a Budweiser ad. Being in the world but not of it is a fine line, and Patty feared her shirt looked too worldly, that someone might have to study it to see that it was a gospel-inspired spoof and not celebrating beer. The Elmwood Missionary Baptist Church covenant expressly states that members won't consume alcohol. Plus one had to consider I Thessalonians 5:22, "Abstain from all appearance of evil," or as rendered in the Darby translation "hold aloof from every form of wickedness."

In high school I held aloof from alcohol and drugs, and boys held aloof from me, which made the path of virtue a smooth road. My sense of style was a mix of Fashion Bug and Kmart, where I shopped with Hazel, the occasional fancy trip to Benetton, and the Zondervan Christian bookstore. Like Patty Mallow, I wanted to spread the Good News with my t-shirts. I wore an "Abortion stops a beating heart" t-shirt, stamped with what looked like an inked imprint of a newborn's tiny feet, and the serrated line across the front like an EKG. The cashier at Little Caesar's Pizza asked if I was with, and I was like with what, and then I figured out she thought I was pregnant.

My favorite t-shirt from this period was kind of *Sgt. Pepper* album cover but black and white. Who Will Save Your Soul? the shirt asked in big block letters across the

front. It was a front-and-back collage of famous people's photos, cut-and-paste like an old school yearbook spread. On the back of the shirt, Jesus stood near Rod Stewart and Goofy.

Accept Christ as Savior or Burn in Hell: Drape your brimstone banner across an interstate overpass the morning of the L.A. marathon, and you've got 25,000 souls running by on their way to Santa Monica.

Others will give you work to do, but only CHRIST will SAVE your SOUL: Hold your admonishing posterboard, taller than a man, by the side of the road as runners try not to elbow each other in the hustle to the next water stop.

One noticed, between little cups of Powerade, an ideological shift in the course, as the fundamentalists clustered like doomsday morning glories in the dewy hours, but the Campaign for Peace, the End This War folk showed up miles later.

I was running with John, who also goes by Johnny, and Johnny was printed on his race bib above his number, and women all over the city shouted "Keep it up, Johnny!" In the start corral at Dodger Stadium, we weren't able to find our friend Barbara. We could barely move. Pacers and fundraising teams held signs. One woman held up a white cross about the size of an unfolded pizza box. John 3:16 was written on the cross bar. JESUS ran down the vertical axis.

"What's John 3:16?" John(ny) asked.

I recited the verse without hesitation: "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

“Woah,” he said. We joked that he, John(ny), should train to run a 3:16 marathon. “I don’t know why,” he said. I said, “Maybe the Lord has chosen you.”

As it turns out, I beat John(ny) the ultra-marathoner by more than 15 minutes because he had leg cramps and was more accustomed to running on trails than roads. Runners first, friends/lovers second, so I pressed on when he slowed down. John(ny) took photos and chatted with people. John(ny) (a real doctor!) helped a runner who collapsed in a tunnel get to nearby paramedics.

Not long after we met, John(ny) picked me up on his scooter for an outdoor concert. I buckled my arms around him so I wouldn’t fall off. We talked about how much taller I am than his kids, and also we talked about church. He attended the Church of Alta Ski Resort. He was a card carrying member of the compassionate agnostics. “I know a lot of people who go to your church,” I said. I had recently joined the choir at St. Mark’s, and soon I noticed John(ny) attended more services than he missed.

“Why are you here?” I asked him on the way to coffee hour.

He said “I like the choir.”

You can buy colorful soul-winning bracelets from 4iana.com, a branch of the Evangecube empire. 4iana is an acronym for the first part of Romans 1:16: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth...” The 4iana web site proclaims: “The Gospel: Wear it. Share it. It’s that easy!” 4iana bracelets are plastic bands; in high school I wore a bracelet with a similar concept, but made of beads on a leather cord. These witnessing beads were different colors: White for the purity of God, black for the sinfulness of man and the pain of

separation from God, red for the blood of Christ that washes sins away, green for the growth of our new spiritual life, yellow, a craft store's gold, for the brilliance of heaven and an eternal life with God.

I sat behind my friend Shannon in science and she asked me what the different colors meant. Perfect! She's fallen right into the flow of the flow chart of How To Share Your Faith: soul-winner expresses interest or confusion at your t-shirt, piece of jewelry, keychain, hat, Bible cover, etc., while soul-winner gets an entry point into the conversation and dispels the confusion and gets to proclaim the Gospel message of salvation, to boot! "What are the different colors?" I parroted back to Shannon. What do they mean to me? The door was open; would I walk through? Jesus is knocking on your heart; will you answer? I had several classes with Shannon, and she played on the volleyball team, and I just couldn't really picture myself busting out the plan of salvation. I thought of the preachers inviting both the Lost and the Saved to the altar at the end of every service. Is it well with your soul today, friend? Today, today is the day of the salvation. Christian, if you don't share your faith now, when? If not here, where? If not you, who?

"Oh, they're just beads," I said. "You know, some colors I like." I jangled my wrist for emphasis.

THIS IS MY STORY, THIS IS MY SONG

At sea with my family on the *Emerald II*, my careers as vocalist and bingo hustler peaked. I played bingo in the afternoons, working four cards at a time. I charged Cokes to my parents' room. The crew of the *Emerald II* posted a sign-up sheet for the talent show, and I felt that I should sing my song for all of these people because it was my talent. From Sunday School I remembered the parable of the three stewards given talents as in amounts of money, not abilities, though the Sunday School teacher extrapolated that we could interpret it to mean abilities, too. In the parable, the master praises the servants who circulate and increase their talents, and berates the servant who buries his in the ground for fear of losing it. I wasn't quite sure why the servants got unequal talents. The ones who multiplied theirs had more to start with, which didn't seem fair, but then again fairness wasn't really what underpinned most of the parables. The moral, it seemed, was that the master could pay whatever wage he wanted. That wasn't our business. It was our job to be grateful and to use wisely whatever we had.

My family was at sea on the *Emerald II* because Hazel, my grandmother, didn't want to sit at home at Christmas and think about my dead grandfather. I had a song to sing because in my elementary school's Christmas program I had just played a character named Mrs. Merriweather. The script called for Mrs. Merriweather to be played by the choir teacher, but Miss Scites thought I was already tall enough and bossy enough to play an adult. I wore a green v-neck sweater, a white blouse, a navy skirt, and a black scarf

looped like a clover around my neck. My solo explained that “the greatest gift to come our way/ was sent by God on Christmas Day.” When I saw that talent sign-up sheet, I felt a stirring in my heart, I felt a sense of conviction that I should sing this song on board as I had already sung it as “special music” at my church.

Much of the church’s “special music” involved soundtracks, like karaoke, with the backup music of contemporary Christian songs. In her essay “An Expedition to the Pole,” Annie Dillard claims “I have overcome a fiercely anti-Catholic upbringing in order to attend Mass simply and solely to escape Protestant guitars.” A folksy acoustic group called “Wildflowers” has invaded the Mass. “Who gave these nice Catholics guitars?” Dillard asks. I have wondered: who turned Baptists loose with tapes (now CDs and mp3s) and thought this was a good idea?

I would stop in the Zondervan Bible bookstore on trips to the mall with Hazel after my piano lesson. At Zondervan, there were many shelves of accompaniment cassettes that weren’t shrink-wrapped, so you could try them out in a tape player and listen with headphones. Well-meaning Protestants sang off-key at the small white table with the tape player, groping for which arrangement best suited their vocal range. I didn’t have the tape for my Mrs. Merriweather solo, so I just sang a cappella, standing at the pulpit in the Elmwood Missionary Baptist Church sanctuary on a Sunday night. I was nervous to sing my solo, but not afraid. I had sung in front of many more people in the school cafeteria. I wasn’t worried about being off-key or forgetting the words. I would jump off the high-dive of obedience, and the Spirit would catch me.

At sea, I thought I could bury my talent or I could use it. So I sang in the afternoon talent show, at sea on the *Emerald II*, alone with a mic on the parquet dance

floor. That evening when my mom and I were walking toward the dining room, a woman and her daughter stopped me on the stairs. The woman said she liked my song. “Do you know what you’re singing about? Do you know what it means?” she asked. I said yes, that I had asked Jesus into my heart, that I knew what the song was about. Say what you will, but there’s a balls-to-the-wall quality about evangelism, a requisite amount of courage needed to take ordinary small talk into the realm of Conversations About Eternal Decisions. Again Dillard is instructive here. In her essay “On A Hill Far Away,” a lonely boy feels compelled to ask Dillard “Do you know the Lord as your personal savior?” “Not only that,” Dillard replies, “I know your mother.” My mother was impressed that this woman on a cruise ship had the boldness to ask me about my salvation, even though it’s a perfectly common evangelical question: have you? If not, why not? Today is the day of salvation.

Growing up in an Evangelical church, I learned a lot of cool songs, and also some things about language. My family regularly attended services at Elmwood on Sunday morning and Sunday night and Wednesday night. One of the most notable features of the Sunday night service was its more relaxed feel: less pressure to finish up by a particular time, and more freedom of the Spirit. This wasn’t holy rolling. But Sunday night allowed for more singing, so you might have seen people raising their hands, maybe (but not likely) some clapping or swaying. And though there was a little testimony time on Sunday morning, it was on Sunday night that people could let rip about what God was doing in their lives. Many of these testimonies were vignettes of an answered prayer or some unexpected blessing. Some people referred to or retold the story of their moment of

accepting Christ as their personal savior. Hearing others' testimonies made me think about my own, and about how to package a life into salient bundles: lo, observer, behold the glass-paneled curio cabinet of my formative experiences.

There's a testimonial impulse embedded in many expressions of an Evangelical church. Some hymns follow the "Just As I Am" trajectory of "I once was lost, but now I'm found." Hymns may unfold into a triptych of experience:

First panel: I was lost/on sinking sand/ a boat tossed by waves and about to be dashed on rocks.

Middle panel: Then Jesus called/ found/delivered/ rescued/ ransomed me.

Third panel: Someday I'll walk with Him on streets of gold/ beside the crystal sea/ to the mansion He's prepared for me.

In church we sang "Blessed Assurance": "This is my story, this is my song:/ Praising my Savior all the day long." We sang: "He brought me out of the miry clay,/ He set my feet on the Rock to stay;/ He puts a song in my soul today..." This suggests we don't just get salvation by the skin of our teeth. It's a joyful act, with a pinholed outline around it to let light and music through. We get saved, *and* a song.

A couple of summers ago, I was visiting my parents and joined them for a service at Elmwood. The youth group had just returned from a week at church camp, and they were hot to testify. There would be time for singing camp songs, especially ones with hand motions. I thought about my own experience in church camp, and the joy of commandeering the Sunday morning service when we returned tired, sunburned, and Spirit-filled. A lot of fire imagery is used. Campers sing a song asking God to light the

fire in our weary souls. The congregation is admonished to fan the flame and encourage the youth in their fervor to witness for Christ, to help them keep their resolutions to give up rock music or cussing or whatever else they'd vowed by the campfire. As a camper, I'd always liked the symbolism of the final night's fire. Even though I knew it was made from branches the youth pastor and some boys gathered during activity time, the fire seemed indwelt with the Holy Spirit. It was much more than a flaming nest of twigs. It burned from somewhere deep in the earth. From it, we carried little flames in our hearts, tiny lanterns of faith back to the grownups stuck in their desk jobs, or the stay at home moms sentenced like Sisyphus to clean glittery finger paint mashed into the wall-to-wall carpeting, or the kids who were too cool for camp or who didn't want to be away from home so long or who were not interested in using showers where you really needed shower shoes.

During the testimony time that Sunday after camp, Dad and I kept score. He scratched a line on the back of the bulletin for each occurrence of the word "awesome" (as in "Jesus is awesome. Camp was awesome. You had to be there.") Later we compared tallies. My dad and my brother have been known to time testimonies at church, especially Mrs. Dunkle's. She's a grandmotherly lady whose husband fell ill, whose daughter's life veered from the path of God, whose granddaughter's husband needed brain surgery. Sometimes she starts out with a prayer request but the request unfolds like a stealthy paper lantern into a full-blown testimony. "Twelve minutes!" my brother would shout when we got in the car. "A record!"

My dad is Bible-toting, concordance-checking, tithing, praying, Sunday-school teaching Christian soldier. But the joy of parody is not lost on him. He and I would sing

when he took me to school on his way to work. We composed a song called “We Got Across the Road” to be performed when we crossed Rt. 60’s four lanes of traffic after a left hand turn. A few hymns got doctored in the car. “I’ve got a mansion, just over the hilltop” became our hit “We’ve got a McDonald’s.” “It’s under the blood” was no longer a song about redemption through Christ once it was reworked as “She’s under the bed,” a tune about the best place to search for Snuggles our cat. “Plenty of room in the family,/ Room for the young and the old,” about being welcomed into the church became “Plenty of room in the Chevy,/ Room for the dog and the cat./ Three in the front and three in the back,/ unless, of course, you’re real fat.”

In those days, on summer Sunday mornings, I’d sit in the back of the minivan after church, sweltering until the AC got going. I’d whine that it was hot in the back seat. “You know where else-uh is hot-uh?” my dad asked, channeling his best fundamentalist preacher voice. “In the fiery pit of Hay-ell, that’s where,” he said.

Dad would pull into the 7-11 on the way home for a snack to tide us over until Sunday Dinner at Nana Sheets’ house. Like the honey given to children as they begin their study of the Torah, high-fructose corn syrup played a part in my openness to religious instruction. My dad got a Big Gulp of Diet Pepsi and split a Mars bar with my mom. He bought cinnamon Certs, and I think if he’d had his way, he would have bought a pack of cigarettes, but he’d started running and had given up smoking for good. It was all part of reclaiming his status as someone Born Again. It was about living life with Philippians 4:13 gusto: I can do all things through Christ who strengtheneth me.

At the 7-11, on my way to the candy aisle, I wanted a moment to browse the pine-tree shaped air fresheners, the rectitude of the stacks of tissue boxes, the single-dose

packets of aspirin and antacid, the tins of Vienna sausages and cartons of Hamburger Helper, the tall coolers of bologna and Lunchables and pints of milk. I had a reputation as a piddler, one who took forever to get going in the morning, one who couldn't make up her mind, one for whom efficiency was not on the list of Personal Goals. In the candy aisle I was torn between the tiers of fruit-inspired delights—Starburst, Skittles, Charms Blow Pops, Pop Rocks, Nerds, Spree, gummi bears, gummi worms, Jolly Ranchers, SweetTarts, Twizzlers—and then there was all the chocolate. My choice, and the time my father afforded me to make that choice, felt like a sacrament.

I still think 7-11s are borderline holy places. On our long runs, Barbara and I may stop at one or more 7-11s to use their public services and to buy water if they don't have a fountain (7-11s are hit or miss on this count). Barbara pays for her water and maybe she is surprising me with a small pouch of cheese Combos. I realize I don't have enough change on me for a Domokun straw and also I don't want to carry it with me for eight more miles. I am mesmerized by the hot dogs, taquitos, and kielbasa rolling back and forth under the heat lamps. I like to observe their various states of shrivel. There should be an award for the Last Dog Rolling, the one that's lost all its greasy shine, that looks like it's made out of vinyl. The ceaseless back-and-forth motion of the hot dog warmer is not a picture of purgatory or boredom to me. It seems like a fine way to spend an afternoon, kind of like being on the beach with a constant massage. A guy eats a doughnut outside the 7-11 by a display of firewood bundles. His shirt says "Got me? I'll do your body good." Barbara asks, as we resume our run, "How could you let him get away?"

In a testimony, there's a desire for clarity I can appreciate, a hope of a tidy story about a messy life that's been washed clean by the blood of Christ. Some people have survived remarkable things: near-death experiences, privation, hardships or abuse they've managed to overcome. My parents read devotional pamphlets and inspirational Christian books full of stories like this. My dad was inspired by Dave Dravecky, a pitcher in Major League Baseball in the 80s who briefly returned to the Major Leagues after an operation to remove a cancerous tumor in his pitching arm. My mom was moved by the story of Joni Eareckson Tada, who became quadriplegic after a diving accident and then learned to paint landscapes with a brush between her teeth.

Then there's a testimony model for those of us who've more or less grown up in church, who accepted Christ at an early age but still had struggles great or small with eating disorders, porn, drugs, not living like a Spirit-filled Christian, or keeping one's faith to oneself instead of witnessing to The Lost.

My own testimony is of this latter sort. What can I say? I've never been much of a plot person.

In college, I helped lead a Bible study with Campus Crusade for Christ, a nondenominational Christian group. In Crusade we were encouraged to hone our testimonies, to write them out and commit them to memory so we could share our faith at any moment, so we'd be ready "in season, and out of season," as the book of II Timothy expresses it. The web site 5clicks.com reminds me of my Crusade training. The idea is that you answer a series of questions, clicking from one to the next, and these become the building blocks of your testimony narrative. The story has three basic parts: before you

became a Christian (describe where you looked for peace and happiness, and why that wasn't enough); how you heard about Jesus and what happened when you received Him; and how your life changed.

5clicks.com compiles your responses to its prompts, and then you're asked to comb over the composite testimony with these questions in mind:

- Does this read like a story?
- Is it disjointed? Does it make sense?
- Can I read this out loud in 3 to 4 minutes?
- Have I exaggerated?
- Did I give the Lord enough credit for the change in my life?

I attended several Campus Crusade conferences, including spring break at Panama City Beach. Instead of drinking and fornicating on my 21st birthday, I was passing out booklets called *The Four Spiritual Laws* and *Would You Like to Know God Personally?* Sometimes I asked people if I could get their thoughts on the booklet. I had some questions to ask about each page if people were interested in talking. I asked students in bikinis or jams if they would mind filling out a survey. It was sort of like market research for Jesus. The survey asked questions about one's satisfaction with life, or the strength of one's desire to know God more. Near a volleyball net, a few girls made a dotted fortress of green tracts wedged around their beach towels. Clearly our work there was done.

The other day, while I was walking from the library to the student union, a woman in a pink and purple scarf stopped me. "Do you have a minute?" she asked. I'm

an easy mark, and I was preoccupied with thoughts of lunch, and I assumed she was going to ask me for the time or for directions. But of course “Do you have a minute?” is the opening gambit of a survey, like from those people in the mall concourses with their clipboards, or from the sales associates at those wagon-shaped kiosks in the middle of the mall selling skincare products or cell phone covers. With the woman in the scarf, I didn’t slow down. We did the walk and talk. I guess my body knew what my mind hadn’t picked up on, that I didn’t actually have a minute, that this woman with her invitation to a Bible study stood between me and a garden burger. I told her I had class, which was true, and also that I already had plans for Easter. “Good luck with your Bible study,” I said, rather than “leave me alone.” I hate feeling tricked, even though I know the intentions can be good: people need to hear the Good News, one might say. People will thank me for the chance to try this exfoliating face wash. But if you’ve got a good product, you don’t need a trick. Maybe just some slick posters, or a catchy song.

If I were to meet my College Self now, the one with bad hair and all those tracts, I wouldn’t give her the time of day. I would not fill out her survey about my satisfaction with life. I would crumple and throw it in the nearest waste receptacle. *Be sweet*, College Me implores. But I’d get drunk and call her names: Prude, Hypocrite, Fatso, Lesbo, Clog Dog, Ramen-Breath, Warrior Princess of Acne, Even the Dungeons & Dragons Guys Won’t Kiss You.

In my senior year of college, I started hanging out with Chris. I had briefly dated someone my freshman year, but had not yet really received my entry pass into The Club For People Who Date Other People. I was still wearing my favorite overalls. They were

from the Gap and made of a thin, soft denim. My attachment to the garment may have involved subconsciously ascribing to it some kind of spiritual significance, like “Jesus’s love covers (over)all.” Chris came with me to Campus Crusade weekly meetings. I teased him that it was really Campus Crusade for Chris, which he thought was funny. This was a good sign.

Chris and I had met our freshman year because we were both Spanish majors and had a class together. Freshman Chris was lanky, and he’d gained so much weight by our senior year that it took me a moment to recognize him. He was smart and funny, and had blue eyes and a job with an internet company in town. Chris had initially asked me out on A Date, and though I demoted the event to Just Hanging Out, he was still not in the bin of other guy friends Who I Would Really Never Ever Consider Dating.

Sometimes Chris and I went to Coopers Rock, a state forest where we’d bring lunch and sit on the overlook above the brambly sheer hillside and the Cheat River far below. Chris and I watched a lot of movies together, and he sent me an email once, after we’d been to a movie in Friendsville, Maryland, wondering if he would be the world’s oldest virgin. Chris said he went days sometimes without anyone ever touching him. I realized that I never touched him: I never gave him a hug at the end of an evening, I never kissed him on the cheek if I hadn’t seen him for a long time. Chris told me early in our Hanging Out period that he was HIV-positive, from a blood transfusion for hemophilia. He explained that his dramatic weight gain was from medication. I told myself that I didn’t keep my distance from Chris because he had HIV. I reminded myself that I was not usually an initiator of hugs with any of my friends. I promised myself that I

wasn't not-dating Chris just because he had HIV. His email wasn't an accusation, but it was a loneliness I had never thought about.

For a while, Chris attended my Bible study. At the Crusade Friday night meetings, called Prime Time, one or two people would share their testimony each week. I asked Chris if he wanted to work on his, but he was shy about it. Continued faith in God despite intense physical suffering could be the backbone of a very powerful story, I thought. Another student in our Crusade group almost died after her ruptured appendix was misdiagnosed for nearly two weeks. She returned to an altered version of health, and presented her testimony of survival and strengthened faith to us and to churches all over the area. Incurable illness hung like a millstone around Chris's neck, an affliction pinned to an innocent. And yet he didn't hate the world or God. He wanted to finish his degree. He wanted a girlfriend.

Wow, I thought, when I looked at Chris, what a testimony.

MAKE YOUR PARTITION

I was searching for Mount Messiaen, nine miles from Parowan, Utah. In 1978, a mountain known as White Cliffs was renamed for French composer and organist Olivier Messiaen, whose symphony *Des Canyons aux Etoiles... (From the Canyons to the Stars...)* was inspired by his visit to Utah's Bryce Canyon. I can't read topographical maps, and I couldn't find clear directions on the Internet to the mountain and its marker. It occurred to me the day before I left Salt Lake that I might want to call Parowan's Chamber of Commerce. I assumed I'd get voice mail but in fact every number I dialed had a real person at the other end, as though the good people of Parowan had been sitting at their desks all morning just waiting for my call. The chamber of commerce referred me to the visitors center. A woman at the visitors center asked me to hang on for a minute. *Hey, do you know about that composer?* she said to someone nearby. *Hey, you need Frankie Lou Bentley* she told me, and gave me Frankie's work and home phone numbers. I'm from a small town in West Virginia, so I'm no stranger to this kind of open-hearted, unsuspecting help. My impulse was to explain myself, but no one seemed particularly concerned about what I was up to.

I'd first heard of Messiaen earlier that year, at a performance of his *Quartet for the End of Time*, one event in a week-long Messiaen festival. Why, I wondered, was Utah dedicating a week to this French guy?

In 1971 Messiaen was commissioned by Alice Tully—New York mezzo-soprano, heiress, and patron of the arts—to write a symphony for the American bicentennial. I can picture Messiaen leafing through his *Les Merveilles du Monde*, his Wonders of the World book series and lighting on Bryce Canyon as the most beautiful place in America. (For the record, Hawaii scored a close second). Messiaen's *From the Canyons to the Stars...* features such instruments as a thunder sheet, a eulophone or wind machine, and a geophone, Messiaen's own invention, basically a drum full of rattling pellets attempting to replicate the sound of dry crumbling earth. The symphony is an hour and a half long, and almost a third of it is piano solo. *From the Canyons to the Stars...* isn't widely performed because it requires 44 musicians, somewhere between a chamber group and an orchestra. In Messiaen's defense, the number of musicians was determined by the space available in Alice Tully Hall, part of the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts in New York City, where the symphony premiered in 1974. Messiaen wasn't trying to be difficult.

As a singer/songwriter I, like Jimmy Buffett, wasted some time with country music. Jimmy Buffett discusses the early frustrations in his career and the roots of his beach bum persona in his autobiography *A Pirate Looks at 50* (published by Random House in 1998, the same year as Buffett's Don't Stop the Carnival tour). A fun fact about Jimmy Buffett is that he is one of only seven writers to have had books top the New York Times Bestseller lists in both fiction and nonfiction. (The other six: Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck, William Styron, Irving Wallace, Dr. Seuss, and Mitch Albom). Years ago I too tried to make it in that world of country music, banging my forehead against it. I

struggled until—like Buffett—I realized “hey, I’m no two-bit country singer meant to troll the bars of Mobile and Nashville. I’m a star.”

One of the best songs I wrote in my country music period is called “What’s the Motive for My Votive?” I wrote it as a way to explore my feelings about buying big-c Catholic candles at the supermarket. I am not tough enough to be Catholic. But I buy Catholic candles in part because of their pleasing and assorted colors, and they burn a long time. Also I have been on the Jesus team for many years, but I don’t really know His Mother at all. So far the Candle Score is 2-1, with the Blessed Virgin Mary in a slight lead over her son. My newest candle showcases The Immaculate Heart of Mary. On the front of the candle, Mary is dressed simply, in a blue robe with a soft beige cloth draped around her face. Her left hand holds open the robe to reveal her heart, square in the middle of her chest. The heart looks like a red hot-water bottle with a fat orange pompom flaming from its top. It could be an ad for Pepcid AC. Mary’s right hand gestures toward her heart, and red cartoony rays fantail around it, just to let you know, in case you missed it, that This is a Super Heart.

On the back of the candle is a Prayer to the Sacred Heart of Mary, first in Spanish and then underneath in English. Instead of inviting the devout to “make your petition” the clumsy directions cue, in my favorite typo of all, to MAKE YOUR PARTITION.

The Blessed Virgin Mary is mysterious to me. For example, I don’t understand how she stays a Blessed Virgin if she had more children after her most famous son. At least for a time she might have been both virgin and mother. I, who am neither/nor, admire this idea of both/and.

If I could be any typographical mark, I would choose to be a slash. The slash allows more than one option to co-exist, floating there like fruit in the Tree of Possibility. A slash creates a lean-to for a weary clause, a bivouac for an item that is not nested in another idea but paratactically stands shoulder to shoulder with the other items on the list. A slash mark creates a partition like the wall of a dollhouse. The sentence swings open like a dollhouse so we can see all the rooms at once, all the characters and actions and tiny furniture simultaneously.

More and more I see the Blessed Virgin Mary's face. One summer, at the Church of St. Francis in Santa Fe, I stood before a puppet-like statue, the oldest Marian image in North America. Here she is La Conquistadora and the informational literature indicates that people pray to her for peace. There's a note too about how the prayers to La Conquistadora have been *kind of* effective, as the Spanish reconquest of Santa Fe was not as bloody as it could have been. This sounds a bit like settling, to me. The episode did inspire my song, which you might remember from its heavy radio rotation, called "At Least We Weren't Massacred Real Real Bad."

Near the front of the church I heard a pulsing, puffing sound like an iPod turned up loud. I thought: What sacrilege! Walking through a church with an iPod! When I turned around I discovered the sound was from a little girl in orange shorts with an oxygen tank in her backpack. And not Downs, but something. I chanted to myself: *shit shit shit oh shit shit shit shit*. At that moment, I wished intensely that the noise were her iPod playing the Hannah Montana movie soundtrack or the Jonas Brothers or whatever she wanted to listen to. I thought of a song I'd written a couple of years before, called

“Who’s the Asshole Now?” I realized afresh that my work was more autobiographical than I’d readily admit. In general, I was really singing about/to myself.

Sometimes I wonder if my spiritual goals have less to do with seeking holiness than trying to avoid assholiness, a lame sort of *via negativa*. I do believe that some assholiness is unintentional. For example, in Santa Fe, outside the Church of St. Francis, two women in sensible footwear walked the gray and white stone labyrinth, quiet and intent. A younger blond woman popped gentle wheelies with a stroller, spun donuts on the labyrinth, not catching on that this was a tool of religious or meditative devotion rather than a folky playground mosaic.

When I reached Parowan, Utah, population 2500, in my search for Messiaen’s mountain, I followed Frankie Lou Bentley’s instructions and parked in her driveway. She’d pegged the purple canvas banner in her front yard—Parowan High, Class of 1946—just as she’d told me on the phone. I couldn’t miss it as I rounded the turn on Center Street. Frankie Lou Bentley was on the committee in Parowan that renamed White Cliffs for Messiaen, and she met him once at a reception. Frankie had short wavy silver hair, brown penciled-in eyebrows, and a sheen of sweat on her forehead as we stood squinting in her driveway. Inside Frankie Lou Bentley was a sherpa; even though her classmates were arriving in just a couple of hours, she offered to lead me to Mt. Messiaen in her silver Chrysler. I followed her to highway 146, to the gravel turnoff after mile 11.

The marker for Mt. Messiaen is a bronze plaque pressed into rough loaves of sandstone. It is not unlike a cemetery marker. The plaque doesn’t face the gravel road, though it is in the foreground of the diorama of Mt Messiaen. I would never have found it

without Frankie Lou Bentley. I'm not so great with monuments. For example, on the way to Kodachrome Basin, I stopped at a ranger station and considered a route back to Salt Lake that might take me by the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. Steve, the ranger on duty, did not mock my epiphanic moment at the giant map display.

So, Steve, I said, you're telling me the whole thing is the monument?

Yes, Steve confirmed, the whole thing, all 1.7 million acres, is the monument. *It's not like the Washington Monument*, he said.

From the angle of the marker, it's clear that Mt. Messiaen is actually three mountains, sort of a Trinitarian mountain, which must have appealed to Messiaen's Catholic sensibilities. Frankie said it was a shame I wasn't seeing the mountain at sundown. There must be silica in the stone, she said, because when the light hits just right it shines.

After Frankie left for her class reunion, I stood there in pine and juniper, and while trying to commune somehow with the spirit of Messiaen, I found that I could not switch off the dented simile machine in my head. The area around the bronze marker was junked up with the charred remains of a campfire. A faded beige couch cushion sprouted like a mushroom from the shaded earth. And as if from a fairy tale: a green door lay face-down over a dry ditch. The cheap wood peeled apart like a head of lettuce, each layer shearing off like a limp leaf. It was swollen like the copy of the *Odyssey* that falls in the bathtub and then you have to leave it open on your kitchen table to dry out, but it's never the same even when you press it with heavy books. That green door was like a portal you could open into an underground world with a staircase and a cobweb cellar with jars of cooked cabbage and beets and berries. The door curved like ribbon, it flopped there like a

strip of undercooked bacon. The wood was not real wood but composite wood, like a long flaking sheet-cake of guinea pig cage filler. All around, insects fluttered that looked like moths and rattled like castanets.

Before I left I apologized to Messiaen that I was flesh as well as spirit, and I snuck off into some tree cover to pee. I knew it was a lonely road over the pass to Panguitch and on to Bryce. I turned away from his mountain and toward the open, decorated heavens, cloud doilies draped over the blue couch of the sky.

Messiaen is known for a love of “non-retrogradable rhythms.” In his essay “Music and Color,” Messiaen explains: “Just as it is impossible to go back in time and change past events, the non-retrogradable rhythm does not change when played backward, it merely repeats itself.” Messiaen found non-retrogradable rhythms in the symmetries of palindromes, butterflies, the human form. Non-retrogradable rhythms mirrored back on themselves, a matryoshka doll unnesting then nesting again.

Messiaen is known for a love of puzzles and obstacles, claiming that “certain mathematical impossibilities, certain closed circuits, possess a strength of bewitchment, a magical strength, a *charm*.” Like Messiaen, I enjoy challenges, the diamond-hot heat when pressed by formal limitations, the fear of shame were I to fail a double-dog-dare to self (Does one have to honor one’s bets to self? Walk self naked through Temple Square? Buy oneself a round at the Tap Room?). The catalyst for my latest experiment is my matryoshka set depicting Russian leaders. The biggest one is Putin with the faint comma of a comb-over. The baby one is Stalin, Stalin who glares like a mustached, fiercely varnished peanut.

The excitement of matryoshka is not in the shape, which is a pretty basic cylinder with a rounded head and tapered bottom, but in the painted designs. Typical matryoshka sets include at least five nesting dolls, and traditionally a woman is the outer doll, a woman carrying a rooster and wearing a sarafan, a peasant garment that's a cross between an apron and a muu muu. Before they were tourist must-haves, matryoshki were gifts for infants and were considered symbols of fertility and timelessness. The inner dolls may be of different genders, with the innermost doll, as one source puts it, "a baby that does not open."

Although matryoshki stand as bottom-heavy emblems of Russian arts and crafts, the dolls first appeared in Russia only in the late 19th century, inspired by Japanese nesting dolls. Russia was no stranger to nesting and surprises; recall that these are the fine folks who brought us the Faberge egg. Tsar Nicholas Alexander III commissioned an Easter egg from the House of Faberge for his wife, Empress Maria Fedorovna, in 1885. The gold egg opens up to a gold yolk, then a gold chicken, then a crown dangling an egg-shaped teardrop of a ruby. The Faberge egg is such a success, that eventually the Tsar gives Faberge full creative control. One egg per Easter. The Tsar is so happy that in subsequent years he just says to the House of Faberge, Surprise me.

As a songwriter, I was trying to push myself. I had written a song about this matryoshka set of Russian leaders: "I'm not a Doll, I'm an Action Figure." I was planning an entire album, shells of songs, around Stalin. I came across some honorary and spurious titles he'd accepted in his lifetime, which I thought might make nice songs too: "Coryphaeus of Science," "Father of Nations," "Brilliant Genius of Humanity,"

"Great Architect of Communism," "Staff of Life," "Gardener of Human Happiness." I also co-opted Stalin's editorials and essays "Dizzy With Success," "Reply to Collective Farm Comrades," and "Marxism and Linguistic Questions." Stalin wanted to recast Soviet history in his own image. Once Trotsky was snuffed out, Stalin could condense the Soviet story into a tale of two men, a kind of buddy comedy, the Lenin & Stalin show. Once he offed people, he also had to vanish them out of his photographs. Stalin showed tremendous creativity and forward-thinking, Stalin the proto-Photoshopper.

I had worked up a few songs to fill out the album. The most promising were more or less a throwback to my country/western period: "You Don't Know Lonely Till Your Regime Kills At Least 10 Million People," "The Only Combine I Want to Drive Is You," "Let Me Buy You A Drink, Let Me Tell You 'Bout My Five-Year Plan." Well, there was that love ballad, "The Only Aral Sea You Need Is Deep Inside Your Heart," and an electronica piece "Look Into My Eyes (Let's Collectivize)."

I connect most with Stalin at his points of insecurity. Born Ioseb Besarionis dze Jughashvili, Stalin was renamed "Uncle Joe" and "Kremlin Highlander" because he was from the Caucasus Mountains (Stalin a hillbilly, like *moi*?). Stalin renamed himself with many war names including "Stalin" from the Russian word for steel. At five feet five, Stalin was not, shall we say, a tower. If the Highlander were from my hometown, he'd tool around in a jacked-up Ford F-350 Super Duty with extended cab. That truck would be loud, with a deep-throated vroom. It would be the Anti-Prius, which needs an artificial vroom to let you know it's approaching, like digital cameras with an added-on shutter sound just to give you that satisfying click that says cheers, you took a picture, o brilliant

maker-of-memories, you. Stalin stands there in his uniform, hands on Soviet hips: *this vroom is real!*

Some thoughts about partitions:

A partition is sexy, like that scene in *Bright Star* where John Keats and his beloved Fanny Brawne caress the wall, scoot their respective beds to that wall dividing their rooms in the rented house. “Partition” means both a division/separation as well as that which divides or separates. Both cause and effect. Partition grows from *partir* “to divide,” which also gives us “party.” Though we may think of party as an event that brings people together for some shared purpose (a tea/search/Tupperware/hunting party), the word had about a 400-year head start as a “side in a contest or dispute.” A “gathering for social pleasure” doesn’t circulate until the early 18th century. A “party line” is orthopedic politics that line up for nearly 60 years before it’s a shared telephone line (1893). You couldn’t have been a party pooper until 1951, or at least you couldn’t have been called by your rightful name, says the *Online Etymological Dictionary*. “Party” definitions abound, and some of them sound like a multiple-choice test, such as definition 4 from the *American Heritage Dictionary*:

- a. A subscriber to a telephone party line
- b. A person using a telephone.
- c. An act of sexual intercourse.
- d. An orgy.

Perhaps this could also be found in a rhetoric textbook (see Slippery Slope). The way was paved, long ago, maybe even before pavement, for the love vessel *par excellence*, the booty text. Talk about turning nature into notation!

A partition is sacred—like the grille obscuring the faces of priest and penitent, for the anonymity of confession. Post-Vatican II, the screen is optional. Some confessionals have a traffic light system outside the booths: green means go ahead and unload, the priest is inside. Red means the confessional is occupied, wait your turn, and better yet out of earshot. Some confessional lights are activated by pressure on the kneeler inside, not unlike the door lock on airplane lavatories that illuminate the red X to tell you no use unfastening your seatbelt just yet. One custom for dealing with this problem of overhearing is covering your ears when passing by the confessional, whether or not anyone is in there. I like the cultivation of the habit of shielding your ears, red light or no, just to cover all the bases, just to make sure that even the latent echo of a confidential word won't be misplaced. Confession, then, runs on the honor system. No wonder the plots of so many plays function on eavesdropping.

A partition is sexy—the negotiation of the arm rest at the movie theater on an early date. Whose territory is this anyway? You want to seem assertive, that Promised Land touted by our therapy friends between passive and aggressive. Sometimes it's more fun to make people read your mind, and then get huffy when they read it all wrong!! In which case, one becomes passive-aggressive. The slash would not work here because in this case it's not one or the other but rather the two fused into one concept, much like the Crayola shades of red-violet or violet-red. The hyphen joins like a belt, cinching the waist of the phrase, keeping its semantic figure. It's like the clasp of the necklace, the kiss that seals the lips but also the flick of tongue against teeth to aspirate those consonants, punch them out of the mouth of speech. The hyphen is a cleaver: it separates, it joins. A hyphen

is like a big-c Cleaver, like the peerless 1950s family, obedient, well-groomed, knows the rules.

I must confess that the more I read about Messiaen, the more I'm developing a crush on the guy. It's not just the early photos of him in his small round eyeglasses and butterfly collar shirts. Certainly I'm drawn to Messiaen's potent and mystical Catholicism. Messiaen said "Je suis ne croyant," I was born a believer. I feel this too. Faith is like a fanny pack, no a backpack, and when I try to peel it off of my shoulders, it doesn't go anywhere. Leaving it behind is like trying to leave behind my foot. I don't feel burdened by the backpack, I realize it's a golden backpack, a great and inexplicable treasure.

Now you know that inside my more ecumenical self is a tiny fundamentalist mini-me. Behind the old church that taught me songs, many of them complete with hand motions, grazed a small herd of tires half-buried in the ground. The herd loitered across from the field where the church made applebutter every fall. That youth-group fundraiser seemed like something from the Deep Past, with the fires and kettles and all, something you'd do at a heritage festival or Gettysburg. There was a dance and rhythm to sweeping the wooden paddles back and forth, scraping the bottom of each big kettle so the sweet molten applebutter wouldn't stick and burn. Baptist arms churned like a giant meditative mixer. The kettles didn't move, so you did, in gyres around them, walking a path in a sort of Baptist labyrinth (though careful, don't sound too New Age-y). Even with my dental floss arms I could move the paddle by myself in one of the smaller kettles, although it was nice when someone else would jump on and help me. (See photos from the old

church directory in which applebutter-making is tagged as an “appealing project” and a “stirring event.” Do not trust Baptists with puns.) Now if there’s any applebutter in my parents’ fridge, it’s from the supermarket. The “old church” was razed for a school playground. The field of the fires and kettles now spreads like a blanket beneath the “new church” and the “multipurpose family center.” The tires died off.

Those tires’ arced bodies were primary colors. One tire was five feet from the ground at its highest point. As a child I was scared to climb them; I was scared not about the going up but the coming down. I preferred to hide inside the tires, a knee tucked into the rim of each lip. A tire was a great hiding place, secure but not closed, small but not stuffy. I waited for someone to find me.

Messiaen sounds like a guy who couldn’t resist a good detail, who couldn’t keep his own myth-making under control. The very existence of his *Quartet for the End of Time*, composed while he was imprisoned during WWII, is the stuff of story. Messiaen had been judged unfit for active duty in the French Army; he was a furniture mover and then a medic, until he was captured by German forces and imprisoned in the Stalag VIII-A camp in Silesia. Messiaen was not Jewish, so for all the darkness and privation of prison, he wasn’t under the specter of deportation. Different versions of the Messiaen story compete for sunlight. Did the Germans give him a barrack in which to compose in quiet? Or was he, as his second wife Yvonne Loriod maintained, writing music in a latrine used by 3000 prisoners? When you’re listening to the *Quartet*, with a haunting cello solo so slow you might fear it will be the very vehicle that ushers you into eternity, does it matter?

Messiaen wrote his *Quartet* for piano, violin, cello and clarinet, the instruments available in the camp, and the work premiered for both guards and prisoners on January 15, 1941. He claimed there were 5000 people in the audience, though other sources argue the hall could not possibly have held such a crowd. In Messiaen's version, the *Quartet* went on with a bum clarinet, one of its keys melted by a German officer's paraffin stove. Clarinetist Rebecca Rischin, in her 2003 book *For the End of Time: The Story of the Messiaen Quartet*, argues this is impossible, that the instrument would have combusted from such heat, not just lost one key. Also in Messiaen's version of the premier, the cello had only three strings. Rischin interviewed the cellist, Etienne Pasquier, who joked that he would correct Messiaen— "I kept telling him: 'I had four strings, and you know it,'" Pasquier said—but Messiaen wouldn't let go of that story.

Messiaen's version is compelling. Once that track is laid down, you can't extricate it but only layer over it. It's scary how long our utterances hang there. A friend once told me a story about painting the walls of her new apartment. She used coat after coat of glossy off-white but a permanent-markered message from a previous tenant bled through, no matter how much paint she applied. I can't remember the message exactly, "I Love You, Beth" or "Fuck You Forever" or something like that. It was weird, not the words of the message but its tenacious, unstoppable nature. The story struck me as part Poe, part Home Depot.

Sometimes a story becomes a read-only file, you can't overwrite it at all, even if your version is better or more accurate. It's hard to quarrel with a good story, one that has a smooth shape, smooth as an IKEA table, though remember if you've asked me to put the IKEA table together, probably the top's not flush with the floor. I always wind up

with extra pieces which I think the Swedes don't really factor into their assembly kits. People like me also lose pieces, and usually it's the important pieces.

Recently I began work on my first big-budget production: *IKEA: The Musical*, including the heartwarming hit "How Do you Solve a Problem Like IKEA?" my tribute to the unparalleled musical achievement of *The Sound of Music*. I picture IKEA at some kind of crossroads, like Rodgers and Hammerstein's Maria, the young woman who wavers between of a life of celibate devotion to God or marriage to Captain von Trapp, a man covered with harsh, battered man-crust but who is—underneath—full of loving man-magma. In the wake of his losses, Captain von Trapp has no vocabulary around which to shape his emotional experience. Captain von Trapp blows a bosun's whistle and his seven children line up like unnested matryoshka dolls. I can't get that image out of my mind. And that whistle. Was it some phallic intrusion of power? The shrill sound of his hollow masculinity? With the whistle, Captain von Trapp plays commands for the children to follow as a group. In addition, it's both touching and perverse that he creates a distinct tune to summon each one.

There will be no whistles in my musical.

Messiaen has a control-freaky side I can relate to. His efforts to score nature as sheet music could be read as an overlay of control, an attempt to tame the variables. Though he himself was not converted but was born right into the manger of Catholicism, his work is about conversion: birdsong into notation, suffering into escape, time into eternity.

On some plane of soul-love, rainbows and freedom, Messiaen and I are doubles, two speckled wings on a non-retrogradable cosmic butterfly. When Messiaen digs into non-retrogradables, I wonder: How much variation does symmetry withstand? In *The Messiaen Companion*, Steinitz faults Messiaen's *From the Canyons to the Stars...* for its zealous symmetry, an order imposed too, shall we say, religiously on Utah's rocks and stars. Messiaen is also faulted for avoiding conflict in his music; in him there is no darkness at all. "This great hymn to heaven and earth has no darker side," Steinitz laments. In *From the Canyons...* there's not even a gray stripe of doubt, a chiaroscuro birthmark/Rorschach to set apart the glow of faith, to make it pop.

And not only is there no shading, there are no people. Messiaen might have at least thrown in some Mormon pioneers, Steinitz suggests, but a "narrative of human drama would have interfered distractingly in this theocentric song of praise." A central part of faith, as I understand it, involves being a neighbor-lover, a brother-keeper. This is a very tricky part. But I'm kind of with Messiaen on this one. Birds are OK; people just foul things up.

I've opened up the dollhouse, the Dollhouse of Damaged Men. Unlike my childhood stash of Barbies with the lone beleaguered Ken, this dollhouse is man-heavy. Stalin, for one, could not fight in WWI because of an accident with a cart that damaged his left arm. Messiaen's poor eyesight exempted him from WWII active combat. Jimmy Buffett was turned away from Vietnam because of a peptic ulcer. Captain von Trapp, well, clearly he's a military star shining so bright that he got a title out of it.

In the parlor, Stalin the gardener of happiness tries to sell some Faberge eggs to make bank for the revolution.

In the dining room, Captain von Trapp (for a time trapped—oh, it's too easy!—in a sonic web of sorrow, a cocoon of sound that instead of nourishing life and giving space for the fragile strength of wings that could one day bear his spirit aloft rather mummies him, isolates him from the love beams of his seven children and Julie Andrews and the salutary Austrian snowcap glint) blows his whistle. He whistles in loneliness, trying to summon his octave's worth of children caught in their forbidden playclothes made from curtains.

Messiaen creeps around with his daypack complete with mesh pouches for his keys and pencils and also a water bottle (*hydration, Messiaen, hydration!*). He ticks the cadences of von Trapp's whistle. Padding on the mezzanine that wraps around the house like a scarf on a neck, Messiaen tracks a flock of Jimmy Buffett's Parrotheads. Messiaen's pencil scratches the face of the notebook even after he's struck on the head with a stray beach ball.

You can imagine how excited I was, how carnal desire quicksilvered through my veins when Messiaen called me all the way from 1972. He was pumped about the Tully Commission, and he'd just bought a ticket to Utah. Would I pick him up at the airport? Yes yes, of course, I said. His wife was joining him. Would I also, he asked, pick up his wife? Yes, I said, yes I'll pick Yvonne up too.

As soon as they arrived, Yvonne wanted to take a nap at the hotel, but Messiaen was eager to buy supplies for their trip to Bryce Canyon. Would I take him shopping? As

we strolled through REI, Messiaen was in rare form. He insisted that we get sleeping bags that zipped up together. “Oh you,” I said. Messiaen shrugged as if to say “married, not buried.”

This was the sexiest thing that had happened to me for some time.

I knew that when Messiaen camped, number one it would not be camping in a tent but in a cozy cabin maybe even with one of those cushy beds with the numbers you dial to achieve perfect firmness, and number two the trip would be with his current wife and former student, Yvonne.

Messiaen liked lying there on the sales floor, trying out down and synthetic mummy bags at various price points as some kind of sarcophagus rehearsal or cocoon costume. I thought about a project I’d been working on. A minister had asked me to write a musical for children; the idea was to help kids affirm their faith and their love of God’s creation while also galvanizing their interest in what the minister called “the urgency of ecology.” My working title for the musical was *The Natural World is Almost As Cool As A Text Message, Maybe Even A Bit Cooler*. Butterflies would feature prominently in the production, and the songs I’d drafted so far included “All the larva sing God’s praises” “Smile, God has a purpose for every pupa under heaven,” “Don’t mess with metamorphosis” and “I can’t wait till I get wings.” Messiaen could star as a chrysalis with the patience of the ages.

A craggy sales associate did not make me or Messiaen feel weird for trying out sleeping bags on the floor. “Are you an REI member?” he asked, and when it became clear that I was lost in Messiaen’s eyes and Messiaen was lost in his cocoon, the sales associate disappeared among the freestanding display of Chacos.

How alike does something have to be to be a double? I'm not trying to be coy or airheaded here. I've really been asking: What is a double? How to recognize one? This question hit home at In-N-Out Burger, where I the In-N-Out novice was instructed that if I were "really hungry" I should order a Double Double with cheese. As I annihilated the two patties, I thought, shouldn't a Double Double actually be a double of a double? As in four patties with cheese instead of only two? (Listen to me, *only* two!) Maybe I carry around the simile machine in my head as a way to crank out the doubles. Then I always have company (though, as our therapy friends remind us, we know company doesn't negate loneliness). The simile, some say, is a kind of imperfect doubling, a goofy fraternal twin. You hook things together and insist hey look, there's a hook, that means they're similar. Maybe all this doubling creates a crushing, maddening, beautiful, useless wealth.

A songwriter sets notes side by side, trying to figure how they fit, how to show their angles to advantage, how to echo and complement their contours. Is there really a kind of parataxis (etymologically "an arranging in order for battle"), a level field where ideas join hands like a fluttery streamer of paper dolls? Or am I leaning more, of late, to hypotaxis, that nesting matryoshka of syntax, a subordination one into another till we get to that pit, the pith of mystery, that glowing impenetrable core, fiery wick, the baby that does not open.

Inside me is a singing star that feeds me lyrics and melodies. As I walk down the street I sing my newest song, trying to transcribe it as I hear it. The title is something like "What is at the Core of My Self-Loathing?" All I've got so far is a line *mumble mumble*

something clothing and later in I think an attempt at a slant rhyme *garble garble*
...nothing.

To trace Messiaen's path from the canyons to the stars, I needed some stars. At first I feared there would be no stargazing in Bryce Canyon, but then I got wind of the Star Guys who set up at the Red Canyon Campground.

Steve, the lead astronomer, gathered a dozen gazers around a telescope. He touched stars with a red laser pointer, as though the night sky were an overhead transparency. Except for elementary school hits like the Big Dipper, I was lost in the illegible expanse. I thought maybe I could understand a little better if I could touch the sky like the pimpled metal spool of a music box. Also I wondered, would I go blind if I looked at the red laser pointer? My neck hurt from a day of looking up, first at Mt. Messiaen and then at constellations.

In the telescope, Jupiter winked. I counted four of its many moons, gray but legible dots. We also looked at M-57, the ring nebula, which Steve called "a smoky Cheerio" and a NASA web site labeled "a barrel-shaped cloud of gas shrugged off by a dying central star." The M in M-57, I learned that night, is for another French guy, this one from the 18th century, Charles Messier. Of Messier's biography one source reports: "While playing turbulently, he was falling out of a window of the Messiers' house and breaking a leg on the level of the thigh, but he was found and taken care by a farmer of his hometown, who looked after him and assured complete recovery."

I wrote a song about the life of Messier, called "Defenestration Blues."

After his injury, Charles was taught by his brother, Hyacinthe, in “administrative and methodic work.” Messier made a career of cataloging objects that could easily fool comet hunters; he tracked decoys, those false doubles.

More stargazers crowded near astronomer Steve as he explained that double stars are quite common. The North Star, for example, is actually a pair. Steve found one in two different colors. A woman in sweatpants bent to the scope and named the colors right away: gold and blue. Clearly she and Steve were speaking the same language. I don’t think I would have picked out the differences in color had they not been pointed out to me ahead of time. In fact, the whole Star Adventure brought back my Anxiety of the Eyepiece. I remembered hunching over microscopes in intro Biology. We were supposed to count cells on a slide and I just saw an illuminated blur, highlighted fuzz. There was nothing to count. My eye throbbed. My lab group made Jeff count everything and then we used his data. I couldn’t look at all that light. My eyes have to be trained to see. Like Messiaen’s music, OK I’ll admit it, I like it but I don’t always know what I’m listening for. I’m not alone here. Noted le Boulaire, Messiaen’s violinist in the *Quartet* premier: “at moments, it’s unlistenable. It’s severe, jolting. There’s no harmony, no song, no melody, just this harshness...So, we were a little dumbfounded by his music, because, amid all this severity, suddenly, a song would arise.”

As astronomer Steve readjusted the scope, he said it was surprising that our own sun is a single star, burning alone.

I wonder: am I a single star or a double star? Sometimes double stars look like single stars, which I think is a neat feature. I pondered this one evening on my way to meet my friend Luke. Luke is an attorney and part-owner of a comic book store. Six

months after his divorce, his ex had moved in with her new boyfriend, a manager at Captain D's Seafood Kitchen. "I can't compete with free hush puppies," Luke said. Over dinner, I told him that if I ever have a daughter, I want to name her Starlene. "Does that name come with its own trailer?" he asked. If I have son, I continued, his name will be Tote Bag, but I will call him Tote. "Because," I said, "I really love tote bags."

I needed a coffee so we walked to Empire Books in the new uppity outdoor mall in our hometown. Luke motioned me toward a corner of the store. "You have to see this," he said. In a section of the bookstore usually labeled "adult" or "mature reading" the shelf was marked, simply, "individuals."

This next song is called "I'm Not Lonely, I'm an Individual."

WHY BURNING MAN WON'T FIX YOUR SHATTERED SELF-ESTEEM

A giant white chicken on wheels can't help you if you won't be helped.

We were soldiers deploying Weapons of Mass Abstraction. We were virgins, First-Time Burners. We debated our playa names on the way to Black Rock City, the city that effloresces in Nevada's Black Rock Desert for the week of Burning Man. E chose Aphasia because, she claimed, no one ever remembered her name anyway. I considered Princess Fallopia (*too Pynchon?*) and decided on Candy (*Who doesn't like a little Candy?*).

It wasn't until we drove past Elko, Nevada, and a stand of hills with tawny patches like threadbare armrests that I thought about how, at Burning Man, I'd be sealing myself off from the rituals that preserve me in unsteady times. Once we set up camp, I wouldn't be able to call my mom and ask her to remind me I'm OK. I couldn't cruise LOL Cats. In a temporary city of more than 40,000 burners, entry and exit would take hours: I couldn't just jump in my car and leave. We weren't even in my car. We took Aphasia's car. Aphasia pitched this isolation/claustrophobia feeling as a chance to detach from habits and get in touch with the deeper self. Yeah, it could be a pathway to healing, but it could also be a big shitstorm disaster. The experiment ensued!!

Burning Man is all kinds of noun. Burning Man is a person, place, thing, and idea.
Burning Man gives good noun.

A few months before Burning Man, I'd found myself with a love who had turned into a judge, a judge in whose lakeblue, judicial eyes I was found wanting.

I found myself first in Bargaining (“What if I mute my self-doubt like one of those decorating shows on TV that you don't really need the sound for?”). Then in Denial. Much later, finally, some Anger.

I found myself apprised that despite the judge's high talk of Wanting Space, his new woman moved in with him, a woman who is tall and dark-haired like me, a smoker and a keeper of rabbits, which I am not. I saw Facebook photos of her jade plants and white Adirondack chair on the judge's porch, where I used to drink coffee and throw rubber toys to the puppies and stare at the parking lot of the 24-hour Mexican restaurant across the highway.

I found myself divided into equal parts OMG and WTF.

I found myself heartsick, able to get through a day and call it good thanks to the dream that the judge would expropriate the woman and ignite her Adirondack chair. We would bore the rabbits to death. We would roast them over the pyre. After wiping rabbit grease from his chin, the judge would kiss me and gesture to the flaming chair: “Case dismissed!”

I found myself waiting for this.

Waiting.

Waiting.

Then at the end of August I found myself in a vintage Boy Scout tent tall enough to stand up in. Each time I entered the tent I shook playa dust from my feet like a missionary leaving a town of hard hearts. In the tent I fought encroaching dust as though bailing water from a doomed canoe.

I found myself, when the wind rested, lifting my eyes to the sere hills guarding our gaudy city. When the wind rallied, I wore ski goggles and a flimsy painter's mask. Dust blotted out the tall flags of Center Camp, the hub of Black Rock City. Its longitude is based on the clock; the latitude rings out alphabetically with words related to the year's theme. Like the *y* of our alphabet that's sometimes consonant, sometimes vowel, time can also be a place in Black Rock City; you could easily find yourself at 6:00 & Biology at 4:00. And funny thing about clocks: I wore a watch at Burning Man, just like I do in the Default World, and naked or bedazzled or neon people would stop me to ask the time. For all the dusty exuberant freedom of Burning Man, there was also a printed schedule like a conference, events and talks that wouldn't wait.

I found myself, in the tumult of winds, knocking on doors of new friends in RVs. Their air was stale because they couldn't spare fuel to run the generators, not with the hours-long Exodus waiting at the end of the week. So I'd sit in their stuffy peace like a grateful musty hat in an attic box, while into our tent, small dunes blew. The dust whispered it would bury me if I'd just hold still.

When I was little, my parents and I would sit around the breakfast table and have family devotions. The source text was *Our Daily Bread*, a monthly publication of RBC Ministries (formerly Radio Bible Class). For years *ODB* was distributed by my parents'

church until it fell out of favor for its use of the New International Version Bible instead of the King James.

Each day, the *ODB* suggested a scripture reading and included a short inspirational story, an italicized verse of a hymn or poem, and then a pithy statement in boldfaced type that my mom called the snapper (origin unknown). The snapper was a smooth capsule, a tidy mnemonic device, a sleek vehicle for wisdom. My adolescence was snapper-rich (“Stand for nothing, and you’ll fall for anything”), including the Ten Commandments for Teens: “II. Don’t let your parents down; they brought you up,” or “VI. Choose a date who would make a good mate.” Snappers gave adults, especially youth group workers and parents, a sense of victory, some scripted stuff that could feel like a zinging talk-to-the-hand rejoinder in an argument with a teen at a crossroads.

A snapper is a proverb’s shabbier cousin, the one who gets all the clothes the proverb’s outgrown. I think of snappers as only a small side-step toward perverses, one of my favorite Oulipo tricks (e.g., “a stitch in time is worth two in the bush”; “red sky at night gathers no moss”). Perverses crack open then splice together, releasing fresh revelation.

The snapper was part of the Real-Life Application of Scripture, an emphasis in my upbringing intended, I suppose, as a hedge against Empty Ritual. You couldn’t just repeat a creed or already scripted prayer (that was for idolators and Catholics). The idea was to let the Spirit use the Word to guide you into deeper truth. Jesus is a personal Savior, so why shouldn’t His Word be a personal Word?

Our youth group, the Gospel Four, was divided into teams, one each for the four canonical gospels. We earned points for our teams by bringing visitors, memorizing

scripture and taking notes on sermons. Note-taking encouraged attendance as well as thoughts about the Bible. You can imagine why I did so well at church in the ways it was like school. My spiritual formation was hyper-Protestant, with its stress on salvation by grace not by works, but as a matter of temperament I do like keeping track of points. There's a part of me that would like the Life of the Spirit to be based on points, something like the tickets I earned at Billy Bob's Wonderland for skee ball, one sport I actually enjoyed. I liked redeeming the tickets. (What is the soul's equivalent of a spider ring?)

I envision the Lamb's Book of Life—in which are written the names of those saved for all eternity—as the Lamb's Gradebook of Life. The Lamb of God, that takest away the sins of the world, also moves His red pen over the celestial graph paper, awarding and penalizing us for participation, taking initiative, attitude, preparedness, on-time completion of tasks. The Lamb keeps orderly rows and columns in this vast vast book, but this after all God's Lamb, and God can crunch a lot of numbers, since He invented numbers, and there's even a whole book of the Bible called *Numbers*.

In my thinking about Burning Man, I'm struggling to get the genre just right.

An inspirational & devotional story:

~*The Bread of Busyness*~

Some days, when I have a lot of work to do, I like to bake bread. I think of this as “virtuous procrastination.” *Surely there's nothing immoral about baking bread!* you say. You're right! In fact, baking reminds me to give thanks that Jesus, like bread, rose again.

As I pummel the warm, yeasty dough, I think about how God is shaping me, molding me into the image of His love.

So what's the problem with baking? Well, even though my bread is good (just ask the ladies at Bible study!), I've given baking my attention instead of accomplishing the other work God laid on my heart that day. Instead of trusting in His will, I've taking matters (literally!) into my own (floured!) hands; I've swapped something good in place of God's best. That, my friends, leaves a bad taste in my mouth.

Real-Life Application questions:

1. What are your "virtuous procrastination" habits? How do you recognize them as such? _____

2. How do you distinguish between the good and the best that God has in store for your life? _____

Burning Man could easily discern the mixed motives of my devotion: I wanted to see this Man. But also my heart was broken, and I felt like shit. I wanted to outrun the shit feeling. I wanted to feel better about myself.

I wanted to be the kind of person who goes to Burning Man, so I went to Burning Man.

In spite of my upbringing I'm still a Snapper Apprentice (I can hear your voice already: *you're fired!*). I readily admit that some of these aren't snappy enough to be real

snapper, Grade-A Snapper. Not rancid but also not fresh, mine are the Manager's Special of snapper, meeting the minimum standards because they have indeed been memorable as they drive across the desert floor of my waking and sleeping mind like a chicken-shaped car but less visually interesting.

A self-helpy snapper: You can't get everything from one person.

A break-up snapper: I wish you felt better about yourself.

Another: I need to be alone to learn how to be a man.

A core tenet of Burning Man is "radical self-reliance," by which the event "encourages the individual to discover, exercise and rely on his or her inner resources." I heard echoes of Berryman ("I conclude now I have no / inner resources"); I (mis)heard this Burning Man principle as "radical co-dependence" ("Burning Man, I hate you! Burning Man, don't leave me!"). One practical manifestation of radical self-reliance is that you have to carry in all your own water, and dispose of your gray water by either constructing a shallow evaporation pool or trucking it out when you leave. Here we abut the Burning Man principle of Leave No Trace.

The survival guide didn't say, but I should have surmised, that you also carry your own weight with you.

One of our provisions was a big plastic Barbie head we found at a thrift store. The head offered hair styling practice on Barbie's snarly mane perched atop her long tan neck. We named her Self-Esteem Barbie. She became our own kind of burning man, our effigy, the catch-all for our pent-up pain. As in:

“Maybe if Barbie didn’t eat so much, we wouldn’t have so much trouble closing the hatchback/ the car wouldn’t ride so low to the ground/ we’d have more space for important camping equipment.”

“Maybe if Barbie weren’t so stupid, we wouldn’t have missed the exit.”

“Maybe if Barbie felt better about herself, the car wouldn’t smell like feet and Burger King.”

We were embarrassed for Barbie, and we left her visible but enclosed in the back of the car for the first three days. She had to earn her way out. Finally we needed her to weigh down the rigged dust flap in front of the tent. Imagine: she couldn’t even do that right. She was fat enough to be in the way, but not fat enough to be useful.

My brain is a horn of plenty, one of those wicker cornucopia things people use as Thanksgiving centerpieces. Substitute for the gourds and Indian corn the snapper substance that swells on the vines of my recollected experience. O vibrant harvest, embarrassment of fecundity!

Some of these are not quite snapper-worthy, but they are part of my textual record, and whoever wrote them there pressed down really hard, like a child learning to write with death-grip fist around the pencil:

God doesn’t close a door without opening a window.

Let go, and let God.

At 2 a.m., Pandora’s Fix-It Shop was cleared out. Aphasia and I had driven all day, provisioned up in Reno, wound our way on the two-lane road to Black Rock City. I

was in full road mode, in my stained band t-shirt and black shorts dusty with crumbs. I wore no body paint, no pasties, not even a glow stick. A camp had set up a bar across the street from Pandora's, so we waited until we saw someone who could tell us where to put our tent.

A woman moved through the bar with a silver tray of quesadillas. "Put on your friendly face," Aphasia said, and though normally I don't like to be told what to do, by then she and I were so in sync that it didn't feel like criticism. She meant: "It's not enough just to listen to that weird Pink Floyd mix anymore, now you have to say something back, darling." And it worked, the command released me. I did, to some guy who'd driven to Burning Man from Ohio, I did begin to say things back.

Hi I'm Candy. Melts in your mouth, and in your hand.

Hi I'm Candy, *sweeter by far than honey, than honey in the comb.*

I woke panicked and hot in my sleeping bag. Short of breath, thinking about all the things I had left undone. I read a Psalm. At 6 a.m. there was plenty of light, so I didn't need my headlamp. I brought a few books to Burning Man, including the King James Bible I've had since I was five. Many verses are highlighted and underlined, the edges of pages trimmed with wobbly script, a trace of myself, the Young Annotator. Sections of the New Testament and maps of Jerusalem and Saint Paul's journeys fall out every time I open the thing. Playa dust filled in its cracked leather cover.

I began with Psalm 19: *The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork.*

I wondered that morning: was anyone else around the playa reading the KJV to calm down? Anyone? Is this thing on?

I have a soft spot for the New American Standard Bible, but I brought my KJV. And though I'm not a KJV-or-the-highway kind of girl, I stand with those who cheer that pound for pound, the KJV beats up on many other translations.

Let us consider Job 22:24:

NIV and assign your nuggets to the dust, your gold of Ophir to the rocks in the ravines

KJV Then shalt thou lay up gold as dust, and the gold of Ophir as the stones of the brooks

Your nuggets to the dust? Really? Tell me the KJV hasn't wrapped up the NIV here like a Hot Pocket, heated it in the toaster oven, chewed it up, swallowed, digested and excreted it before the NIV even realized what happened!! Face, NIV!

The KJV feeleth familiareth.

At Burning Man, wisdom visited me in many guises. Snappers popped into 3-D. I walked toward the line of port-a-potties at 6:00 & Genome, and I cut in front of a guy on a bike even though I saw him coming in plenty of time to have stopped and let him pass, which would have been the polite thing to do.

"Sorry," I muttered, even as I walked. I didn't want to wait.

"Don't say sorry unless you're sorry," he said, swerving around me.

This reminded me of my new Honesty Across the Board campaign. I picture a United Way-style thermometer to gauge my progress (I am 65% honest! Let's work

together to meet our goal!). Or a mudflap on my Honda with an 800 number for people to call in and register their opinions. How's my truth-telling?

I wish you felt better about yourself.

In 6th grade I attended a Just Say No rally with my school, and someone played Whitney Houston's 1986 hit "The Greatest Love of All." I stood there and thought about the ways I would say "no":

"I love my body too much to harm it with drugs."

"I believe in my future and drugs are a dead end."

I swayed to Whitney Houston in my white t-shirt with red neckline and cuffs, and my orange fraying fire patrol belt. Please know: I had been approached by the safety patrol, a more elite force at our school. Safety patrols stood outside with the adult crossing guards to help arriving and departing students. They wore white belts with silver badges, and in the rain and snow they wore old long yellow raincoats with hoods. I nursed a cold through most of the winter, so my mother vetoed the safety patrol. For fire patrol, when the alarm rang you had to carefully but quickly assume your station, propping open doors as classes filed out in orderly lines, maintaining an expression and demeanor of calm, of *hey we'll get through this, no cause for alarm, of hey aren't you glad your reading test was interrupted so now you can ask your friend for the answers.*

After the Just Say No rally, while waiting in the parking lot to board the school bus, Brad Wolfe said to me: "I'm going to tell you a joke that's so funny, you'll laugh your titties off." [beat] "Oh, I see you've already heard it."

I wonder what Brad Wolfe is doing now.

I guess I would have a better idea of what Brad Wolfe is doing if I'd planned our class reunions like I was supposed to.

Sorry, CMHS Class of '95.

Don't say sorry unless.

Burning Man is Lent via Mardi Gras. A fasting through superabundance, indulgence turned inside out, a backdoor way to asceticism. Flesh bends subtly, like a Mobius strip, into spirit. As they say: a riddle wrapped in an enigma wrapped in bacon wrapped in hot pink duct tape coated with fine alkaline dust.

For dust thou art...

I was hoping that Burning Man was like church camp but different. The first two or three days suck and then things click, you get tight with your friends, the hardness of your heart gives way, and by the campfire on the last night you are ready to make promises to change your life, to carry a bit of the fire back home with you, like a Prometheus, or someone in need of Pepcid AC.

The Golden Tribe planned a parade for the light, to begin at The Children of Chaos camp. I had a gold purse and a pair of gold shoes that I also used in the Default World. I borrowed Aphasia's gold minidress. Roam, our neighbor, gave me some gold craft ribbon that I tied around my head in a plumose fashion.

The Tribe were mostly the AARP set, and they were ready to rock. They admired my gold ensemble. One guy asked if he could take a photo, and I said yes; he asked if I would remove my hot pink sunglasses, but I didn't want to so I said no. Later, walking

alongside the photo guy, I said that I understood this to be the parade to the light, and my eyes were full of darkness.

If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness!

We handed out strands of gold beads. There was no agenda except to salute the light. This was early in the Burn, and I resisted the Golden Tribe and their cocktail hour. I was still clinging to my rituals of the Default World rather than giving in to the chaos. I could recognize my behavior, but as our therapy friends remind us, recognizing and changing are two different things. Burning Man is the place, I encouraged myself, where people leave their jobs in engineering, data entry, customer service, and teaching to slip into lives as Willow, Magnolia, Beaker, Cedar, FishBait, Bella, La Sauce.

I wondered: was I a member of the Golden Tribe? Was I so uptight precisely because I was loath, like many foundlings, to take possession of my true identity? Were these people my destiny? Was I running from Corinth only to end up at Thebes?

And more to the point: Why couldn't I relax?

At the head of our parade was The Gold Bar, an art car painted gold with a working bar in the back, stools sprouting like mushrooms around it. A dancing naked man painted bright Garanimals green from head to toe danced on top of the truck. Oh that we could all be as free as the green man, shaking his round green belly, shaking his tiny green dong. From the top of the top of the truck, green man shouted "I'm oxidized!"

A lot of back pain comes from clenching your glutes. A lot of heart pain comes from clenching your soul.

Self-helpy snapper: There are many different ways to be.

Variation: There are many different ways to be fun.

It's OK if Burning Man isn't my thing, I thought. With the minor complication that I still had four days left of Burning Man.

Shall the dust praise thee? shall it declare thy truth?

Instead of turning around at the Man with the Golden Tribe, I kept on walking to the Temple. Looking out from Center Camp you might not even see the Temple; it's nearly hidden by the skeletal illuminated Man perched high above a ring of pylons like a troop of handholding starfish, a crown of dancing thorns. The Temple's filigreed wooden base held up a lotus. Its petals bulged around the Temple's second and third stories and reached toward the heavens, swaying in the wind and dust. The Temple would burn on Sunday, the night after the Man, and I'd heard from experienced Burners that this event was less frat-party, more spirit.

I kept thinking of snappers that sounded more like koans but also parodies of koans, faux-koans: *The Temple burns but it does not break*. But I was not just a snapper-maker but also a symbol-reader. I wondered: what is Burning Man about? What does it mean? Was the Man an empty center around which rituals crystallized in order to justify an extended hippie party in the desert? Was the Man a mirror, reflecting us back to ourselves?

I climbed to the temple's third story, reading the notes written on beams, looking at the photos, posters, stuffed animals. The place was not just a memorial. It was crowded

with people climbing ladders to gaze at the playa from inside the spare lotus. On Sunday the messages and artifacts would be reduced to ash and the ash carried away and the imprint of the ash smoothed out like a spot on a goblet by the water that would collect in the playa bowl in winter. The hardpan face would melt into a mirror.

Let there be a firmament

Black Rock City etches like chicken feet on the alkaline bed of Lake Lahontan, a lake that was born in the Pleistocene ice age and peaked about 14,000 years ago. Now it's desert most of the year, a desert, the Black Rock Rangers tell us, used mostly by "rock hounds, land sailors, history buffs, 4WD enthusiasts, amateur rocketeers, and the community of Burning Man."

Lahontan, like the Great Salt Lake, was endorheic. Lahontan, like me, was what we in the business like to call a closed hydrologic system. We don't flow into other bodies. Though sometimes they flow into us.

let it divide the waters from the waters.

Northrop Frye: "[r]itual is a conscious waking act, but there is always something sleepwalking about it: something consciously being done, and something else unconsciously meant by what is being done."

"Lighten up" some guy yelled at me from his bike as I walked to Center Camp.

A sign on a booth on the Esplanade: *Got Guilt? Need More?*

I knew I had to bend. *The Temple burns but it does not break.*

I didn't know how. I didn't know which way.

I never felt at ease with Roam, even though he sat at our picnic table a lot and washed his feet there in his cherry-picking bucket. He said I should go out and meet people. Look at all those empty couches, he said, waiting for the people.

Later that day I sat at the Couchsurfers camp, even though I didn't know anyone there. I needed a couch, and I was proud of myself for finding one. A girl was chatting to two guys nearby, correcting one guy's English. "Score one for the native speaker!" I said, and they laughed. A moment later, one of the couch guys, the one who'd been corrected, introduced himself as Menelaus.

Menelaus asked me if I knew where the Billion Bunny March started. I got a little melty looking into those blue eyes, bluer than the water I faintly remembered from the Default World.

No, I told Menelaus.

Do you want to come? he said.

No, I said, but I should have said yes. Also missed: the Wilson Phillips pancake breakfast, the Librarian Cocktail Party, Soul Retrieval, the Weird Underwear Brigade, the Critical Tits Bike Ride.

Real-Life Application Questions:

1. Recall a time when you felt free. Describe it. _____

2. How can you reclaim and keep that feeling? _____

Dancing with Luna at the Opulent Temple I realized that life is too short to feel so bad, and I should just shake my booty in my white pants that made me feel like Captain Stubing of *The Love Boat*, but even sexier. The pants endowed me with swagger. They shivered my timbers. They snugged then flared to accentuate my moves, pant legs flapping like tall white flags of surrender to Beats, to Dance, to Dust, nature's most perfect body glitter. I could extend this feeling by wearing white pants more frequently.

I wanted to pack up the sky, fold it up and take it home with me. I wanted the wide blue day sky and the pinholed starry night sky.

Day unto day uttereth speech,

The sky above Black Rock City was kind of like Day to Night Barbie. She wore a pink shimmery leotard underneath her pink velvety pencil skirt and blazer trimmed in white. She was a real career girl. She carried a plastic purse with tiny paper credit cards smaller than Chiclets gum. I long for an outfit like that. When it's time to clock out, you just stow your blazer and turn your skirt inside out to reveal a hot pink crinoline, especially useful if you're going to prom or happy hour with the guys.

and night unto night sheweth knowledge.

A blond guy from Tahoe showed up at our picnic table, introduced himself as Black Rock. "I guess you had to think real hard about your playa name," I said. I told him I ran the Burning Man 5k, and showed him my race number still pinned to my tank top.

He said he'd walked all over camp, way more than 5k, just that morning. He also informed me that he speaks Spanish, French, German, Chinese, and Polynesian.

“That’s a lot of languages,” I said. “Why do you know all those languages?”

Said Black Rock, “I’m a cunning linguist.”

Goethe: “Symbolism transforms the phenomenon into an idea, the idea into an image, and in such a way that the idea remains always infinitely active and unapproachable in the image, and even if expressed in all languages, still would remain inexpressible.”

Recovery snapper: Give your grief the space it needs.

But I can’t find a bowl big enough.

From the Burning Man Mission Statement: “The touchstone of value in our culture will always be immediacy: experience before theory, moral relationships before politics, survival before services, roles before jobs, embodied ritual before symbolism...”

Maybe that’s right. Rituals we move through, self-aware or robotic, improvisational or dogmatic, awake or asleep. But we can’t slip our arms into the sleeves of a symbol. Symbols don’t let us in like that. *They burn but they don’t break*. Symbols we can heave ourselves up against, we can walk around, pose in front of and take pictures, try different angles. Sources say we give out before our symbols do.

Now I'm just giddy and sleep deprived, and someone is filling my playa cup with popcorn. I'm kicking up dust, alone on the Esplanade, coming back from a yoga class, that old ritual. I feel pulled apart and reassembled by my rituals. I feel nearly capsized by loneliness.

I see the White Chicken! Wait, now I'm singing *I'm dreaming...of a White Chicken...just like the ones I used to know.*

Now I'm addressing the White Chicken:

“White Chicken, somebody took a big fat dump in my heart, and I'm still scrubbing the skid marks. White Chicken, I want my heart to be as white and stainless as you.”

“White Chicken, O Kentucky Fried Paraclete.”

Hide me under the shadow of thy wings

Susan Brind Morrow: “If the city was Um a Dunya [Mother of the World], what was the desert? The city's negative: a blank page on which things magically appeared.”

This may be true for Egypt and Sudan, Morrow's terrain. But what about a desert that is a city? She's got the “magically appeared” right, anyway.

A dust storm chokes everything, effaces the Man, the mountains. Gloms on anything lucky enough to be a surface.

I can't overemphasize the dust.

Frosted Burning Man, he's magically appearing.

Dust breaded me like Shake-n-Bake on chicken breast, but I slipped on a pair of silver pants I borrowed from Aphasia and a sequined top.

Who coverest thyself with light as with a garment; who stretchest out the heavens like a curtain...

Zombie loaned me her bike, the one with the plastic doll hands reaching out from the handlebars. I already had my friendly face on, without effort. For a few hours, my friendly face was my real face!

At Glitterbox I glimpsed my soulmate, a guy hustling toward late middle age, wearing silver pants and a bandana, like me. I have to dance with that guy, I told my friends, and soon I drew him to me, a dry boat across the dry lake bed, I tugged him with my invisible girl-cables. When I said I was from Utah, he crowed “You Mormon girls! You’re spying on the enemy!” I’m not Mormon, but I liked the idea of being a Mormon spy. We danced back to back, we ground out sparks from our silver butt cheeks, we ignited the supple mirrors of our asses. “You’re a very good spy!” he said as I left him on the dance floor.

I felt electric. Whence such light? I was a reflective surface but also giving off light from the inside. I was, for a few hours, like a solar panel, as though my anxiety had stored up all this energy that now at last I could spend. I was a glow stick, a wand of color in the dark. I was light inside and outside.

Just before sunrise, my friends and I parked our bikes near the trash fence at the perimeter of Black Rock City, deeper in the playa than the Astroturf slide. We were pulled between the rising sun and the full moon, *the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night*. We watched the rising sun till our eyes seared and we had to

look away, and then poof! we saw that big mugging moon. So white and full, the bright imprint of its plump cheek pressed against the sky.

That morning I rode from the deep playa back to camp, steering around the temple. I split off from the group, trying to find a bathroom, and thinking I'd found a bathroom, instead I'd found an art installation comprised of a series of port-a-potty doors.

Cursed. Held it.

There is no speech nor language, where their voice is not heard.

Walking down 6:00 I met a guy in a red Speedo who was from Barbie Death Camp. He seemed very excited when I mentioned Self-Esteem Barbie. He said their camp had SS Guards, a Barbie Gestapo, ovens. Even in a place of such creative excess, in a place where one is exempt from asking "Is this weird?" these guys were going too far. Self-Esteem Barbie was stupid and fat and not much fun, but that was no crime.

Surely she hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows.

An inspirational & devotional story:

~Sometimes You Have To Stop To Get Ahead~

One day, a friend and I wanted to ride bikes across the playa. We waited for the wind to die down, but the longer we sat at our tent, the more dust we collected in our hair and pores.

Finally, approaching twilight, we decided to take a bike ride anyway. We pushed through oncoming dust that threatened us like a dirty inescapable unhygienic mean-

spirited car wash from h-e-double hockey sticks! My friend and I quickly lost sight of each other in the needling clouds, but fortunately, God provided a way for us to stay together through the raucous call-and-response of our squeaky bikes!

You may ask, was sticking to our plan worth the wear on our bikes and bodies? Well, when we dared open our eyes, we saw God's heavenly handiwork, the pink celestial dryer lint clouds clinging to the sunset sky. Eventually we stopped noticing our coughs. And in those grainy photos we're smiling!

How wonderful when we can view our obstacles as opportunities to grow! When we can't control the circumstances, let's control our attitude (and our tongue!)

Real-Life Application Questions:

1. Describe a situation in your life in which you had to exercise great patience. What were the circumstances? What did you learn from the experience? _____

2. How do you practice patience in your day-to-day life? _____

I can't do the one thing I've been assigned to do, which is to pack flat the crates of kitchen stuff. It's like Math Field Day, and I'm trying not to have a panic attack. *The Temple burns but it does not break.* I'm ready to start the Exodus from Black Rock City, but our picnic table goes in the car first, and Roam and Zeek are still cooking pancakes on it and offering them to rosy women who show up at our camp on bicycles. I don't know how to dismantle the tent and untie the knots. I'm antsy as hell. Also: tired and hungry and not pretty enough to score a second pancake.

At last the kitchen crates are passable. I've done all the preliminary stuff I can do and now I'm waiting for Aphasia's cues about what happens next. She writes in her journal for an hour, eats a couple of pancakes. "It's Sunday. I need some church music," she says. Bleuroses, a neighbor and self-identified theater geek, busts out a full-size keyboard with an extension cord, props it on a table near his camper, sings.

I continue writing my own Burning Man scripture: *When the dust buffeteth thine eyes, thou mustest stoppeth*. I'm smoldering: let's move!

Then I get it. A little golden pride-nugget glimmers in my heart when I finally get it. I crack open the last beer from the cooler and sit for a moment. Sometimes all you can do is the best thing to do. Listen to the Peter, Paul and Mary sing-a-long. Finish your beer. Salute the light.

Am I living every moment to its full potential? Do my joys outweigh my regrets?

A couple of days before the Exodus, Aphasia invited me to a seminar on how to take home the lessons of Burning Man, how to re-enter the Default World. I opted to stay in the tent and read *Elle*. Inwardly I scoffed at the need for such a seminar, even though I myself was given to self-reflection all the time.

Am I doing Burning Man right? Am I wringing every bit of meaning?

I scoffed at the applicators. I, the Experienced Applicator.

He knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust.

Cars and RVs stir the playa, snake along the Exodus from Black Rock City. You can't speed up the stop-start. You wait hours to turn onto the two-lane road to Gerlach

and I-80. You can't use the mirrors because the car is stuffed, but through the front windows your eyes lick the last sugary lines of the city lights.

As for man, his days are as grass: as a flower of the field, so he flourisheth

You wave to your fellow Burners in their stopped cars and RVs. You carefully time the inching stop-start so you can slip into your iridescent wings and have one last J.C. Penney photo shoot on the playa before you lose the light. You can make fun of the people ahead of you in the adjacent lane, the people from California who are not moving ahead when the stop-start allows them to move ahead. They are busy filling a travel mug with playa dirt. For a souvenir? Because they forgot to get some ashes from the Burn? For a hair-styling product? A snack? Like they haven't absorbed enough?

C'mon, California, you shout. Get it together!

For the wind passeth over it, and it is gone;

and the place thereof shall know it no more.

BY NOW IT SHOULD SOUND LIKE MUSIC

Xerox, in Russian, takes the masculine pronoun. We have to cajole him, flatter his ego, so he'll spit out copies with dark lines down the page, or the text half faded out, or the white paper crinkled into dainty fans. We have to open him up, leave his side panel ajar like a dislocated wing when he overheats.

Do you understand the rudiments of his functioning? Ludmila asks, pointing to the Xerox. If I hang out with Ludmila too much, I start to talk like her. *Yes, Ludmila, I understand the rudiments of his functioning.* The cracks in her fingers are green from the ointments she rubs twice a day on her dying mother's legs. She calls her mother "mummy."

Ludmila is in her early forties, and she has a regal air. She is also a hugger, and on occasion she will pat my American behind. Ludmila often shares her open-face sandwiches with me, margarine and cheese on slices of white bread the size of my palm. Things are going well with her man friend, a retired military officer, she tells me as she breezes into the room like spring. She wears a turquoise pillbox hat over her blond curls. Her thin eyebrows are penciled in brown. *Love is the great beautician*, the cliché lobe of my brain throws this up, I don't say it aloud, but it's true.

All of the teachers in the modern languages department share a common room, one giant office. Ecaterina, "the chief of the chair," as she once introduced herself to me, has a large desk in the back power corner. We have four computers, a full-length mirror,

two coat closets, the unsteady Xerox, and ten tables with shallow shelf space. The tall windows overlook Decebal Street, a major thoroughfare, and one of the three McDonald's in the country squats right across from us. Two teachers share each table except for me. I get my own. Imperialist! I jam papers in every chink between my books.

Although Romanian is Moldova's official language, in the teachers' room most everyone chatters in Russian unless they're speaking to me. Ludmila and Dima, though, they often speak in English to each other when they're around me, even if I'm not involved in the conversation. In Romanian, a free period between classes is a *fereastra*, a "window." Ludmila, Dima and I have a window at the same time. I should be grading papers or writing a lesson plan but usually I make tea and check my email. Dima reads about boxing matches online. He is in his early thirties and he, like Ludmila, teaches twice as many hours per week as I do. When we walk across the hall to the *bufet* for a pastry, he pats his slight paunch with pride. He doesn't drink alcohol at all, he explains, but he cannot resist a cake. Dima shows a particular weakness for the Vinnie Puh, a blob of cream as tall as a thumb covered with chocolate crumbs, plump and sweet like its namesake.

In the 1970s Georgi Lozanov, a Bulgarian psychologist, turned his work with mentally disabled schoolchildren into a foreign language teaching program for adults. He called his method suggestopedia, based on suggestology, a field focused on the responses of the human subconscious. With adult students, Lozanov favored a desuggestive-suggestive approach, removing students' psychological barriers and anxieties to make the mind more "suggestible" to new material.

Femei sa fie ca shi o paine calde, women should be like warm bread, the director of our Institute says in Romanian as he pours small glass of cognac in his office. It is the first day of the new academic year, and between the morning and afternoon classes, we circle up in Domnu Director's office to celebrate. Ludmila urges me to take a glass, and to eat something. I have a class to teach but how can I refuse? *Femei sa fie ca shi o paine calde*, the director repeats. I blush, for the first time in a long time. *If I have cognac, I will be on the floor, ha ha!* I say. The director hands me a glass. He is not unfoxy with his silver hair and moustache. He is a silver fox. Toasts are made, mostly in Russian, *All prosperity in the new school year etc.* Dima whispers translations in my ear as we stand close together on the bright blue carpet. I am already ten minutes late for class, but some of the older teachers chide me for rushing off. *If I ever complain about my job*, I email a friend later that day, *please remind me of this moment.*

Our Institute, a branch of Moldova State University, occupies a renovated factory building. Upstairs, it's one endless corridor opening onto rooms painted buttermint hues. Moldovan students take all of their classes together in groups. My afternoon group has sixteen women. They are sitting at their tables and yelling in Russian, it always seems as if Russian speakers are yelling. I enter with my clunky sling bag and flushed face. *Oh students!* I sing out. *Take a deep breath!* I am putting the students in a relaxed state. I pass out rectangles of white paper traced from an audio cassette case. *Let's make a quilt of our expectations for the year.* They draw a globe and talk about peace, a diamond ring and say they're getting married, an airplane to take them out of Moldova, a diploma for the end of their struggle. I sober up and am moved by their speeches.

As the students walk to the front of the room and tape their quilt squares on a big poster, I can't help but admire. They all do the European butt swish, a sexy walk they must be taught in the womb. It is a slight sway from side to side. Wearing high heels, as most of them do, must help. *You wear those cute clothes and you walk like a boy*, Nataly, a friend and former student, told me once. *It is not flattering*. She tries to show me how to do the walk in the dim hallway of the school, but I am made of metal, I am not fluid, I plod, she collapses in hysterics, she cannot breathe. Even young Moldovan girls, you can watch them saunter down Stefan cel Mare, the main street downtown. They glide, they sashay, they are not in a hurry because the world will wait for someone so full of grace.

At Lozanov's Suggestology Research Institute, beginning students attend classes for a month, two hours a day. For most of the lesson, the teacher reviews the previous day's material and explains some new information. The suggestopedic session comes last. Lozanov explained in his *Suggestology and Outlines of Suggestopedy* that music, particularly Baroque music with its close imitation of the heartbeat, is key to unlocking the subconscious. The teacher plays a musical recording of "an emotional nature," enters the mood of the music, and then reads aloud the new words and translations in the mother tongue. This is not a sleep or hypnotic state: students follow along in their textbooks. After a few moments of solemn silence, the teacher repeats the material in a more relaxed, conversational tone and with music of a more "philosophical nature." This time the students are not allowed to look in their textbooks but should listen, relax, and allow their minds to wander in fruitful distraction. At the end of the lesson, students leave in silence.

Though she is not a slim woman, Nataly favors miniskirts and the deep v-neck. She carries a handbag with the word “flirt” sewn on one side. One of her eyes does not stay centered, so I focus on the one that does. She opens her throat wide to laugh when she hears something funny. Obviously, I am very funny. *When you come into the classroom, I get butterflies*, Nataly wrote once in a card she made for me. Obviously, I am the most beautiful English teacher she has ever had, and she says she wants me to feel in my body what she feels in hers.

Nataly and her husband, Vlad, find partners for three-ways on the internet. Vlad is smaller than Nataly, blond, a computer programmer. They speak Russian. Vlad understands English but asks Nataly to translate sometimes. They both know their way around a kitchen.

I have visited their flat in Ciocana, on the outskirts of town, several times, and I never remember how to get there. Each time Nataly meets me in front of the Fidesco supermarket. It is our ritual. I must like it, because every time I say I’m going to memorize her cat’s-cradle path around the gray apartment buildings, but I never do.

I sit on a concrete step outside the market waiting for Nataly. *Don’t sit there!* she scolds when she finds me. *You’ll freeze your ovaries!* Their apartment, on the fourth floor, is covered with Nataly’s collages of half-dressed women. Long sheets of white drawing paper with women’s faces sketched from cosmetics advertisements, their clothing a mosaic of ripped paper, ragged edges, gaps of white space between the folds of a skirt, a misshapen top hat. Vlad supports Nataly’s ambitions with me. It is a game we play. *Would you prefer foreplay or just sex?* she asks. *I prefer soup* I say and dip the ladle

in a white tureen. She laughs up to the ceiling. Vlad cuts more bread. The big joke is now that I'm no longer her teacher, I have no excuse for delaying our torrid affair!

Nataly is a photographer and shows me lingerie pictures she's taken of Malasha, their most recent young playmate. She is striking: jeweled eyes, slender waist, breasts like ripe pears. Maybe Malasha has been photoshopped, or maybe she is in fact flawless. There are more words for beauty like this, but I can't remember them.

It will be years before Bach. For now it's the C major scale in two octaves, up and up, back and back, until my fingers memorize it. Vasilii Vasilivich, my guitar teacher, is a compact, middle-aged Ukrainian man, not Russian but Ukrainian, he reminds me. I can't keep up with his Russian, and his Romanian is as shaky as mine, but it's what we've got. That, and the sheet music in my beginner's book, and the guitar tablature like beads on an abacus. We break a sweat trying to figure out when to meet for our next lesson. Usually I find him at the Casa Armata, the Army building downtown. Vasilii Vasilivich winks at the woman who guards the keys. There is a large auditorium and long bleak hallways with cracking parquet floor and narrow red carpets. We have our lesson in a small closet of a room. The guitar feels clumsy, my hands like paws. I practice chord progressions, and Vasilii Vasilivich tells me my hand should jump on each chord, clean, see?, not wrap around it finger by finger, as though I can't make up my mind. The hand jumps, he says. He takes the guitar. His stubby fingers flash in and out, chord to chord, like a convulsing spider. One two three four, C F G7 C. *Practice it 100 times this week at home*, he says. This does not calm my heart rate. I plunk twice through a short prelude in my textbook. *OK, nice*, he says, *but now it should sound like music*.

Following a suggestopedic session, students do little if any homework, no more than a cursory rereading of the day's material before bed. With this method, some beginner students learn an average of 80 new words a day. In other cases, some students learn more than 500 words after a day-long lesson. In his book, Lozanov claimed this was just a beginning, and projected that students could learn even 1000 words or more. An added benefit: at the completion of the 30 day course, many students suffering from "neurotic complaints" experienced relief of their symptoms.

In our introductory Russian class, we get new names. Call me Nina. The teacher drills us on the alphabet. There are two letters for [sh] and I can't tell the difference between them. They both look like bars of a gate, one has a barbed tail. The [zh] looks like a stylized spider with six legs. It is a lovely letter. The teacher holds up big flashcards to help us remember the letters. [yo] is a yoyo to mimic the sound, [ee] is a woman on a chair screaming because there's a mouse! The flashcard for one of the [sh]s is a librarian, her bun knotted on top of her head, her index finger covering her mouth. The bun is attached to a string, and if you pulled it off her head the finger would jab the air, she would do the hustle to the strains of Beethoven piped into the room. She would lighten up! *How do you memorize the letters?* our teacher asks. I tell her I light a candle, and sit in my quiet place, and visualize the letters on the back of my eyelids. It is a running ticker of letters. *Nina, you really have your shit together,* says a student next to me. Says the teacher: *Here's a map of Russia, in case you care.*

As in many Moldovan apartments, at Nataly and Vlad's the bathtub and sink sit in a separate room from the toilet. On the back of the toilet room door is a picture Nataly cut from a magazine. It is a woman's stiletto heel in the middle of a rounded, orange background. It is a black thong between two stately plump butt cheeks. It is a Rorschach experience. While I dispatch my business, I see: a stiletto, a thong, a stiletto.

Before the beginning of the course each student is given a name that is used in the language he is going to study, wrote Lozanov. He is also given a new biography. In this way, the students become actors and actresses. They are forbidden to talk about their real names and professions and, further, are not to ask each other questions about themselves.

There is pleasure in scales, in the walk of my fingers up the neck of the guitar, the soothing repetition of their dance. I practice alone in my living room on the disabled pink brocade couch that slumps to one side, next to my table covered with a burgundy cloth and a stash of books, two uncomfortable floral chairs, a glassed-in balcony and clothesline, and beyond that the mangy white building opposite mine and a patch of sky. The guitar sleeps in a corner of the room. I don't have a TV, so it's the bug-eye stereo or my own music on the guitar. I find chord progressions for easy songs and practice them in hopes of impressing my students. I play "El Condor Pasa," I sing *I'd rather be a hammer than a nail. I'd rather be a sparrow than a snail.* In one of my morning conversation classes we're working on stating preferences. Would you rather learn a Romance language or a Slavic one? Would you prefer to study or sleep? The song fits. I

try to tune the guitar's strings with the help of an orange plastic pitchpipe. I am the piper leading all of Moldova's students past the crumbling zoo at the edge of town, and out through the gates of the city.

Lozanov listed guidelines for teachers at the Suggestology Research Institute. All the staff of the Institute with whom the students come in contact should show or suggest:

- *confidence in the teachers and the method.
- *fastidiousness in teachers' manners, dress and reactions.
- *maintenance of a high cultural level in the etudes and little plays which the students perform. Alcoholic drinks are banned in the Institute as is improper behavior and sexualization or misunderstood modernization of the etudes.
- *a solemn attitude toward the session.
- *a tactful attitude toward poor test papers, if there are any
- *maintenance of an enthusiastic emotional tone, without overplaying it.

I write the Cyrillic alphabet over and over. *If you don't write in cursive, Russian people will think you're retarded*, our teacher says. I imagine the letters each with a different taste. The cursive M is my favorite. It tastes like honey. The cursive lowercase t also looks like an m, but you can tell a real m by the pronounced knob at the beginning of the penstroke.

Nataly and Vlad invite me for dinner. *Oh, you don't have to cook*, I say. I mean it just as politeness. By the time I meet her at the supermarket, I'm running on fumes.

What's for dinner? I ask. She cackles. *Silly, you said I didn't have to cook, so I didn't cook.* She winks. In the living room waits a cold bottle of champagne, and a box of chocolates. I eat enough chocolates to push me to the edge of pancreatic shock. Nataly doesn't drink, and she teases me that getting me drunk is all a part of her plan to seduce me! We nibble chocolates and watch music videos on TV. The sun goes down and the apartment turns green. Moldovans are always trying to sex me up, people are always putting me in high-heeled shoes and scribbling on my face with eyeliner. Nataly wants to give me a makeover, so I rest my head on a pillow in her lap while she smears my face with foundation, glitters my eyelids, lines my lips. I cannot say I find her unattractive. I still have too much Sunday School in my head for adultery, though I wonder if I sleep with Vlad too perhaps it would cancel out? In gold eyeshadow I look so hot we have to open a window. I wink a hyperextended eyelash at Vlad, a lash so long it might reach out and molest him. Vlad studies his glass of champagne. He has removed his gray sweater and sits in his white t-shirt. I feel that I know Vlad quite well because I have seen photos of their vacations at Mamaia, on Romania's Black Sea coast. In the photo, Vlad wears a Speedo, shimmery turquoise with thin beige stripes, an opulent second skin.

Lozanov: *Anticipation of the next phase, the session phase, arouses pleasant emotions in the students. As the teacher explains and deciphers new material, the teacher must suggest through his behavior that the assimilation of the new material has already begun and all is pleasant and easy.*

In one of the morning groups at the Institute, there are two male students. Viktor wears sweaters, some spread across him like garish landscapes. His spoken English is a little choppy, but he is diligent and makes progress. I ask the students to write in their journals about their first few days of class. *The teachers are patient and good looking. My hopeness is that all will be fine in the near future*, Viktor writes. As part of his job, he produces the weather report for a local radio station. In his journal, a notebook with puppies on the front, he writes about his dysfunctional aquarium and the dire wild mushroom situation this year. The journal is a conversation between us, and in my comments I ask if there's any hope for the forest mushrooms. Next time he hands in his notebook, he assures me *Yes, mushroom situation has improved*.

One day after class Viktor says *I learn English all the life and still it is not so good*. I rip off his synthetic sweater, the colors bleed like an apocalyptic sunset, and I throw his black boxy manpurse out the window. My unstoppable powers and the green afternoon light blind Viktor into submission. *With the light and Tchaikovsky and the pulsing of our bodies, you'll remember a thousand words for love*, I whisper. It is the green light of desire, it is the green-eyed dragon of jealousy that will rip your sorry ass apart should you ever so much as lay an eye-mote on the toned yet ample backside of some secretary who works downtown in short skirts and heels and baroque, peekaboo tights. You watch her meaty hindquarters propel her frame onto the *marshrutka*, the white minibus that will carry her to a molting building where she will exchange her heels for slippers. She will tie back her hair and make chicken *zeama* and a cabbage salad for dinner for herself and her mother, with whom she shares the flat. You will want the secretary, Viktor, as she warms whole cabbage leaves in a skillet, dips them in honey and

flattens them on her mother's naked back, covering the leaves with a plastic bag, wrapping her mother in a thick blanket, kissing the top of her unwashed head. But you can't have her. I will hunt you, Viktor, I will light candles to your sterility, may your bread always be stale, may you always miss the bus on rainy days. You will make no woman happy if not me.

Zhana, my stylist, does not understand my Romanian very well, but she does understand my hair. *Your forehead is too big. You need bangs*, she says. I know the word for "bangs," as I know the word for "highlights," because I looked them up before my appointment. I am crestfallen, my ungainly forehead hanging down. *Don't worry, I have a big forehead too*, she says, sweeping her bangs up with her free hand. A fine mist of hairspray pulsates in the large open room, young girls mingle with their hair curled or swept up or braided with flowers. A girl is in a hurry, Zhana asks if I'd mind terribly if she styles her first. The girl is thin, her thin legs hold her up like an elegant giraffe. I leaf through Russian women's magazines, looking at the pictures. Giraffe girl hands Zhana an artificial rose.

Any time of day or night is suitable for suggestopedic lessons.

In Russian class, we dance on the tables, we wave our hands like monkeys. The letters appear before me, my own sort of Protestant kabala, the letters get up and move around and they don't spell "women's shoes" or "hat" or tell me how to get through customs like the textbook does. We chant dialogs over and over. We learn the script.

Good afternoon! Let's get acquainted! My name is Olga Simonovna! What is your name? My name is Jane! I am Canadian! We waltz and whisper in each others' ears what's in our suitcases (magazines, computer games, dresses). In the dialog there are dresses in the suitcase. It's funny when the boys say "dresses." It hasn't stopped being funny.

I bring Kolea, a guy I fancy, to dinner at Nataly and Vlad's. I invite him on the spot, while we're having a beer downtown, and I don't call Nataly in advance to tell her. *What a surprise*, that's all she says. We sit in their small kitchen, where long thin windows overlook a courtyard and another grimy building. A padded bench at the table lines the wall and then cuts at an angle toward the window. Vlad stirs a packet of spices into a pot of potatoes. Pale yellow cabinets hulk over the sink. The Soviet-era stove has knobs like a spaceship. Kolea sits in the crook of the padded bench near the window, and I sit between him and Nataly. Vlad takes a chair opposite me. Kolea is not left-handed, no one in this country is left-handed because it's beaten out of them by the first grade. But he gestures with his fork in his left hand, and his right hand grabs my thigh under the table. I don't know how Nataly sees but she sees, and she giggles. For a while we all speak in English, but even at the risk of hurting my feelings, Nataly interrogates Kolea in Russian and no one translates. They laugh. Later that night, when I'm home alone, Nataly calls me. Her tone suggests *Breaking Bad News* or *Letting Down Gently*. *OK, what?* I finally ask. Nataly says, *He just wants you for sex!*

Irina Petrovna, the vice-director of the Institute where I teach, hosts a seminar at the State University about rhythmopedia, a technique she developed based on

suggestopedia. Irina Petrovna is a blond tank in her 60s, and though I know she is happy to have a native English speaker on board, because she told me, I fear that one day she'll run over me. *My dear girl*, she says, in polished English and a sing-song voice, discussing my students. *You have to correct them more.*

At the seminar, Irina Petrovna shows a video of herself teaching a class. On the screen she is much younger, standing at the front of a long lecture hall. Dima leans in to translate for me. We move to a nearby classroom and sit at individual carrels each with headphones and a small lamp with a green plastic shade and a lightbulb the size of a toe. The bulb has melted a bubble in my shade. Some shades have been patched with tape, some just allowed to burn through. I sit between Dima and Ludmila. Irina Petrovna gives us each a photocopied paper with Russian words in one column and English translations in the other. The papers are wrinkled, dog-eared. She will collect them at the end of our session to use them again. On the audio tape there's a layer of Vivaldi, and the faint pulse of a metronome to match our heartbeats. A woman's voice reads English phrases and their Russian translations three times. *Workers!* The woman reads. *Vlad and Ecaterina are scientific workers! This table belongs to Ecaterina!* The green lamp burns brighter and fades out in cycles. I already know the Russian word for "work" because there's often a sign on our Xerox indicating it doesn't. At a nearby café, over plates of salads, some of the younger teachers ask me what I remember from the presentation. *Workers!* I shout. I stand up and salute. *Nicole*, they say, *you proud little Soviet!*

Kolea invites me to Miracol, a summertime disco in the Ciocana district. He hosts a popular morning radio show, *Vremea Dingea*, Time is Money, on Hit FM. We pass a

long blue swimming pool and a tent with video games. Bartenders pour a streak of vodka along the edge of the bar and light it on fire to amuse themselves. Kolea's friend D.J. Mars is on stage, the good times, they are rolling, the disco ball spins, red and yellow lights flash, a guy walks around with a video camera, a herd of giraffe girls, in high heels and swimsuits shrouded with flirty translucent sarongs, bust their moves. We're 200 people dancing. The guy with the camera throws us up on a huge screen. I would prefer not to see myself dancing, so I burrow into the crowd. If ever I saw myself dancing, I would never shake my American butt again. Kolea removes his shirt, ties it around his waist. He is something of a celebrity. A girl asks if she can take a picture with him; her friend unfolds her phone. It's the capital city, but it's a small town, and Kolea's histrionics are hard to miss. Already he envisions me ten pounds lighter, already he fashions a workout routine for me with the weights, which I ignore. *Those girls*, he says with a glance to the giraffes, *have even worse bodies than you do.*

In the Institute, the heat is meager in winter. The students sit in their puffy down coats, or leather and fur. *Don't you want your coat?* they ask. I am worked up when I teach, I can't sit still, I pace the aisle between their tables, I talk from one corner of the room and then the other. I'm writing on the board, I'm jumping up and down. Over the hum of the fluorescent light the students chatter in groups, finishing up a list of questions. I tell them I have a surprise, and unveil the guitar from its white plastic "case," the same bag in which Vasilii Vasilivich delivered it to me as though it were 10 kilos of corn. I strum the strings, checking to see if we're in tune. I pass out lyrics for "El Condor Pasa" and explain a little about my American lovers Simon and Garfunkel. We read the lyrics

aloud, like a poem. The vocabulary is straightforward, and once we clear up what exactly a sparrow is, I sing. My playing is abysmal. I'm nervous, my brain can see the chord patterns but my fingers don't follow fast enough. The song sounded so much better in my apartment. My voice tries to hold us together. I look up for a second from my fingers on the strings. None of the students is staring at me. They are reading the lyrics. Each one of them sings.

PORTRAITS: LOOKING OVER MY SHOULDER AT MOLDOVA

Rita

She stretched my name to three syllables, *Nee-cole-ay*, and when she took my hand to touch her face, I instinctively pulled away. She talked about her toothache in a confetti of Russian, Romanian and English, and she wanted to prove to me the swelling was gone.

Rita was my student for a week at the Institute for Continuing Education before she dropped to a beginner class. Other teachers warned me: one show of kindness and she'd push you to your limit. Her blue eyes slightly sunken in their dark circles, the creases of her face showed she was on close terms with hard times. She was cagey, and she had nerve. She stopped me one day in the hall after class: Could I find some money for her heating bill? Her husband was sick, and her relatives were no help. I had no idea if her story was true, but it was hard for me to say no. Though I worked less than my Moldovan colleagues, I made more money. The dollar stretched in unimaginable ways. It did pirouettes at the currency exchange offices on every corner. Later that week I gave Rita an envelope, resigned that I might never see the cash again.

One evening as I was leaving work she caught me again, near the stairwell, and asked me for help her with an assignment. Her daughter, in primary school, watched us as though we were playing table tennis, her blue eyes tracing every move of the conversation. I wondered how much she understood. I helped Rita with a couple of

exercises, “come by” versus “come around,” but when it became clear that she wanted me to do the entire worksheet, I refused as graciously as I could, assuring her she was up to the task by herself.

Rita insisted she would pay me back, but she just needed more time: “You. Three weeks. Permit me.” Yes, of course, and finally in July, just before I left, she met me on the busy corner in front of the Gemini department store to hand me the cash, every bit of it. I could have made it a gift. Surely she just borrowed the sum from someone else. But I was leaving, traveling west, and so surprised by the money that I took it.

King Lars

Lars is coming to dinner, with two Moldovan friends. Lars is the Swedish Language Department for the whole country. He lives on Stefan cel Mare Boulevard, the main street downtown, in an apartment right above the Palmer lingerie shop. The shop’s logo, an illuminated green P with a crown, hangs just below Lars’ kitchen window. I call him King Lars. Once I drank some water in that kitchen and looked at the tiny flashcards he’d scattered across his table: Romanian infinitives and Swedish kings. Lars sat with a cup of Nescafe, listened to the traffic of Stefan cel Mare, reviewed his lineages and translations.

Before dinner, one of the Moldovan guests helps me in my kitchen. She insists that I give her a task. “I am a Moldovan woman!” she says. “Give me work!” Usually I work alone but I like her and I’m moving slowly, so I let her peel the carrots. Lars says “Too many cooks spoil the soup,” by way of excusing himself from kitchen duty. The

kitchen is cramped, the floor warps, there's no kitchen sink, only a plugged up pipe where a sink should be.

It is impossible not to have a crush on Lars, his wire-rimmed glasses and his lilting voice. He's on the skinny side, but I could fix that because I like to bake. We talk sometimes about the prolonged adolescence afforded us freewheeling Westerners in Moldova. Lars is in his early 30s and his students are floored that he isn't married. My students, the dean, the director of the institute where I teach all hint that I need to get busy in terms of my personal life: *Maybe you? will meet a Moldovan man? and get married? and stay with us?*

In my living room, Lars plays the cheap guitar I rent from my guitar teacher, Vasili Vasilivich. I announce that dinner is almost ready. I imitate as best I can the fumbling Swedish chef from *The Muppet Show*. In response Lars sings a Swedish folk song, a tune full of oos and ohs. He says, "it must have been written by a phonetics teacher."

At the end of the night, the Moldovan friends leave to catch their *rutierra*, a van better suited to hauling furniture than people. Lines of *rutierras* circulate through the districts of the city. I kiss them goodbye. Lars can afford a taxi, but after another drink decides to take the little bus, too. I walk outside with him, help him navigate the junky courtyard, the mangy gazebo with peeling shingles. Stars peek out. The night is cool but not cold. Lars has not yet met Sylvia, his Great Moldovan Love, so he is free to embrace me among the stray dogs and small plastic bags blowing like confused jellyfish around the ruts in the mud. I could swoon by the post office, locked up for the night, or by the

drivers who smoke and wait under a tree. Lars thanks me for dinner and gets on the bus. I wave goodbye and stand there, a Big American Weirdo, a little too long.

Mental Illness Corner

There was blood on the steps of the *rutiera*, as the driver opened the door and pushed a drunk onto the pavement. There was blood down the faces of men who threatened each other with jagged broken bottles near the bus stop. I lived on the outskirts of Chisinau, Moldova's capital, and near the intersection of my street, Independentei, and Cuza Voda was a bus stop where people talked to themselves, or slept on the bench. A guy cocked his head to his shoulder as though talking on an invisible cell phone. A woman in dusty, mismatched clothes looked me over only to huff and turn away when I smiled at her.

Musicians

Around the corner from my bus stop sprawled the *piatsa*, the open-air bazaar where vendors sold piles of tomatoes and apples, pyramids of canned corn and peas on tables underneath sagging sheets of plastic. One Sunday morning as I passed through the garlic and parsley, I heard a boy singing folk songs over an accordion melody. The black-haired boy and the stooped old man with the accordion were dark-skinned Roma, gypsies, *tsigani*. The boy warbled loudly to the wheezing accompaniment. As I paid for my small sack of garlic bulbs, the singing boy collected gifts in his bucket. Into his bucket one vendor placed a beet, one an onion.

Dima

I went to a movie with my colleague Dmitrii at the country's only English-language cinema. He invited me for a coffee at his family's apartment, a couple of blocks away. I gave him a stainless steel thermos, which had been a gift to me months earlier from another American casting off her worldly goods. Dmitrii, known as Dima, behaved as though I were doing him a great favor, as though such a fine thermos would have been forever beyond his reach. His mother, wide as though another two women hid under her housecoat, served us nectarines, Nescafe with chocolate liquor, and ice cream. Dima's sister took photographs of us.

The giant hulking cabinets in the living room occupied an entire wall. The cabinets held dishes, shot glasses, a bust of Lenin, goofy stuffed animals, the kind won at fairs and arcades, and photos of family and French film stars. In one photo Dima's sister wore a fox costume. In a poster-sized black and white print, Dima as a chipper schoolchild stood at the blackboard. "Hello, school!" was written in Russian, with Lenin's picture looking down. The blackboard shows the date as October 1, commemorating the Russian Revolution, though Dima said it was really the 7th or 8th of October by the time the pictures were taken. As Dima proudly showed me his books, I wished again that I could will myself to fall in love with him. Our Dima: smoothing his blond cowlick before class, running off to a badminton match, brushing crumbs of pastry or Vinni Puh dessert from his sweater, asking me questions about boxing, which I didn't care about, and American movies, which I did.

His mother never sat down but beamed at us, moved from room to room with trays. She gave me a pair of crocheted slippers to keep as a souvenir of Moldova. I

marveled at their colors, bright red and blue. I couldn't stop the little sing-song party in my head: *slippers are red, slippers are blue...* I wore them like a harlequin, delighted in their style, like doilies gone wild.

James Joyce

I wanted to make cookies, so I navigated the maze of *piatsa* stalls covered with draped tarps, the lightbulbs on strings like at a county fair. It was early fall, it was a moment from "Araby," the stalls shutting down, most of them empty, the desperate search as the lights extinguished themselves and left cavernous halls in the dark. Oh, for a packet of cocoa for my mocha cookies. I found vendors who had not yet closed up shop. "Please, you have *cacao*?" I'd asked. The vendors stared at me, shook their heads no. That evening, when I recounted my quest for Romanian-speaking friends, I learned that my pronunciation was off and I had wandered from vendor to vendor, seeking a small packet of shit. "For cookies!" I'd said, in Romanian, to vendor after vendor. "A small packet of the shit! I need the shit for to bake!"

Alex and the Interchangeable Boys

Moldovan boys are all copies of the same boy, scrawny, wiry, 12 years old, close-cropped hair. I can't remember their names, or even distinguish the faces. Except for Alex. He's in junior high, with light brown hair, and by the time I leave Moldova he's got a faint moustache. He addresses me in English whenever he sees me cross the junky courtyard shared by two molting apartment buildings. Some of the interchangeable boys

say hello. Once in the entry way of my stairwell a boy spat out, as though the words were acid: jingle. bells. jingle. bells.

“Hello,” Alex says. “Where are you going?” It’s getting dark. He addresses me in front of a small pack of interchangeable boys sitting on the flaking green benches built at right angles. Surely they must tease him for talking to me. I have come from the *piatsa* with a kilo each of potatoes and carrots. And from the supermarket: a block of tofu, “soy cheese” in the vernacular, and a bag of sour cream. “Home. To make dinner. I live up there,” I say, pointing to the fourth floor with my index finger freed from the bag. “I know,” he says.

Lena

It’s one thing to choose not to take communion, but it’s another thing to be denied it. It is like being locked out of your own house. Lena, one of my Moldovan students, invites me once to her church, a Baptist church planted by British missionaries. Aha, I think, if anyone will let me take communion, it’s the Baptists. I was baptized when I was six years old. This was no wussy sprinkling but a full-on hold-your-nose dunk-you-backwards-and-raise-you-to-new-life baptism in the church’s cinderblock fellowship hall.

I meet Lena in the city’s Ciocana district and we walk to a small, white building. Most of the men sit on one side, separate from the women. The service is in Russian. I speak dysfunctional Romanian and have not studied Russian at all. Lena whispers translations in my ear.

“You can’t take communion here,” she says to me. She shrugs. It’s a rule that adults must be baptized in their church in order to receive the bread and wine. My first

thought: *Bunch of legalistic poopypants!* I am being uncharitable. “Lena, Lenutchka,” I say, “it’s alright.”

After the service, Lena wants me to take photographs in the forest with some members of her church. One tall guy wears an anaphylactic zebra-print sweater. I’m in my caramel wool coat. I’ve lived in Moldova for five months and already I’ve gained ten pounds, and there’s still the winter to come.

Lena has green eyes and a sweet round face. For a while she had an English-speaking boyfriend. She reads a lot of Tolkien. Her family is Ukrainian and she wants to be a translator when she finishes her courses at our Institute. Her dad, a round happy man with a brown mustache, is the conductor of the band at the Moldovan national circus. I think this must be the coolest job for any friend’s dad to have. Lena promises some day they’ll take me to a show.

At their flat, Lena apologizes for the cold water and drafty rooms. Her tiny bedroom is stuffed with pillows and bears. Her mom serves me borscht and *coltsunash*, thumbnail-sized dumplings stuffed with potatoes, slathered with sour cream. Mostly Lena and I speak in English and she translates for her parents. Her mom stares at me whenever I open my mouth. I am as fun as the circus.

Pasha

Pasha wears the pants his mother makes him. They fit his slim hips snug, the waist low, a slight flare at the bottom. I try on a pair and pose in front of his full-length mirror. Pasha and I are the same height, but the back pockets of his pants flatten my ass into a baking tray for a toaster oven. I take the pants off and fold them on a chair.

Pasha was born in Archangel. He is a radio D.J. on Hit FM, which everyone pronounces “Heat FM,” a Russian language station in Moldova. He has a shock of blond hair that artfully hangs over his eyes. He tosses his head back, flips the golden wing for emphasis. He smells like baking bread. I tell him this when I kiss behind his ear. “My grandfather, he’s still available, he smells like bread and honey,” Pasha says. I like that by “available,” Pasha means alive.

Pasha is fun and strange, and after he kisses me I want to squeegee my face. I’m leaving Moldova in less than a month, after teaching for two years at a university across town. Pasha works out every day. Pasha says “Don’t go back to America and get fat.” I say, “I’ll miss you, too.”

I hang out at his apartment. A band called Leningrad is on TV, with a video involving pale bumpy chicken carcasses lined up on beach towels, their legs moving in a can-can. The song repeats the word *muzhik*. “What is *muzhik*?” I ask. I learn new words: *Muzh*, husband, *muzhin*, man, *muzhik*, manly man, *moy muzhik*, my manly man.

I try to cook. “How do you know which faucet to use?” I ask from the kitchen. The taps are labeled, in English, “hot” and “hot.” Pasha laughs and says, “You are the first person to notice.” Pasha’s English is good. His father was a trade ambassador in the 80s for the Soviet Union and was stationed in the U.K. for part of Pasha’s childhood. “English won’t be your bread,” Pasha says, channeling his father, “but it will be your butter.”

Pasha tells me about the separate Soviet school for expat kids, where their uniform included the red Pioneer neckerchief. The school grounds butted up against an English school, the Soviet kids separated from the British kids by a fence. “We’d wave,”

Pasha says, and I imagined a chain link fence, Pasha in a gray shirt and red Soviet kerchief, a pale blond little bird with a noble nose so outsize to his face the other kids called him “Concorde,” his pudgy arm lifted in a wave to the English boys on the other side, with whom he could not go to school.

Lily, Vlad and Catyusha

In a Moldovan classroom, I once spied a poster divided in half: in one half, a tree stands strong and tall, and a boy sits at his desk, a red line drawn down his straight, straight spine. In the other half, a tree bows to the ground and a boy hunches over his books, his spine a red curve. I tried to stand straight, not to wilt in the heat, under a big leafy tree outside the Cvin supermarket with a kilogram of peaches, waiting for Lily.

We peeled peaches and baked a crisp despite the heat, despite my kitchen that could not will itself to be clean. She stayed for three hours, and we ate and listened to music. Lily had been my student, but now we were friends. Lily had just defended her thesis, a comparison of Russian translations of *Winnie the Pooh*, so it was a visit of celebration, too. “It’s a pity you don’t know Russian,” she would say, not out of judgment but as though I had not yet visited a land she knew I would adore.

Not long before I left Moldova, I visited Lily at her apartment. Vlad took charge of the cooking: fish. Their daughter Catherine, Catya, Catyusha, still young enough to run around the apartment without a shirt, leaned her belly on the window sill, calling out to her playmates in the alley between the apartment blocks. Her feet dangled above the floor. Lily reminded her not to fall on her head. After we ate together in the tiny kitchen, Catherine slipped on a dress to play outside. We drank the very last of some uniquely bad

wine.

Our apartment buildings, both in the city's Botanica district, were half an hour apart on foot. It was summer, people strolled down the sidewalks, flower vendors watched their wares in well-lit booths all night. I felt safe walking alone. I usually walked alone, but Lily asked to join me halfway, to Traian Boulevard, a main thoroughfare.

When I got up to leave, I realized I'd bled a big red strawberry on the white seat cover. I apologized and excused myself to the toilet. It was a flashback of my junior high fear—part health education, part horror movie, part sitcom—that one day I'd get up from my desk to work out a math problem on the board and realize too late that I'd bled some serious slapstick blood all over my seat and my backpack. In some twisted way it would be like my water had broken, but even more gross. That was always happening to pregnant women on TV, their water was breaking in some inconvenient place like an elevator. Of course my entry through the Gates of Womanhood involved much less fanfare, but I didn't know that before it happened, so I was free to worry about it for ages.

I apologized again to Lily and Vlad. The rational particles of my brain said, Sister, get yourself to the health center and figure out what's the deal with this atomic period. The cheesy-metaphor lobes of my brain said, Behold, your animal body marks its territory. Look, your heart is breaking, and you just can't hold it all.

Bessarabia

Besarabia noastra, our Bessarabia, the Moldovan man with three silver teeth tells me, tapping the window glass of the dingy *rutierra* carrying us from Gura Bicului back to the capital. He gestured to the green floodplain of the Bic river, the grass pulled taut like

the felt of a pool table on either side of the river. On a map, Bessarabia spreads itself over current-day Moldova like a gauzy paper dress pattern. Both are marked by the Dniester river to the East and the Prut in the West, but Bessarabia stretched down into the Danube and the Black Sea, land now part of Ukraine.

Bessarabia changed hands like a dull nicked coin. As part of the Treaty of Bucharest, ending the Russo-Turkish war in 1812, the Ottoman Empire ceded the fertile swatch to the Russians. It was then given back to Romania, an “outpost of Latinity,” after WWI, then taken again by Russia and turned into an SSR. When the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic declared independence in 1991, there was talk of reunification, plugging Bessarabia back into “Greater Romania.” But the reunification didn’t happen, and in 2007 Romania joined the European Union, and that’s that.

One of Bessarabia’s biggest problems has been how to write its name. The orthography of Bessarabia danced back and forth to the tunes belted out by ruling powers. Bessarabia was a supple clay tablet, blank and ready for inscription. Script after script pressed into the tablet, there was no way to erase the previous letters, you just had to push down harder with your own alphabet. You had to push down into the fertile dirt with your hand, a rock, a ploughshare, a spoon, a staff. The letters stacked on top of each other, the Latin over the Cyrillic over Greek.

Someone was feeding the alphabets.

Caroline

Caroline took an hour to get ready. She scrunched her blond hair into elaborate waves and wore backless heels, a long, slinky skirt, and a chunky fake diamond ring. She

smoked thin Karelia cigarettes when her mom wasn't around. When I first moved into her family's house in Chisinau, she walked me to the passport office, a few blocks away, where I had to register with the local police and get an *anexa* for my passport. It occurred to me that Caroline wasn't used to walking really anywhere. She called taxis, or her friends picked her up. After I moved out, her dad bought her a little greenbean Peugeot.

It was unfortunate that I turned out to be not as cool as Caroline had hoped. Doamna Luda, her mother, made it clear to me that it was Caroline's whim to host an American. I lived with them for six months, before finding an apartment across town that was much closer to my university.

Caroline could be generous, a little bit, in her way. She invited me downtown to PaniPit, which was not a strip club but what my American friends called "the French place," with a courtyard full of expats in summer. You could order quail. You could fondue. We drank beer while Caroline smoked and waited for her friend Veronica, the chatty one in the red gaucho pants.

One night Caroline wanted to call a taxi to go downtown and buy a new mobile phone because she had lost her old one. My parents had called from the States and the connection was pretty good. Caroline asked if she could use the phone. She asked me to go with her. I said I was in for the night. I talked to my parents maybe once a month, and it was tricky to negotiate the seven-hour time difference. I told her to give me five minutes and explained to my parents that my Caroline needed the phone. Doamna Luda scolded her for hurrying me off the phone when my parents had called from so far away, but it didn't mean anything.

“Caroline should be more like you,” Doamna Luda would say, after Caroline had taken an hour to smooth and perfume herself before going out. Luda meant my pragmatism, my sensible gray unwrinkleable pants, my boy-short hair, my hiking boots, the frumpy messenger bag I carried to the university. Luda repeated, flashing her wide smile at her shined, coiffed daughter, “Caroline should be more like you.”

MORE COLORS, MORE WINGS

Elaine's face smiles, like the moon. Her bargain: all the Romanian monasteries I want for one castle. To Romania we travel from Moldova, its neighbor. Elaine teaches health education in Sculeni, a border village, and I work in Chisinau, the capital. Many hands have drawn the boundaries in this part of the world. Romania once included most of present-day Moldova, and the country still has a Moldavia region, a place of confluence, where the Russian, Habsburg, and Ottoman empires waxed and waned. Today Romania's shape suggests a fish as the map swims on the television screen for the weather report.

Romania is not a real place but a beat-up cardboard diorama full of vampires, gypsies, goats and orphans, superstitions like cobwebs in all corners, a scrim of communism throwing shadows. It is a nation molting off the dead skin of past misrule, a nation in transition. Of course, so is our Moldova. Compared with Moldova, though, Romania glitters. And this is more than metaphor. From a night black without street lamps in Giurgiulesti, Moldova's southernmost village, Romania glows from across the Danube Delta like an oasis of light.

In late June, Elaine and I leave Moldova from the bus station in Chisinau. The *autogara* is a storm without an eye, no calm place in that swirl of exhaust fumes and people, plastic bags and boxes heading back to the village. In questionable urban planning, the *autogara* nudges against the *piatsa centrala*, the largest outdoor market in

the country. Vendors display housecoats like loud velour flags with zippers down the front. They stack plastic clocks, boxes of baby chicks and flats of eggs. Men in fake leather jackets lug dollies piled with bags of vegetables or laundry soap. On the side of the market near the Hotel Meridian, acrylic blankets flutter in bright colors and animal prints. The first time I navigated the *gara* on my own, the directions I'd been given didn't make much sense. I called my boss for help. *You will see many carpets*, she said, as though this were the crucial clarification.

The huge market throbs like a clogged, cacophonous heart. The alley between the *piatsa* and the *gara* clots all day. On the *gara* side of the street, men, women in headscarves, young girls in tight jeans and high heels wait for their rides. They stand at tables, drinking soda or beer, eating ice cream. Techno music blares from a kiosk selling audio cassettes. Nearby a woman with a crown of dark hair, wearing something like a sports bra and a breezy skirt, sways her hips to music from a stereo. A small crowd forms around her, glued to her moves.

Elaine stays in my apartment sometimes when she travels to the capital. She brings me tiny packets of miso soup mix her mom sends her from California. Elaine is 23 and has never been on a date. She has no agenda for our trip except a castle. That I have made plans with a person even more passive than I am leaves me in the awkward position of Being In Charge. I want: churches, nuns, angels. To be moved. To wake up from a monastery bunk and watch beatific Orthodox nuns do calisthenics in a courtyard, to hike from the painted walls of the monasteries' churches into cathedrals of trees in the forest, buttressed with pine and light. I want to explore on my own, but I'm also afraid I'll miss

something; I want a guide to tell me what I'm seeing, to make sure I catch every drop of meaning.

On this trip I want everything planned; I want everything spontaneous. This is my Piscean way. At the end of the zodiac, Pisces bears all the wisdom and failures of the entire cycle. It's a lot to sift through. I am two fish, panic and serendipity, swimming in opposing directions, facing each other, opening and closing their mouths. *What are you saying?* I ask the fish. *O*, they say. It is their refrain. *O O O O*. I try to count the Os like the chimes handed down from a clock. The fish turn in their circle like a compass, a globe, the ever constant, all embracing, giving away nothing *O*. Zero, the stopwatch before the race, before time gets invented, before the universe has nudged its odometer. The *O* that divides anything back into itself.

With the *O* racket echoing in my head, I forget that Elaine and I speak some Romanian. Elaine speaks so well she can teach sixth graders, in Romanian, to brush their teeth and stay away from cigarettes. I panic that we won't see everything, forgetting that of course we won't see everything, and rather than wait into our old age for public transportation, we hire a car and driver in Suceava to take us to some of the Bukovina monasteries. This is a bad idea. The pace is too fast. The colors blur together. Every church is an overwhelming feast. I can't hope to taste it all. Ciprian, a young skinny guy with a dark buzz cut and fake leather jacket, hangs out at the tourism office. Ciprian is also a bad idea. I want to enjoy the churches for myself; we can ask nuns or latch on to a tour group if we suffer desperate questions. And yet. I like someone whispering facts, even disjointed, jagged, questionable facts in my ear. We need a guide, of course we need a guide, and I inquire, shyly, might he be available to go with us?

In the car, Ciprian plays *manele*, turbo-folk with a strong bass line and relentless repetition. It is a polarizing force: either you want to bellydance like a snake or lunge for aspirin. *Manele* unfurls its tremolos. Ciprian chatters. We pass farmed fields, tracts with *Alice in Wonderland* stripes, haystacks like giant pastries with poles sticking out at odd angles, like something on an appetizer tray. A pig pokes its snout from the back of a horse-drawn *carutsa*.

It is when the edge of the Carpathian Mountains rise into view that my heart pounds faster than the *manele*. Music switches on in my head, a celestial *aaaah*, as a halo of light pours through the sieve of the sky. Another curve in the road and the mountains drop out of sight for a moment. *Go back!* But I'm sure the driver can't hear me over the quivering riffs and stairstepping bass.

The Carpathian Mountains cover almost a third of Romania's land area, and they pull me into their orbit as we skirt Transylvania. I gaze at these thickly forested hills so different from anything in Moldova, even its prized Codru, the national forest. Although I regret my decision to hire this car, I can't berate myself with my whole brain. *Ah*, say the mountains, an angel choir's *Ah*, alpha and omega, the first and last syllables of *Alleluia*. The pointed A of the forest's *Ah* mimes the peaked tree tops, those stately, unfathomable trees.

Ciprian dotes on Elaine, who is petite and more sociable. I scribble in my notebook. All day long I ask clarifying questions of Ciprian, noting dates and names I will probably never need again but who knows? My whole existence is a collection of things I might or might not use again, a gamble: what's a bargain, and what's dead weight, ready to be cast overboard? *Professor, you are writing a book?* he asks. Winks.

Although its forests gather pine, birch, fir, and poplar, Bukovina takes its name from its beech wood trees. Stefan cel Mare, Stefan the Great, a national hero and religious saint, defended this land against the Ottoman Empire from 1457 to 1504. He and his son, Petru Rares, built monasteries in Bukovina both as fortresses, their walls and towers still standing, and as monuments for their victories. Frescoes of biblical scenes with a military flourish gave illiterate soldiers and worshippers something instructive to look at. The land fell anyway, under Rares' watch, to Ottoman rule.

These monasteries and their painted churches have survived shifts in boundaries and rulers, and centuries of weather. They are praised not least for their paint. No one has successfully copied the formula. Robert Kaplan, in his book *Balkan Ghosts*, credits the paints' staying power to *pure dyes: madder for red, cobalt and lapis lazuli for blue, sulfur for yellow*. Some say the paint contains cheese, and its butterfat keeps the color.

These churches also attract the eye with their shape. As the Moldavia region has witnessed overlapping cultures, so the churches themselves blend East and West, and Gothic and Byzantine architectural styles. For Kaplan, *the fan-shaped roof, extending far out over the walls to cover the paintings from the rain, suggested the protective intimacy of a peasant's home*. The peaked roofs look like dark party hats.

At Voronet monastery, touted in one guide as the "Sixtine Chapel of the East" and known for its distinct blue, a school group shuffles on the grounds. The rickrack of scaffolding wraps a slice of building under renovation. Ciprian leads us through the church's *pronaos*, the first of its three rooms, this one painted according to the church calendar, a block for each day. Scenes of Christ's passion line the altar room, the

innermost space, including Peter's denial of Christ. Christ's prophecy in Ciprian's words: *you will drop me three times until the chicken will sing*. I cannot dislike him.

Outside, near the top of the Last Judgment scene, angels fold the ends of the zodiac, rolling up time like a picnic blanket. A zodiac on a church seems incongruous, something occult grafted onto something Christian, but Ciprian explains it as a symbol of eternity over which God presides: *Jesus is the center of all time*. The Last Judgment includes a wasteland scene of souls bundled like babies. Fire rains. Angels blow horns. Fish, bears, lions, tigers, a melancholy elephant bring bones of the dead for the final reckoning, a host of animals coughing up their snacks. A kitten sharpens her claws near our feet while all the fire of judgment pours into an elephant's mouth. *The deer has nothing to return because in the Romanian folklore it stands for innocence*, notes one travel guide. This Last Judgment is *processed in a characteristic Moldova way: the souls carried to heaven are wrapped in Moldova's towels, while the souls doomed to the fire of Gehenna wear the turbans of the Turks, the Moldova's enemies*. Judgment is not announced by a trumpet but a *bucium*, a Moldovan folk wind instrument. The frescoes show the Bible, but a Bible as seen through 15th century Moldovan eyes. God, or His word, minted in one's own image.

The churches I know exalt words not pictures. Orthodox churches blindside me with their gold, their paintings and colors. Red rules the Moldovitsa monastery. We enter the grounds and pass a nun with aviator glasses. In the altar room, lined with scenes of Christ, I am knocked down by the faces. These are old, open faces. Men cast lots for Christ's robe, a man in red waves scissors, threatening the integrity of the garment, to cut

it to bits. Other men with long faces stare, dice resting by a man wearing what looks like a dwarf hat. There is no avoiding the crucifixion: the lifting of Christ's limp body off the cross, his halo intact, blood leaking down his feet. A lanky man with tools ready to pluck the nails from His flesh. Two women and an old man hover above Christ's swaddled form at the burial. A woman in red kisses his cheek. The other woman stands with hands upraised in a gesture of *what will we do?* I hear *mmmmm* like a buzz of flies in the altar room, but only in retrospect do I think of Emily Dickinson. God the whitehaired Father, the Son, and the dove preside over the middle of the iconostasis, the border beyond which only male servants of the Orthodox Church may tread.

Outside the church, two wings of an altar hold candles for the *morti*, those who have died, and a big middle section for the *vii*, the living. One small candle burns. Next to the altar a sign admonishes us to *pastrati curatenie*, keep it clean. Ciprian fawns on us and struggles with irregular verbs.

Romanian offers many more words for devils than angels. My Moldovan friend Rodica, a teacher, easily rattles off levels of devils: *diavol*, *demon*, *satana*, *Beelzebub*, *drac*, *naiba*, *necuratul*, *bata-l crucea* ("let the cross beat him"), *bata-l toaca* ("let the stick that announces ceremonies in church beat him"), *duca-se pe pustii* ("let him go to some uninhabited places or desert"). Angel words can't compete. Superstition enriches the infernal vocabulary; it's less risky to speak of the devil indirectly, Rodica says, and even in the same breath as the cross (like *bata-l crucea*). Uttering the word *dracul*, devil, can bring his power on you; after saying the word or even hearing it, cross yourself three

times, to be safe. *With angels it's easy*, Rodica explains. *You can say 'angel' all day long and nothing will happen to you.*

On the walls of Sucevitsa monastery, deep in the Carpathians, Mary and Jesus wear crowns. *Not normal*, Ciprian says, pointing to the crowns. Russian Orthodoxy, not Romanian, stresses royalty. The Ladder of Saint John from Sinai cuts a decrescendo across one side of the church. It is a ladder of thirty rungs, and a crown waits at the highest step. Some mortals fall headlong off the ladder, arms and legs askew. Demons dance with open arms. Things lose form, plunging into the void.

On this wall, the angel space and demon space may be equal, but the arrangement of angels is striking. Despite their semantic disadvantage, they rule. Angels are a more orderly force, their yellow halos like astronaut helmets bubbled on their heads, the arpeggios of their cream-tipped wings dyed deep red, light green, dark blue. Some angels carry what look like *prosoape*, long white traditional cloths often embroidered with flowers. In Moldovan and Romanian homes these cloths garland rooms, draped around icons in corners. They appear at weddings, around the necks of the *nanasi*, the godparents of the bride and groom, or around wreaths of bread big as truck tires.

I can't stop looking at the ladder. Monastery walls surround us, as the Carpathians surround the walls. I want to stay here, but I don't ask the nuns if it's possible; the fear fish in my nature says we'd be stranded, though there are buses and taxis and someone's got to be heading to town eventually. The colors mesmerize, but I break my own trance. Ciprian is in a hurry, our time clicking fast. A woman circles Sucevitsa monastery

beating a wooden plank the size of a cutting board with a *toaca*. She calls to prayer those with ears to hear. Another nun climbs into a red Opel and drives away.

Near the town of Raudati, a man sleeps in a flowerbed by the sidewalk. We stop at a pottery factory. In the studio a lonely boy throws black clay, spins it into ashtrays, while three blank women look on. Elaine and I browse the shelves of vases and knickknacks, but I don't want to weigh myself down. I know I need my feet on the ground. I need to move at the speed of nuns in a courtyard: walking. Augustine's words give off the O of an echo, *Solvitur ambulando*: It is solved by walking.

In the Carpathians, I feel girded with sound like the vibrations of a singing bowl, a glorious tinnitus that I can't and don't want to shake. As we leave the mountains behind, a heaviness descends. I can't breathe. In those mountains I felt what I came here for, and I'm not ready to let go. This delayed reaction isn't new for me. I often feel my compass spinning when I travel. Not only am I disoriented in time and place and language, but I feel aimless until I trip over a touchstone—an image, a view, a plate of food, a joke—that cries out *ah, clumsy pilgrim! This is why you're here!* I decide we should sleep surrounded by these mountains, not in a hostel back in Suceava. In true Pisces fashion, we'll face the way we came.

I ask the driver and Ciprian to take us back to Voronet. Once we change direction, the right pitch sings inside me. I feel so fed by Bukovina's colors that I can even spare some generosity, a little light, for myself. In fact, I'm on a self-affirmation roll, something I never bargain for. There are many ways to see these monasteries, besides

zipping past in a hired car or hitchhiking and camping for weeks in the forest, I tell myself. Each path can be beautiful, I say, giving myself a high five.

At the gate of Voronet, a whitehaired woman takes my arm and leads me to her two-room house around the corner where Elaine and I can stay for 100,000 lei, less than four dollars. Doamna Elena's place is small and old-lady musty with a wooden outhouse in the yard. Elaine and I drop our bags and head down the hill to find some dinner. The dark green night is brisk, even in June. I wear my one sweater and my sandals, the only shoes I brought. I guess I was feeling optimistic when we left Chisinau, or not thinking of mountain weather while sitting all summer like a little cake in Moldova's Easy-Bake oven.

At 9:30, when we return to Doamna Elena's, she is already in her bed in the front room, the room with the stove, pots, pans, and dirty dishes. She is laid out as though waiting for the great O of death, but she rouses at our entrance, pours water into a large bowl for us to wash our faces and hands. Elena's walls sprout icons in their corners. A Fanta poster smiles down on us from the ceiling. *Prosoape* butterfly along the walls. Identical prints of the last supper watch us like two eyes in a strange head. Elaine and I whisper, trying not to disturb Elena, whose room is not separated from ours by a door.

This place makes me think about doubles: the two opposing yet identical fish in my nature, and their isometric pull. Elaine and Elena, one whitehaired and bent with time, one dark-haired and fresh-faced, ready to race her students across the courtyard after class. Those two Last Suppers, that table spread before two sets of disciples. The dual familiar and estranged feelings I have about the landscape: I was shaped by mountains, but not these mountains, and by churches, though not these churches.

The next day Elaine and I wear the same clothes as the day before. We have seen the Humor monastery briefly with Ciprian, of course, but we haven't seen it from Voronet, through the small town of Gura Humorului, and up the hill. Though Humor and its monastery are pronounced oo-MOR, Humor would be a fitting name for our destination if I were of a more allegorical turn of mind. Where's your sense of oo-MOR? I ask myself. Lighten up, sister, I say. You can't take yourself too seriously, kiddo, not in sandals like that.

Elaine and I are quiet on the five-kilometer walk. We dodge some hail and fail to hitch a ride the rest of the way. We console ourselves with tiny jam-filled croissants from an *alimentara*. A muddy white dog decides to join our pack. The weather conforms to a made-for-TV-movie version of our day: the clouds part at the monastery as we finish our climb. On rocks we look at roses and the streaked church walls. We sun ourselves like snakes.

Walking jogs my thinking about accepting the backlash of beauty. I remember that everything has a price, and the surrender to something so marvelous, so powerful to bring me out of mind—a meaning and effect of “ecstatic”—also bears the shadow side of reckoning with my limits. Who told me I'd see everything? Who would expect that? *Accept the limits. Enjoy the gifts.* That's what this place tells me. *Give thanks you have eyes to see.*

After Elaine and I dry out, we head to the train station at Gura Humorului. Three boys on bikes pass us, ride faster then lag behind, keep us in sight. They address us as young people, not formally. Elaine is accustomed to dealing with kids. *Why do you come here?* the boys ask. *It's beautiful,* we answer. *You should come to America,* I say, for no

reason. *Will you give us your address?* asks one. A boy not much younger than my own brother makes a special effort to keep up with me and introduces himself as Nicushor. I give him and his friends each a piece of gum. *Do you have any money?* Nicushor asks. *Not much.* He wants to know what an operation in America would cost for his blind sister. Do I know anyone who can help? I tell him I'll try to find something, but he should keep asking around. I take his address. And please could we give him some money for ice cream? I say no. I don't know why I say no. Even if it's a scam, even if he isn't a kind boy looking out for his blind sister, so what? Ice cream is a gamble a traveler can take.

Even a day of walking can't solve everything for me. Walking has two sides, too: it can generate greater awareness and compassion, or at least point to a place like a dry riverbed where compassion might flow one day. But walking also calls up the crabby parts of me and makes me look at them, walk with them like embarrassing companions who pick their noses and complain loudly about everything. Maybe the idea is that in looking at those shady parts, I also have to give them a hug, hug them like the kid who acts out not because she is super evil but because she feels she isn't being heard. I hear you, kid, I'm supposed to say. I love you, kid.

But in fact, I just want to be magically transported to Sinaia without waiting for the train or losing a night's sleep in the jaundiced light of the transfer station. I say no to the ice cream, and Nicushor disappears. I must already feel guilty for telling him I'll try to find information for his sister, knowing I probably won't. Weeks later I do make a couple of half-hearted efforts and then choose to forget about it. Ashamed of my two faces, I don't want to look at his young one. I want him to go away. I don't know what, in those moments, turned my heart to stone.

Sinaia, a ski resort town in the Prahova valley named for Mount Sinai, has a monastery dating from the 17th century and a castle used as a royal palace and later a retreat for Ceausescu's communists. I see my breath as I climb, still in sandals, up the station steps. In the morning chill, vendors line the margins on the paved walk to the castle. Peles castle emerges with its German Renaissance hulk like a movie set. We buy a roof-shingle-size piece of *susan*, sticky homemade granola of sesame seeds, honey and the thick, tongue-numbing aftertaste of sunflower oil. I buy a small plastic cup of raspberries. A man sells boomerang toys, flicking them in the air and catching them, while a black and white rabbit on a leash sniffs around his table, attracting customers. Vendors offer hunks of quartz, rugs, handmade doilies, Pokemon purses, and snow globes, including one with a scene of the Last Supper filled with colored beads that give the icon a Jimmy Buffett flavor. I consider buying this snow globe, the one with its Jesus with a face like an unbaked pie, blurred past the normal edges of a face. I want to trim His excess crust. I take Elaine's picture with Peles castle in the background, so we have proof we've seen something.

Our afternoon train from Sinaia to Bucharest runs hot and slow. There is no question of leaving windows open on both sides of our compartment because of the *curent*, the perilous crossbreeze that gets blamed for earaches, colds, stiff necks, and muscle deformation. Most babies and small children wear hats and bonnets, even into the warm days of late spring or summer. Moldovans are aggressive bundlers, their babies like bright, stiff marshmallows. Rodica explained to me once in ominous tones: *if the air that circulates is capable of shutting violently doors and windows, imagine what it can do to*

your internal ears and throat. People swelter. The window across from our compartment slides down about four inches but requires someone to hold it in place. I prop it open with my body, desperate for air. Standing, breathing, I am attacked by sunflowers. At times their yellow blurs unbroken for miles, dizzying, the motion nauseating like a carnival ride.

Elaine and I have one more day of walking in Bucharest before our train back to Moldova. Elaine has no preference so I set out to find the church of Bucur, the namesake shepherd of the city as well as a word for joy. With our map we walk among the fountains of Bulevardul Unirii, then the crooked elbows of side streets, looking for this church. We stop at a restaurant and ask a cook but cannot get our bearings as to how we, two people, relate to the uncaring lines and squares on a white piece of paper. In its alleys the city is more under construction, dusty, cracked into pieces than the Bulevardul Unirii suggests with its cavalcade of billboards and grand buildings modeled on the Champs Elysees. A truck with several workers lounging in its bed passes us, two girls with question marks where our faces used to be.

I do not grieve that we don't find the church, though we had no trouble finding the multiplex cinema or the Pizza Hut. I don't hear the angelic *Ah* or ringing *O*, just the beat of a sledgehammer busting up the sidewalk, eating it out from under us. I am a lousy mystic. My flesh is still here; it hasn't burned off. But there's a pull to the holy, like the pull to the strange. It bends me to monastery's simple clock of prayers, to its colors. There is nothing quite like these colors where I come from. They are obligate. They do not translate. They make me believe I can be baptized by color, made pure by color, not only by water or fire.

THEY SAY IT IS SO

Mama Nina's *racitura* congealed in the fridge, waiting for Easter. The dish's name is related to the Romanian *rece*, cold, and the first syllable sounds like "retch," which more or less described my response. For *racitura*, Nina boiled a cleaned chicken, which was then disassembled and arranged on three or four small platters. Then the broth was poured around black-red knobs of kidney, the brittle spread of toes, the neck sheathed in tender flesh. *Racitura* was always a hit at parties. The organs and appendages vanished. Guests spooned up cold blobs of broth like molten light.

Racitura was the second most disturbing thing I ever saw in Nina's kitchen. The most disturbing thing was back in the days of the Old Freezer, which I opened once to find an intact pig's head. The pig's head wasn't wrapped in plastic or posing in a Tupperware box. It was just there, looking blankly from its icy lair towards the white wall behind me. Wisps of frost formed an aura or halo helmet around the pig's head. The dead pig was not distressed. He looked good. He seemed peaceful. The pig currently living in Nina's backyard was named Shashlik, a Russian word for barbecue. I wondered what this pig's name had been. I wondered what the head was for. Perhaps it had talismanic powers to ward off evil freezer spirits. Possibly it featured in some Moldovan proverb I hadn't learned yet: *pig's head in freezer, food all winter*, or *a frozen pig's head always speaks truth*. Perhaps it was a party trick (Nina asks dinner guest nearest the freezer to hand her the ice cream. Guest opens freezer. Guest: *Aaaah!* Family explodes,

Nina weeps with laughter). Maybe this pig's head was remarkable only to me because everyone in the village had their own pig's head propped next to the frozen corn.

This was my third Easter with my host family in Mitoc, a small village in Moldova. Before I moved to Chisinau, the capital, for my Peace Corps assignment, I'd lived in Mitoc for a few weeks of language training, and I returned there on holidays. By now I knew the routine. I slept a little after dinner, then at 11:30 my host brother Mihai opened the door and called to me from the hallway : *Are you going?* I brushed my teeth and dug out my scarf. Nina and Natasha, my host sister, had cooked all day. Natasha was already asleep, but Nina arranged the food in the basket to be blessed: small patties of fried pork, smoked duck, baked and herbed cuts of lamb, *miel*, a word I always confused with *miere*, honey. She stacked wedges of *cozonac*, a sweetbread with golden raisins and a sugary glaze, and *pasca*, a bread braided around pockets of egg and sheep cheese.

Nina polished the eggs, all dyed red, with animal fat so they would shine in the candlelight. I often saw red in the village: the *bobochi*, baby ducks daubed with thumbprints of red paint, or a cow with a red tassel in its forelock, or babies with red strings around their wrists or ankles. *Why red?* I asked. Nina explained that it was a color of protection. Later I learned that in Russian, which is spoken along with Romanian in Moldova, a word for "red" is also an archaic word for "beauty"; Moscow's Red Square is named for its splendor, not the color of its bricks.

Iasha, my host dad, carried Nina's basket. By the time he, Mihai, and I reached the church, the faithful had already marched around it three times and gathered inside. The choir, mostly women in white frilly headscarves, sang the liturgy like a run-down cassette player, stretching out the sounds. The melody line of *Hristos a inviat*, Christ is

risen, reached its highest note at the “at” of “inviat,” then stairstepped down into something about Christ conquering *moarta*, death.

I stood near the back of the church in my leopard-print headscarf. I kept an eye on Nina’s basket parked in the foyer, checking on it as though there were a baby inside. A heavy older woman leaned forward from her wooden stool and poked my wrist. *Nu se poate*—you can’t do that, she said. My hands wanted my pockets. I folded my hands in front of me, lest they fall to other mischief. Mihai shuffled in and out of the church. He had lots of people to talk to; he was a ninth grader at the village school and a DJ at the nearby discotec, marked by its unequivocal “Disco Bar” sign. Nina worked three nights a week at the disco’s adjacent store in addition to a part-time bookkeeping job at the mayor’s office. She sold vodka and cognac by the shot or bottle, and beer, soda, juice, boxes of wrapped candies, blocks of butter, and whole fish shining silver and gold from a white plate in the case.

The Orthodox service was a radical shift for a good Protestant girl like me. Everyone stood except the old and infirm, who took the small stools along the periphery. The church had no linear pews or orderly aisles. It did have a convection current of worshippers kissing icons, passing candles and money back and forth to the little stand in the corner. As in the markets or on the bus, in church there’s a high tolerance for pushing. Moldova is a culture of shared space, of common rooms that become bedrooms, full of Transformer furniture (sofa and armchair by day, beds for three people by night. More than meets the eye!). I loved my pockets and I loved my space. *Isn’t it too much space?* my university students asked when they visited my apartment for a class party. It was a big place: three rooms, one of which my landlady claimed for storage, a kitchen and two

large balconies. But too much space? Hadn't I taught them any better than this? The question was absurd. *Hello, are you joking? I'm American*, I reminded them. *There's no such thing as too much space.*

Toward the end of the Easter vigil the priest repeated three times *Hristos a inviat*. Each time we answered him *Adverat ca-a inviat*, Indeed He is risen. For forty days after Easter, this exchange replaced the usual *Buna ziua* greeting in the village. The assurance of *adverat ca-a inviat* also called to mind *amen*, which simply affirms "so be it" or "it is so." It also made me think of the absence of *Alleluia* in the Episcopalian liturgy during Lent, and its magnificent reappearing at Easter. Throughout the Easter season it's magnified into a double alleluia: *Alleluia, Alleluia*, and those Alleluias explode with the force of pent-up blooms. Every Easter I find my mouth has missed the shape of the word, the workout of all those vowels. *Alleluia* is a word that asks to be sung, like the nasal "n" at the end of *amen*, a consonant behaving like a vowel that can stretch as far as you have breath to sing it.

Iasha, Mihai and I moved outside for the end of the service, lining up along the path from the front gate to the driveway behind the church. Many more people stood with their baskets and candles, waiting for a blessing, than could have possibly fit in the sanctuary. We lit up the yard like an airport runway. The whole village was in on this. At 2 a.m., there was a hushed busyness, not a somber wait. The mourning was over. Christ was already back. People chatted. *Christ is risen*, said one. *True, he is risen*, answered another.

I recognized candlelit faces in the crowd, a gallery of faces from my first summer in Moldova, including Nina's friend with the mentally disabled daughter. This woman

with frizzled brown hair and a gold front tooth, who was probably in her late thirties but looked older, led her teenage daughter by the arm like a suitor, gently guiding her through the press of bodies as though they were headed for a cotillion instead of waiting for the priest. The girl wore a thin dress and house slippers. Her eyes crossed. She had freckles and was quiet.

I had seen the mother and daughter once in Nina's kitchen that first summer, when I came home from my Romanian language class. In Peace Corps speak, I was to begin "self-directed time," practicing my verb conjugations; in Romanian, I fell into a *pui de somn*, literally a "chick of sleep," the etymology of which I never really got a handle on. I greeted the mother and daughter and sat at the table, while Nina made me a snack of fried potatoes and some *compot*, the boiled fruit and sugar drink she kept in big jars in the cellar and called Moldovan Pepsi. Small piles of women's and children's clothing lay on a nearby rug. It wasn't clear to me whether the clothes were being sold or given, or whether they belonged to Nina or this woman. The freckled girl stared at my glasses, which were a rare sight.

Outside the Mitoc church, candles gave up their pixels of light. The night was not warm even at the end of April, and my dingy camel-colored coat got wet in the light rain. Iasha, trained as an engineer, flopped a piece of plastic over the open basket so the food would stay dry and the candles wouldn't set the whole thing on fire. I felt awkwardly proud to be with them: this dad who was not my dad, the brother not my brother, the church not my church.

The priest in his white brocade vestments made the rounds with an older man who carried a bucket of water. Into the bucket the priest dipped a broom of the dried flowers

of *busuioc*, sweet basil; every flick spattered us with sweet-smelling water. Mihai and I joked that we were not very faithful. We were like characters in a parable who were not big-time evil but just kind of dopey and inattentive, because our candles blew out at the easiest breeze. We kept lighting them from Iasha's steady flame. We cupped our flickering candles in our palms, we made little hand-caves, but the wind snuffed mine out again just as we passed through the church gate and headed home. After that I had to imagine its light.