

Spring 2014

Fiction Fix 15

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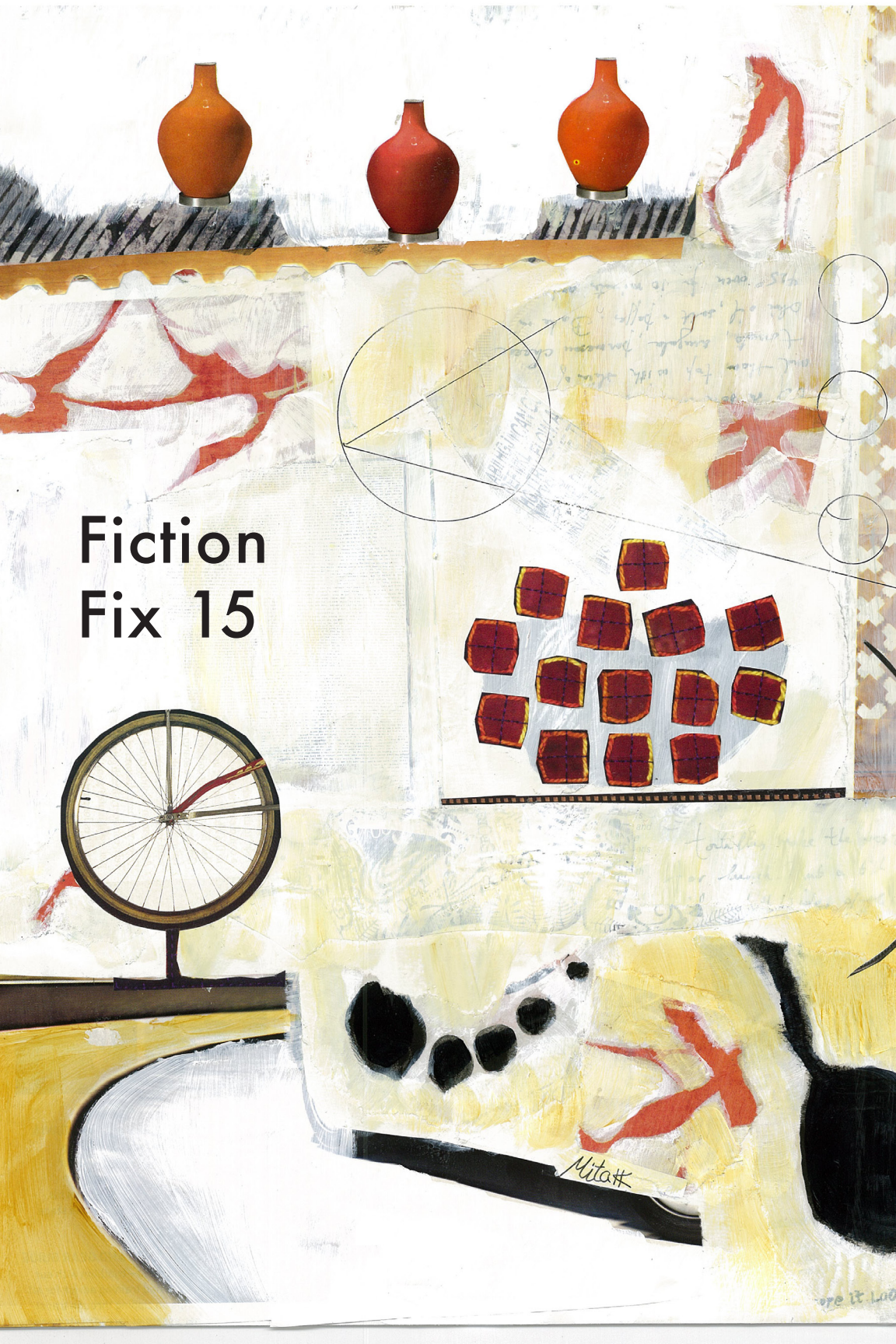
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Fiction Fix 15



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Fiction Fix 15

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Dear Readers,

At *Fiction Fix*, we publish stories that dare to be human in exactly the ways they *must* be, even (and especially) if that means pushing the boundaries of language, form, and culture. We publish stories that broaden our understanding of *what it means to be a human being in the world*. With this issue (our fifteenth) and after over a decade, we're humbled by the

way our writers continually make the world new for us. In many different ways, the stories herein push boundaries in order to achieve this remarkable feat. We love them, yes. May they speak to you. May they keep you company. May they bring you moments of joy and new understanding, and make you feel as deeply as they have us.

April



Mame Ekblom Cudd

Calling Out to Lizzie

It's the day before my surgery, and Da, before tending the cows, says goodbye. He places his hand on my head, then his cheek, too, his breath slow and calming.

Last night I heard them, my parents, in the front room, their speech all low and whispery, worried about my sixth surgery to repair my cleft palate—for clear speech, finally, maybe. My cousin Anne, down the road in Killybegs, she got the harelip, too. A little scar, a fine, white line is all she has, but her speech is clear.

Mrs. Mulrany's great-aunt, visiting for the first time, popped in yesterday and asked my mum, "Your Fiona, is she a bit deaf, as well?" I do sound like that. The words floating, my tongue loose in my mouth, not touching the roof, not well enough for clear speech. I stay silent at school and silent with the boy I like, Thomas.

So many hospital visits and just this past July the doctor saying, with a probe in my mouth, pointing, showing, "You see this extreme deformity here," and my parents never using "extreme deformity" with me or anyone. We all sat straight in our chairs as those words flew around the room, hitting us.

And afterwards silence in the car, my mum reaching her hand back between the seats to hold my hand for a while. We left the windows rolled down, so Da could smoke and those horrible words could be peeled away and tossed out into the sea air.

Today we drive back to the children's hospital in Limerick for a better palate, advancements Da says we should not ignore. Only Mum and I are going. Da will stay back with Connie and Michael and Lizzie.

Lizzie, my little sister, jumps behind me on the bed as I pack. My talker, my kitten, she's small and quick, affectionate, so physical. She'll curl up in my lap, or Da's or Mum's. Quietly she will talk and then, dancing almost, she'll spin over to the visitors in our kitchen, speaking for me, answering, laughing with Thomas, as well. Reading, now that she can, the notes on the little chalkboard Mum gave me. Always there's a giggle as I write more and more complicated words, and she says them perfectly, explaining. She takes me in good humor or not. She runs with me, keeping up almost as fast to tend to the

cows, to bring them down to the second pasture. And she knows the whistles, directing them through the little gate near the stream.

"You're a big help to your sister, Lizzie Keneally," Mr. Mulrany said yesterday, catching us on the road with the cows, asking again of the surgery and Lizzie answering, cuddling against me, but her speech clear and sounding much older than any child of eight.

We walked home through the tall, wet grass, waving to Mr. Mulrany, with me thinking of Lizzie's childish movements and laughter. Yet she speaks clearly to them, to our neighbors and friends, and then she hides behind me as if I'm the one who spoke. So well done that when they answer, they look at my eyes. Sixteen in a month, I will be. I should speak, I hope, better, and I shall have to leave Lizzie alone. She must speak for herself.

We sit in the kitchen, still in the dark, and Mum makes the tea before we leave. Connie and Michael have gone out to help Da. Lizzie, she picks up the chalkboard and climbs onto my lap. When I get home, I will call out her name, nice and clear, and hear it she will, all the way from the second pasture.

D. E. Smith

Familiar Faces

People began first to trickle but then pour, the volume of bodies increasing steadily as a function of time, into the capacious, near hollow (with an empty, not objectless but sort of under-filled quality one might impose upon the near vacuum of space) gym/auditorium where this morning's, 8/11/2001, pre-semester gathering/briefing/new faculty orientation and all around rundown of any changes that might have occurred or been issued in the sort of handed-down-from-above kind of way changes are generally implemented is being held. It is sparsely filled but filling, echoes abounding. Hanging banners that, flaglike on a windless day, dangle gonfalon-style from the steel I-beams that constitute the rafters; six basketball backboards and lowly attached goals, two on either side of its full court length and four half court numbers for practice, hover unused; a greyly carpeted, shallow stage with an escutcheon emblazoned podium stands, now empty, under the one goal in front of the dull, unelectrified scoreboard; dozens of rows of black, squeaky, stackable chairs rolled in on golf cart trailers, mixed with the increasing numbers of drowsy souls that all enter, stand for a second at the back, heads moving from left to right or right to left, all searching for a familiar face or faces or large blocks of vacant seats to go ahead and grab and save in the event that some familiar face not yet here will eventually arrive, scanning the room left to right or right to left, for his or her now seated familiar face.

You arrive as the flood subsides to a trickle, most attendees now seated, interfacing, giving the gym/auditorium a sort of indecipherable, white noise hum. The time it takes for the few now arriving, not late but close to it, to choose a seat lags long, faces now blurring, identities lost in the nebulous crowd of unsorted rows. Some stand in an apparent state of vertical tetraplegia, just heads moving back and forth like spectators of an extended volley, endless, no familiar face standing out in the crowd of innumerable, blankly anonymous faces. But not you, knowing no one, proceeding anxiously past the indecisive, bobble-heading bodies, walking to the dead, anonymous middle, spotting on some row there a set of five seats, comfortable empty, pinching just past, between bunched right-



Synthetic Maximalism

angled knees and chairs, the slight gap altogether too narrow for normal walking, forcing you to do a sort of sidelong shuffle, bumping knees and trampling purses and apologizing along the way, "Oops... sorry, sorry, excuse me, sorry."

Seated, you sigh, trying to breathe downward so as not to send violent coffee breath vectoring into the rows ahead, clocking unconscious those in your direct path, turning nauseated peripheral heads your way, disgusted, looking—bald eyes wide and white with angrily pointed pupils—directly at you. You slump in your seat, knees knocking the vertical axis of the back in front of you—whose occupant grunts, audibly agitated—you just trying to reach the phone in your pants pockets that are really too tight for things, but what are your options, really? Pulled out, you begin fiddling with it for no real purpose other than to avoid looking at other people's eyes. Direct eye contact prompts questions, and questions prompt the reasonable expectation of an answer followed by other complementary questions of your own, then their subsequent answers and, God forbid, a conversation with you unprepared for all the bi-directional expectations that entails. You're smack dab in the middle of the set of five empty black seats that squeak as you shift. You are purposely in the middle because you think that this provides the best possible chance, that when the doors close and lights dim and the presenters begin to present, that at least one of the adjacent seats will remain empty, that if one is eventually occupied, you'll be able to comfortably cross your legs away, body turned, politely demonstrating a calm in-

difference and absolutely no desire to interface or become familiar or engage in the sort of inane, completely unnecessary interactions that come tethered—like birthdays and cake—to these sorts of events. But of course, to no avail, best laid plans and all, because not a minute-and-a-half after you sat, fumbled for your phone, attempting with all possible rigor to keep your eyes down, only looking responsively to sounds or possible indications that the thing might be about to begin, ending this purgatory of pure dread—not two minutes, even—some slender blonde in a skirt tight and slit, pushing the conceptual bounds of professional attire, squeezes with short sidewise horizontal shuffles just past your bunched, right-angled knees, diffusing some amalgamated trail of spring flowers and berries and plops down, her sigh vectoring sweet mints right at you.

And of course, you look down, glancing only in the reflexive way that you do when something flies at your face and then directly down again, smiling awkwardly (God knows the tortured ways your face can twist, furrowed brows and mouth slipping around liquidly).

“God, what a morning—didn’t think I was going to make it,” she says, flushed, breathing deeply in a slow, pronounced kind of way that does something to her chest

No, you need some other type of thing, something irregular that preternaturally violates the natural order of things, an event of eschatological significance whose apocalyptic proportions would render the significance of this and every other previous occasion trivial.

at once reverently beautiful and luridly seductive. You breathe hard, real hard, in short, punctuated spurts. So hard you can be heard from a distance, you think—even among the field of indistinguishable voices and abounding echoes that somehow still manage to exist, even though the gym/auditorium has now filled with what intuitively should be enough bodies to deaden their still-bouncing, sonic trajectories. So hard you think two people one row up and four seats over are looking. No, they’re definitely looking. Alternatively, never at once, one head turning back to the stage, as the other head turns, synchronized, counterclockwise to continue looking, each reporting to the other anything they might’ve missed with a hushed voice and constrained gestures, constant.

You think about leaving. Looking at your phone, holding it to your ear in an urgent kind of way, indicative of the reception of a call you’ve been expecting and just can’t miss. It would work, probably go completely unnoticed.

“I mean, first I couldn’t find my keys,” she says, holding her left hand palm upward, no rings, signaling utter exasperation. You manage near eye contact and a sort of affirma-

tive grunt that she, possibly out of nothing other than the pity or a fear of the inevitable awkwardness that accompanies silence, finds encouraging.

“Then the cat got in.” You can tell the couple ahead of you have heard the monologue that you, a victim, must bravely endure, now too far in to run. You begin to think of all the possible ways that this thing could end. You could sit here in silence, grunting and attempting to force yourself to look somewhere in her vicinity, head constantly battling some occult, magnetic-like force pulling it anywhere other than your nine o’clock, giving the impression that you’re located somewhere on the highly functional end of the autistic spectrum, somehow braving what must be the sadistic rites thrust upon you as a lecturer, given your apparent psychological condition. The thing was already supposed to have begun, but it’s lagging as usual, with no visible indication that the lagging will end. Skies were clear and cloudless with no hovering blackly ominous cumulonimbi stirring cyclonically to grant reprieve. No fault lines that you know of, to shake every soul from this place.

“And I can’t leave him cause, and I swear to God he’s fixed, but he just still keeps spraying, and I wouldn’t mind, I really wouldn’t, but that smell ... it just never leaves.”

No, you need some other type of thing, something irregular that preternaturally violates that natural order of things, an event of eschatological significance whose apocalyptic proportions would render the significance of this and every other previous occasion trivial. You need, and would now—past the Rubicon, irreversibly caught up in this pained and persistent pseudo-dialogue—barter your soul for an end, would pray to whatever for some unique rapture—a ripping through of the veil of this world by ethereal lightning that comes from the east and flashes to the west—where every soul in this room but yours is among the elect, involuntarily floating away, caught up in the clouds with the multitudes who’ve been sleeping in the dust, called by the brash blare of apocalyptic trumpets and the revelatory four non-directional winds, signaling the end of everything, you the sole preterit soul, forced to cope with the true abomination of desolation. That, you think, expected response now lingering past the breaking point, would be better than this. Everyone disappearing, leaving no one, eliminating the possibility of ever encountering any familiar face other than the one, forever invisible, plastered permanently behind your visual field. Then darkness.

Denise Emanuel Clemen

Feathers

*Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul —Emily Dickinson*

Perched on the back of a dining room chair, the parrot's tail feathers trailed almost to the floor.

Addie had just awakened from her afternoon nap, but she wondered if, perhaps, she might only be dreaming that she was awake. She wanted to know more about this borderland between sleep and waking, where she seemed to spend so much time lately, but the sight of the parrot in her dining room was something to savor, not waste while she went off on some tangent. She said hello to the bird and it said hello back. "Hello," Addie said again, testing to see if it was simply parroting her. "I'm Addie." The parrot cocked its head and blinked.

"I didn't die," the parrot said.

"I'm glad to hear that," Addie said, "but what do I call you? What's your name?"

"Nathan," the parrot said.

"Where's home, Nathan?"

"Washington Avenue," the parrot said, bursting into tears. Well, not tears exactly—but crying. The parrot began to sob. It was one of the saddest things Addie had ever heard. She went to the kitchen to find the bag of walnuts that she used when she baked cookies for her grandchildren. Maybe the poor bird was hungry. When she came back, the dining room was empty.

The next morning, Addie awoke exhausted. The evening before, she spent hours poring over the telephone book, looking at the names of all the people who lived on Washington Avenue. She made a list of names and numbers, but it was complicated. Every city in the area had a Washington Avenue or Washington Street or Washington Place

or Court or Terrace, and at first Addie wasn't exact in her research and had to start all over again, eliminating at least half her list. By lunchtime she was so tired that chewing seemed like exercise.

"Are you having a tired day, Mom?" Barbara leaned across the table, stretching her neck in a way that reminded Addie of the parrot.

"Dreams," Addie said.

"If you're going to tell me that Dad was standing at the foot of your bed talking to you again all night, I might have to have a drink to go with this sandwich."

"That's nothing new," Addie said. "He talks to me in my dreams every night—whether he has your okay or not." Addie took a sip of her iced tea. "Would you like a nice gin and tonic?" she asked, even though she knew her daughter would say no. Barbara came by for lunch every day, but she had to get back to work.

"I don't drink and drive," Barbara said. Addie nodded, wondering how her daughter's generation ever managed to go out in the evening for a good time.

"After my nap yesterday, there was a parrot in the dining room," Addie said. "I knew I was only dreaming because I don't have a parrot, but he wanted to go home, and I was trying to help him. Do you know every community around here has a Washington Avenue?"

"At least he knew his address," Barbara said.

"His street. He didn't seem to know his house number."

Barbara shook her head and looked at her mother.

She's hoping I still remember my address, Addie thought. It was a source of wonderment to Addie how clearly she could read her daughter's mind when there were so many other things that seemed to slip away from her. At lunch the day before, she'd asked Barbara about Cynthia's children, confusing them with Barbara's own. It wasn't that she'd forgotten whose children were whose. It was just the names that gave her trouble. Barbara had gotten that uh-oh look, but Addie corrected herself just in time. Straighten up and fly right, she said to herself when these moments occurred, and it usually helped her. Fly right. Maybe that's what the parrot had come to tell her.

Barbara got up from the table and brushed the crumbs from her placemat onto her plate. She gathered up her silverware and her glass and took them to the sink, then did the same with her mother's dishes. "Gotta go," Barbara said. "When you talk to Cynthia tonight, tell her I said hello."

Changing of the guard, Addie thought—but for a few glorious hours, she'd be on her own.

Addie was lucky to live in her own place at eighty-seven, and she knew it. She did her own cooking, her own laundry, and most of her housework. It was easy, really. Much easier than standing at the foot of someone's bed all night and making conversation, which was apparently what you had to do after you were dead. Along with her dead husband,

her dead sisters and brothers came to talk to her while she slept. Not all at once—maybe they took turns, like Barbara and Cynthia—but almost every night one or two of them appeared in her dreams with something to say. Small talk mostly. It wasn't as if they were divulging timeless wisdom or the answer to some riddle known only to those beyond the grave. Sometimes there were old friends, too. It was like a party, except no one had to cook anything.

After Addie swept the kitchen floor, she went out to her patio with her bird book and binoculars. Ten minutes of sunlight every day, her doctor had told her. She had tried

She did her own cooking, her own laundry, and most of her housework. It was easy, really. Much easier than standing at the foot of someone's bed all night and making conversation, which was apparently what you had to do after you were dead.

at first to just sit with the sun on her face and arms, but it was boring. The light wasn't right for mending or needlework, and reading after lunch made her sleepy, so she'd taken up bird watching. Woodpeckers, finches, four different kinds of sparrows, blue jays, wrens, mockingbirds. Western warblers had started coming by, too, ever since her Mother's Day present had been installed. The burbling of the pre-fab waterfall was attracting birds that had ignored her before. Tufted titmouse was the latest. If Addie could be a bird, she'd choose to be one of those just for the pleasure of introducing herself. There were wild parrots in her neighborhood, too, but they were the size of a blue jay—nothing like the magnificent Nathan—and they flew around screeching their lungs out, never bothering with the feeders or the waterfall.

A glint of scarlet made Addie raise her binoculars and scan the stand of eucalyptus trees across the street. Nathan! She stood up so quickly that she nearly lost her balance. Her plastic patio chair tipped, and when she took a step to regain her equilibrium, she stumbled over it. If it hadn't been for the sturdy iron end table, she would have gone down. She righted herself just as Nathan fluttered deeper into the leaves. Addie's heart sank. A flash of red, those amazing blue tail feathers, then nothing. As she replayed the moment, it seemed that she'd even heard the beating of his immense wings. Addie set the chair back on its feet, dragged it into the shade of the awning, and rested there until the adrenaline from her near tumble went back to wherever it hid itself between crises.

It wasn't unusual for Addie to get into trouble in the afternoon. The spilling of bleach, the breaking of glass, faucet handles that came off and wouldn't screw back on. She'd had to push her ridiculous emergency button for the faucet incident. She tried to telephone for help, but the plumber put her on hold, and both her daughters' phones went to voicemail. When the paramedics jimmied open her door, she was standing at the sink

with a stack of towels and a bathmat and a throw rug. The Med-Alert system contacted her daughters, too, and just minutes after the paramedics, they arrived panting with panic. "I'm drowning," Addie had said, trying to infuse a little humor into the situation. Barbara looked so pale and stricken that Addie insisted the paramedics check her blood pressure. Though she was careful to loop the button on its lanyard around her neck when Barbara came for lunch, Addie resolved she wouldn't push the button again no matter what.

After dinner that night, after her phone call with Cynthia, Addie read the newspaper and went to bed. While she slept, some sliver of consciousness kept watch for Nathan. But he didn't come to see her—crowded out, most likely, by her other visitors, who jabbered and jostled at the foot of her bed, noisy as a flock of wild parrots.

The next morning Addie had her coffee and toast on the patio and sat for a bit, but the parrot didn't appear. Back inside, she started up Barbara's old laptop, reminding herself that when she was finished, she was not to push the power button without shutting down first. Clicking on the "Start" menu to turn something off was just plain ridiculous, but she made herself do exactly as her daughter instructed. The pictures of parrots on the Internet were astounding. Nathan was actually a Red-fronted Macaw—which was, indeed, a type of parrot. He came from Bolivia.

All during lunch, Addie wrestled with whether to bring up the bird to Barbara again. My parrot is real. Not a dream. These lines welled up behind Addie's lips, but each time she thought better of it. When Barbara presented her with the piece of cheesecake that she'd picked up as a surprise, Addie decided to tell her. Barbara interrupted just as she began to speak:

"Mother, where is your button?"

"I'm not going to wear it anymore." Having already shifted into confessional mode, Addie could not turn back. "Look how scared you were the day I used it."

"You need to wear it. It could save your life."

"I'm not going to live forever, you know. It's a button, not a magic wand. I'm not going to wear it."

"You're not going to wear it because I got scared when you pushed it?" Barbara got up from the table and scraped the last of her cheesecake into the trash.

Addie shrugged and savored another bite. From sweet to bitter in less than a second—that was Barbara, and there was nothing Addie could do about it.

When Addie woke up from her nap, Nathan was perched again on a chair in the dining room. The tray she had set on the table was half empty, and bits and pieces of sun-

flower seeds were everywhere. “You’re a messy eater, Nathan.”

“You mean a lot to me,” Nathan said.

“Sweet-talking your way out of a problem,” Addie said. “I wish more people would use that technique.” She wanted to touch Nathan’s head—the cap of small red feathers, the way they lay so perfectly, curving into the green of his neck and shoulders. But the large beak was a thing to be reckoned with. She didn’t want another troublesome afternoon with a finger bleeding onto the carpet or an eye pecked out. She gathered up some of the stray seeds from the floor and baby-stepped toward the bird with her hand stretched out flat.

The ringing phone startled both of them. Addie patted her chest for her glasses, straightened out the chain, and slid them into position as she walked to her desk. “Paradise Vacations,” the caller I.D. read. “I’ll be in paradise soon enough,” Addie said, laughing at her own joke.

“Yup. Uh-huh. We’ll be right there,” Nathan said. He was agitated now, shifting his weight from foot to foot and bobbing his head. “Five to ten minutes. Be out front,” he said. Nathan was on a roll. “Got it,” he said. “Yup. Right away.” Good to his word, he flew out the patio door into the trees. Addie sat down and brushed the seeds back onto the tray.

She scanned the eucalyptus for Nathan several times that afternoon, but he didn’t reappear. When the sun dipped behind the roof of the neighboring apartment complex, the air grew cool, and Addie closed her patio door. Maybe Nathan had belonged to a taxi-cab company or a limousine service. The telephone had certainly set him off.

When the phone rang at 8 p.m. it was Cynthia. Right on time. Addie struggled into a sweater while they made small talk. She thought maybe Nathan had heard the phone ring, so she opened her patio door and stood talking into the dark. Cynthia had to repeat nearly everything she said, and Addie could hear her daughter’s patience running out. In a minute they were going to have the conversation about hearing aids again or that special phone for the hearing impaired. Fly right, Addie thought, and in an effort to make more engaging conversation, she told Cynthia about Nathan. “No, no, he’s not a wild parrot. He’s a Bolivian Macaw. I researched it,” Addie said. “He talks. He must have been someone’s pet.”

“We should put an ad on Craigslist,” Cynthia said.

Addie told Cynthia her taxi dispatcher theory. Cynthia didn’t seem convinced.

“And he cries,” Addie said, “like his heart is breaking.”

“Okay, Mom.” Addie imagined Cynthia rolling her eyes. “I’ve got an early day tomorrow, and it sounds like you should get some sleep, too.”

Addie’s heart felt strange as she brushed her teeth. Fluttery—like it had its own set

of wings. She wondered if she should get a cage and keep Nathan as her pet, but it would have to be a very large cage, and where would she put it, and would Nathan be happy? He looked so majestic way up high in the trees. And parrots like him lived a very long time, the Internet said. Sometimes eighty or a hundred years. Addie had no idea how old Nathan was. What if his owner had died? What if Nathan was only twenty or forty or fifty? The bird should be adopted by someone more likely to be around for the remainder of his life. The parrot glided in and out of Addie’s dreams that night. At one point he sat perched on the shoulder of her dead husband. “Uh-huh,” the bird said. “Got it. East or west of the river? Be right there,” he said.

“I heard your parrot turned out to be real,” Barbara said as soon as they’d settled into their lunch the next day. Addie knew from the expression on Barbara’s face that this was some kind of a trap.

“He is,” Addie said.

Barbara chewed a bit of her sandwich and nodded. “Cynthia told me,” Barbara said. “We Googled it and found a discussion on a local birder site. Some people say it’s just a peacock from the arboretum.”

Addie shook her head. “He’s a parrot. A Bolivian Macaw,” she said.

“The main point is that he’s real. Not a dream. That means you left your patio door open, Mom. If the bird was in the dining room when you woke up from your nap the other day, that means you left the door, screen and all, wide open for over an hour.” Barbara folded her paper napkin neatly next to her plate, even though she had half of her avocado sandwich left. Addie wondered if Nathan might like to have it if Barbara wasn’t going to eat it.

“Maybe I dreamed him first,” Addie said. “A prediction.” She knew a comment like this wouldn’t help her case. Barbara was so unwilling to throw her arms around the invisible. She had a logical explanation for everything—blamed the sleeping pills for Addie’s nighttime visitations from dead relatives, and the heart medication for the fading of her short-term memory. What did it matter if Addie visited with the dead or couldn’t remember whether or not she’d had an egg for breakfast? Her life was passing before her eyes, but it was happening in slow motion, not in a flash at the moment of death like people said it did. The unimportant stuff was edited out—like in a movie. There was a reason the names of childhood playmates rose up present and true. When you met them in the hereafter, you could immediately greet them by name. They weren’t going to ask you if you’d had an egg for breakfast.

Barbara put the dishes in the sink, wrapped the sandwich in a piece of plastic wrap, and slid it into her purse. She said nothing further about the button, but made a show of

Feathers

closing and locking both the screen and the sliding door before she left.

Later that afternoon Addie could barely remember saying good-bye to Barbara. She sat in her chair on the patio with the door open behind her. Her binoculars were strung around her neck along with her glasses. As she studied the hillside, Nathan swooped out of the eucalyptus and sailed toward her. Her heart gave a little jump, and by the time the parrot landed on the end table beside her, Addie's heart felt all ablaze, like a heart in one of those religious pictures.

"Don't call Barbara or Cynthia," Addie said, as if dialing the phone might be one of Nathan's talents.

"Crossing into another country," Nathan said. Addie felt she was already at the border, ankle-deep in a river, and she hoped the water would put out the fire in her heart. She squinted, trying to bring Nathan into focus, but she couldn't see him even though she was certain he was next to her.

"Feathers," Addie said as she put her hand out to touch him. The bird sat perfectly still while Addie caressed him, her eyes blind—but her fingers alive to all his colors. How soft his feathers were, Addie thought. Just like the hair of her little girls.

Dennis Must

The Tick A Tick A Tick

We were sitting in the White Horse Tavern late one August afternoon, discussing a play I'd written. Before an audience of me, a saturnine bartender, and an elderly woman nursing a beer in a dark corner, James mercilessly exposed the artificiality of written scripts, especially mine. Personas with beginnings, middles, and ends belong in toy boxes, he chided, and not on stage.

"The subtext is where the real truth lies, Christopher. Take the face off a clock, and you still hear the beat. Like the masks we wear in public, those numbers are lies.

"It's the *tick a tick a tick* what's chasing us, right? What are we gonna create of ourselves in the short amount of time we have to make any goddamn sense?" James laughed. "You get what I'm saying?"

He slid his empty glass before me, gesturing that I concentrate on it.

"Say your father gives you this when you're a kid—a jar with a screw lid. He says, 'Here, it's chock full of *tick a tick a ticks*. They all belong to you. You can't give 'em away to your friends, either. And when you've used them all up, there ain't no more. So now go make something with them, boy.'

"You hear him chortle behind your back.

"That first night, it sits on a stand alongside your bed. It's pitch black in your room. But there's a kind of glow in the jar. Fireflies maybe. Except you can only hear 'em.

"Then you realize that the glass jar is your heart ... 'cause when it stops making *tick a tick a tick* ... you fucking die.

"That's when you become bloody anxious, Christopher. *Why should a kid have to worry?* I ask. But you do because there it is next to you ... your entire life radiant inside that glass container. And you know you got to make those *tick a tick a ticks* mean something ... otherwise what the hell was the sense of ever being given them?

"Make something of yourself, boy.'

"You look around and think ... *What? I've been given this allotment of tick a tick*

a ticks, and I'm supposed to give them some meaning? And I hear my old man bleating alongside my momma in the bedroom.

"*That's what he's done with his tick a tick a ticks?*

"*Ain't gonna do that, I think.*

"Do that so I can lay my head 'tween some woman's tits and cry because I've squandered my *tick a tick a ticks* in self-pity?

"*Maybe I spend them like Momma. But why? 'Cause I got some pious notion that I must sacrifice them for someone who needs me? Locking my tick a tick a ticks in a glass jar until it's too fucking late? Light inside them's all spent. And my old man is still warbling like Chet Baker in the dark from another room?*

"So you see what I'm saying?"

The bartender, who had been standing nearby, intently absorbed, interrupted with a second round of bourbon. "On the house." He grinned mirthlessly. We clinked glasses, and James resumed.

"As each year passed, I took the jar out from under my bed and studied it. How could you not be goaded by the fact that slowly the *tick a tick a ticks* were escaping and you hadn't become anything yet? Oh yeah, I was still a pimply-faced kid, but so was every other screw my age. And what about the pulse under their beds? Some of 'em acted as if they could have given a shit their *tick a tick a ticks* were breaking loose.

"But not me, Christopher.

"I wanted to become someone. Some person other than the tedious swells in town ... the bankers, doctors, or lawyers. I didn't want to be any of these characters. You know why? *Because they all acted as if life somehow made goddamn sense.* That it was like a story unfolding. And some doddering grandmother or grandfather was reading it to them at bedtime.

"Well, that wasn't me, brother.

"I wanted to exchange my *tick a tick a ticks* in for somebody new. Somebody who saw through all the bromides like, *Let's make house, get married, have babies, and buy a little place with a white picket fence.* For what? So that one day I awake and see it's all been a fucking gloss I've been living? Then reach under the bed to discover the fireflies are asleep in Jesus?

"Early on, I willed to rip off the mask of what I'd been conditioned to think of as reality: a warm bath of deceit and self-delusion."

James glanced at me and then at the bartender and the woman in the corner, each of us waiting for him to continue ... a performer caught in mid-sentence. For a brief, moment his face registered, *Why are you staring at me?*

"Please go on," I said.

“Is the audience always this small?” he japed.

I was accustomed to his habit of evading issues that became too personal and continued locking eyes with him.

He took another drink before resuming.

“Christopher, at times in my father’s final days, I’d catch him sitting alone long after midnight at our kitchen table. Maybe I was just getting home. He’d be lost in thought, staring at this little jelly jar that he drank cheap whiskey out of. No water, no rocks.

“And I’d think to myself ... *Hell, that’s his tick a tick a tick jar. And poor Dad is staring at it ‘cause it’s about goddamn empty.* His life he’s pissed out, and he’s wondering what

...your entire life radiant inside that glass container. And you know you got to make those tick a tick a ticks mean something ... otherwise what the hell was the sense of ever been given them?

he’d made out of all those *tick a tick a ticks* dealt him early on.

“Very fucking little.

“And when he’d finally look up and see me, he’d raise the glass, gesturing as if he was to pour me one. I’d decline.

“‘Cause it was empty.

“*You’re offering me nothing*, I’d think. It’s just another story like the millions I’ve already known, Pap. They all start and end the same. And what am I to learn after you’ve drunk your last *tick a tick*, old man? I could get drunk on the tears of emptiness.

“Yet a wave of compassion would sweep over me.

“His hapless look of *Well, I gave it my best shot, boy.*

“And I’d wonder, *Christ, is this the stuff that you and I are made of?* He gave it his best shot? What the hell did that mean? That he’d made choices demonstrating some character that he chose not to pretend he was somebody he wasn’t, nor could ever become, even in three bottles of *tick a tick a ticks*?

“It was a pathetic and tormented defense, I thought. But what are our options, Christopher?

“You see? That’s what I’ve been asking myself.

“Despite my affection, nay, fucking unabashed love for the guy, I swore I was going to be everything he wasn’t. No bloody woman was going to nurse me as a broken man that he had permitted himself to become. No woman would ever watch me hold my jelly jar up to my ear, then listen to me cry about what I’d fucking spent on nothing.

“I swore, Christopher, that I was going to break out of the story-book mold of what constitutes a life and how to live it. That life is a series of heartaches, and we are little more than nasturtium seeds in a garden patch looked over by some mythical god. Once

we flower and produce, soon after we die. The story ends on a melancholic note.

“Well, when I saw him staring into that glass of time that evening while contemplating all the *tick a tick a ticks* he’d clocked in a timepiece of no hands, as if he had lifted his own anemic heart out of his chest and was studying to see just how little life remained...

“I wanted to draw his head into my chest and say, *Listen to mine, Pap. Hear it fucking beat? Do you hear the whoosh, whoosh, whoosh like the waves slapping the underside of the dock in the lakeside cabin we used to visit with Momma? And you’d say to me, ‘Don’t go out there on the lake at night, boy, alone. ‘Cause if something would ever happen, I wouldn’t be able to see to get to you.’*

“*But I never believed that, you see, because I knew down deep that even if it was so pitch black that you could see not even the backs of your hands before you, you still would have splashed into that water and paddled. God knows to where. But you would have paddled, calling out for me.*

“*That’s what I know.*

“*So feel my tick a tick a ticks, old man. I’ll share them with you. Hold onto them, and we’ll fucking go somewhere. Downstream maybe. Upstream perhaps. But we ain’t gonna go back home.*

“*Where your story now lies between the covers.*

“*It has an ending.*

“*And if that’s so ... you will never hear my cry when it gets dark and I’ve lost my way.*

“*So hold on, old man.*

“*The jelly jar is full of lies.*

“*That’s all that you’ve spent.*

“*Lies.*

“*We’ve got a long swim ahead of us. Put your arms around me. I’ll stroke. You sing.*”

“And at night sometimes when I’m lying awake, Christopher, I hear him crying for me out in that dark lake. He’s saying, *Over here, Son.* But there ain’t no light he’s holding. I can’t see his eyes ‘cause the light inside ‘em’s flickered out. And I can’t hear him paddling ‘cause he’s no strength left in his arms. Yet his voice is as clear as when he used to sing behind me.

“And some nights, I laugh and cry, *Fucking sing like Chet Baker, and then perhaps I can get a bead on just where you are. Just so I can get closer to you, Pap.*

“*Let’s Get Lost.*”

Like so often following a performance, James uttered a self-effacing laugh, then bowed theatrically to a rapt bartender, the ashen-faced grass widow in the corner, and me.

Before vanishing.

"It's raining, it's pouring," Elmo sang, dripping water on Oscar's trash can. But Oscar didn't fall for it.

"Maybe Oscar will come out to see his little old grandma," Elmo thought. So Elmo draped a blanket over his red fur and wore a grandmotherly cap.

Tap! Tap!

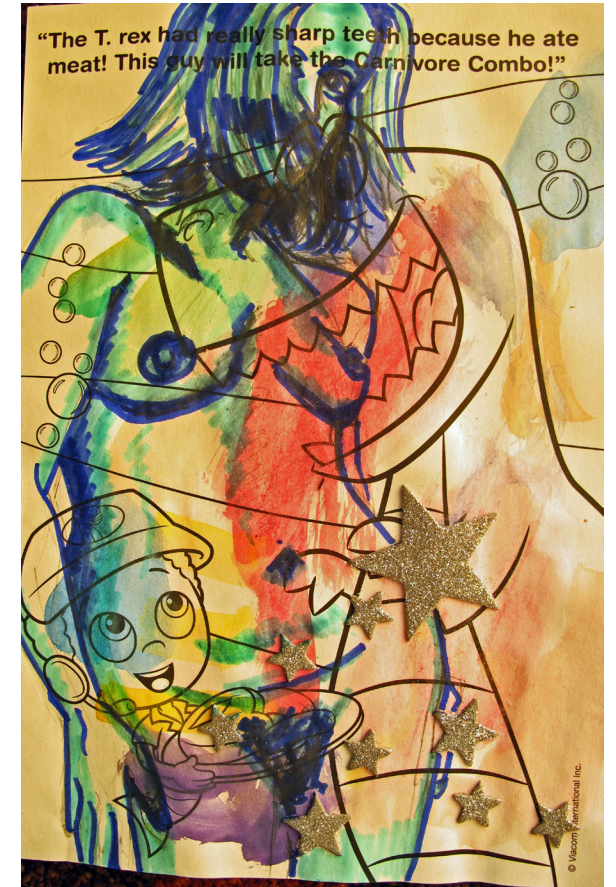
Elmo knocked on the can. In a sweet voice he called, "Oh, Oscar dear. ~~Will~~ you please come play with Grandma?"

Oscar raised the lid, letting out a smelly whiff of sardine-and-donut casserole.

"Oh, it's you again," Oscar replied. "Not a bad trick, but it didn't work. Read my lips: no, no, no!"



SALLY DESKINS
Mixed Media Drawings



Nicolas Poynter

As Marbles Go

It was a few days before the big game when Henry Aaron Lopez lost all his marbles, about halfway through his morning class, Introductory Zoology. They hit the floor together, as one big cymbal smash, and then scrambled in every conceivable direction. He had suspected something horrific was going to happen. College was affecting him, bending his spirit, in much the same ways that high school had. No, it was not different, and nearing the end of what was a grueling first semester, after listening to one professor after another go on and on about insects and what so and so was *really* saying and how to train a dog to salivate and whatever, the rubber band finally snapped. It was time itself that finally did him in. Time got slower, minutes lasting much, much longer than Henry Aaron knew they should. And then, the clock actually stopped for him altogether, and he felt as if he would be forced to sit still throughout eternity and learn about amoebas—single-celled organisms that floated, like him, helplessly through time and space.

Henry Aaron began to doubt he would ever see the end of the class, and even if he did, there were only more and more classes waiting for him. The truth was he could spend the rest of his life waiting for hours and days and years to end, and he probably would. He would spend his life waiting for it to begin. That realization created a tiny explosion inside his head, unlocking it, and his marbles spilled out onto the floor. Some of them bounced over to where all those cute girls in wool sweaters sat. They had never noticed Henry Aaron, as he ogled them from the back row, and they still did not, snobs to the end. Even as his mind machinery lay exposed at their feet, all they could manage was to be disgusted that a boy so inferior to them had had such a horrific accident so near them. *What is his problem anyway?* A few marbles kept dribbling and spinning and then hopped down the long trail of stairs, for what seemed like forever and eventually rolled right in between the professor's polished shoes, amid gasps from the class. The professor glared at Henry Aaron above his eye glasses and then aggressively kicked the marble, a small green one, off his stage. The entire class broke into laughter, embarrassing what was left of Henry Aaron

as he gathered his books and abruptly headed for the exit, slipping on several marbles on his way out, each fall invoking more laughter.

Two campus security guards stood in a knee-deep snow drift, bracketing the prone body of a young girl. She was face-down, arms and legs askew, each one pointing in a different direction. She appeared to be the victim of a sniper.

"Please, Miss. We do not want to have to forcibly lift you."

"What is the problem, Miss?"

Ajeeba finally answered them, but since her face was embedded in the snow, it was muffled and neither officer understood.

"What?" the older officer asked, impatiently.

Ajeeba theatrically rolled onto her side and both officers unintentionally recoiled at her ethnicity.

"I am just worried about the big game," she told them in a thick Middle-Eastern accent. "Do you think we are going to win?"

An hour before, Ajeeba had been fine, on her way to molecular biology, on her way to medical school, on her way to everything her family wanted her to accomplish. It was that damn marble. It was off to the side, seated in a groove of the sidewalk. She could have easily missed it. She raised it to her face and looked deeply into its polished purple surface. In the marble's reflection, Ajeeba could not avoid seeing herself, how different she was from everyone else. She saw herself as *they* saw her, as a pariah. Her stark loneliness was reflected back at her, and it injured her. She could see her family far away, fourteen hours by plane, laughing because there were so many of them in one small house. She saw another Christmas she would spend without them...without anyone. The marble showed her all the lonely places in America: libraries and single-occupancy rooms, coffee shops and laboratories during football games. With a whimper, Ajeeba had flopped lifelessly into the snow as if shot.

From his dorm room, Henry Aaron watched Ajeeba collapse. It indeed appeared as if someone had shot her. But when she did not move for a great while, he became bored again and returned to his project. He had his own problems. Without any marbles, there was little to stop Henry Aaron anymore, and he decided to begin focusing his energy on making his roommate Rob become afraid for his safety and move out. Rob was active in student government and often brought like-minded students into the room to discuss things like current events and their futures. Henry Aaron simply could not take *those people* anymore. He took a step back and surveyed his work, black paint dripping from the ceiling.

He had used almost all of it, the paint he had bought earlier in the afternoon, the hardware store his obvious first stop after losing all his marbles in Getner Hall. He had slopped it around, everything drowned beneath a deep ebony semi-gloss—the television, the comforters, even Rob’s expensive polo shirts were now ruined. Henry Aaron collapsed into a bean bag chair, freshly painted black. He was exhausted but pleased with himself. The greedy absorption of light by the dark paint made the room surreal to him, as if he were an astronaut floating in outer space, as if he were inside a black-hole vacuum from which there was no escape. The fumes began affecting him. He breathed them in deeply, satisfied yet still a little hungry for revolution. He made a mental note to buy more paint.

Luther looked like a ghost. It was near midnight, the day before the big game, and he was out jogging, running circles around the baseball field, breathing hard, puffs of frozen-breath exhaust trailing from his nose and mouth as if he were a steam train chugging along. He was almost done, breaking into what he called his *cool down*, feeling better when exhausted, when all he could think was *I need oxygen*. Then it happened. The giant sea of marbles had been steadily gaining on him, but he could not hear them approaching because he was listening to AC/DC on his Walkman, and he had the volume all the way up. The moment he decelerated, they caught him, ambushing him from behind, washing over him, blurring his vision and taking control of his powerful legs. He immediately broke with his steady rhythm and then began sprinting like a stalker across the oval, seemingly possessed. He hurtled the park benches that he found in his way, one after the other, as if he had run hurdles before, which he had not, gaining momentum with each one. As he cleared the last of them, the heel of his shoe gently scraping the top of it, he almost collided with a dark, shadowy figure. Then Luther instinctively careened towards the interstate like a hub cap that had gone flying off its car. In his last moment of clarity, he wondered what that guy had been doing lurking in the darkness and why all the benches had been painted black.

Henry Aaron watched the lunatic in the ROTC sweatsuit disappear in the distance, giving him a hateful expression and a middle finger. Henry Aaron had had to hurl himself to the ground to avoid being run over and had spilled the last of the black paint all over himself. He sat on the icy ground looking like a cartoon character, black paint dripping off his head, rolling off his cheek, splattered as blood on the white landscape. “Holy shit,” he said.

In the strong moonlight, Henry Aaron’s eyes glinted like they were on fire—star-

tlingly attractive, glowing black marbles. But his eyes were always that striking, even in broad daylight. In fact, if a cute girl in a wool sweater had ever really looked into his eyes,

The greedy absorption of light by the dark paint made the room surreal to him, as if he were an astronaut floating in outer space, as if he were inside a black-hole vacuum from which there was no escape.

she would have fallen deeply in love. But they never did. Nobody ever looked into Henry Aaron’s eyes.

He grimaced, remembering how miserable he was. He glared at the cold, stone statue of the seed sower, brightly lit, perched majestically at the main stadium entrance, waiting for the crowds, the big-game crowds that everyone always talked about. All eighty thousand of them would walk past that statue the following day. “Hey!” he called to it from across the oval and then gathered what was left of his paint and walked towards it.

Luther, still running at a good pace, merged onto the interstate, heading south, although he was oblivious to such details. He was and had been thinking about a girl, devastated.

“What?” he had asked her, spinning and falling into a chair, unintentionally wrapping the phone cord around his neck.

“Luther, don’t make this hard on me. I still care about you. But I love Rod, now.”

“What?”

“He’s on the football team. He’s not a starter, but he is really good. He—”

“What?”

“Don’t be a jackass, Luther. Why do you want to make me hurt like this? Why do you want to make me feel like I’m a bad person? Do you hate me?”

“What?”

“If you are going to be sarcastic, that is it.” And she hung up.

“What?”

That phone call had turned Luther into a ghost. After that, each day became worse than the one before. Luther skipped a few classes, more and more, and then stopped going to classes altogether, thinking how odd it was that *everything* could go to hell so quickly. He marveled at how fragile his life really was and then stopped returning his friends’ calls, the ones that were worried about him, anyway. He began drinking and thought that really helped. The trajectory continued for a month, until the Koreans that owned the local liquor store knew him by name and applauded each time he appeared, until he gained so

much weight his clothes would not fit, until gradually his emotions turned from despair to self-loathing. And then, at what he would call his *rock bottom*, he started jogging again. *Baby steps*, he told himself, and things, bit-by-bit, were getting better, back to normal. He would have been fine too, if not for those damn marbles. They had gashed open the wound again. Luther passed a sign saying Dallas was 200 miles away, but he did not see it for the raging, marble-fueled fire that continued to burn inside him.

The University of Oklahoma campus became quiet, except for the howling winter winds, which whipped discarded party flyers into tornado-like orbits, and the scurrying footsteps of a mad man, high on paint fumes. The big game was a noon kick-off, and most everyone had tried to go to bed early. The next day would be so important that most could not even fathom how important it would be. Everyone needed rest. The Sooners were favorites and expected to win big on their way to the National Championship. The entire campus snuggled in against the cold, dreaming of bombs and quarterback sacks and after-parties that would last until the next morning. It was a time of great anticipation. And it was a home game. Nothing could go wrong.

Ajeeba watched the sunrise, hugging herself against the bitter cold in the Subaru she had bought but never seemed to drive anywhere, looking through a small circle she had excavated in the thick ice, so thick the car looked as much like a submarine as a vehicle. Once again, she turned the key and pumped the gas pedal, praying, her eyes shut tight. The engine popped and then exploded into its weak, four-cylinder grind, frost and smoke belching out all around it. Ajeeba took a good look in the back seat, making sure she had not forgotten anything. She had packed it all. She was leaving forever. As the car warmed, she hugged herself again, pawing at the ends of her knit cap until it covered her gigantic ears.

She was just about out of town when a young, Spanish-looking kid, dressed all in black, ran in front of her car and jumped onto the hood to avoid being run over. Ajeeba braked hard, locking up the tires, and the pair spun several circles together. He looked dangerous as their eyes met through the widening, defrosting circle in the windshield, black grease smeared all over his face. Ajeeba screamed. After the Subaru came to a stop, the kid jumped down and continued running as campus security closed in from all directions. When they finally had him cornered, he pulled out two cans of spray paint from a pack and began discharging them, too far away to get any paint on them. Still, the officers jumped back, but then, as one, surged forward and tackled him, his entire person disappearing under a pile of bulky security. This was a very odd image for Ajeeba to witness,

and it stuck with her as she merged onto the interstate.

“And I’m the terrorist?” she asked herself out loud, laughing. The boy’s expression had put her in a pleasant mood, or maybe it had been his eyes.

Luther was staggering more and more, sometimes even staggering over the line and onto the interstate. He was more than ready to collapse and wondered why his legs continued to walk forward. *Gosh, it’s cold*. He thought he might be dying and hardly bothered with putting his thumb out anymore. Nobody seemed interested. But then a small car that looked almost like a submarine pulled off the interstate just in front of him, slipping a little and then coming to a stop. A skinny girl with really, really dark skin exited the car and ran up to him as if she were very frightened of something. She took her cap off when she got close, and two gigantic ears flopped into the bitter cold, morning air. Luther thought her skin color was magnificent. He had never seen a girl that color brown before, that beautiful. Luther started thinking about hot chocolate.

“Where are you going?”

“Where am I now?”

The girl reached out and touched his arm, and the heat must have shocked his system because his legs finally stopped working. Luther spun and fell onto the road like he was dropped from the sky. The girl shrieked and followed him onto the ground, crouching next to him.

“I am going to take you to the emergency room.”

“Will they have hot chocolate there?”

“Sure they will. Will you help me get you up?”

Luther did not help. Ajeeba put her arms under his shoulders, trying hard but not making any progress, her face moving exceedingly close to his. He closed his eyes and put his nose into the long, flowing dark hair that seemed to be everywhere, breathing deeply. Her hair smelled like coconut shampoo. She must have understood what he was doing because she stopped trying to lift him, tilting her head so that their heads nestled together more comfortably. They stayed like that for several minutes, until he finally noticed that she was crying.

Just before game time, the capacity crowd looked toward the darkening clouds. It was not supposed to rain. At the exact moment the kicker raised his hand, indicating he was about to start the game, a thunder clap erupted, and a dense storm of brightly-colored marbles began to shower upon the stadium, as if a rainbow had melted and was dripping from the sky. The spectators lifted seat cushions and programs above their heads but did

As Marbles Go

not leave their seats. The PA announcer did not even mention it, nor did the network crew or the radio play-by-play man. The mascots for both teams struck comic poses in defiance of the hard rain of marbles. Cheerleaders stood on top of other cheerleaders and remained there, their arms pointing skyward, even while being pummeled about the face, some suffering nose bleeds, one even losing a tooth. The football coach stood his ground too, calmly using his playbook to protect his head, ordering his players not to leave the field. This was the big game and, *damn it*, they were going to play, marbles or no marbles.

Inside the Subaru, Luther and Ajeeba watched the downpour, marbles crashing off the hood and windshield, denting the metal with tiny divots, cracking the glass in a few spots. “Fucking marbles!” they screamed.

The officers escorting Henry Aaron fled when the marbles appeared, abandoning him on the steps to the administration building, his hands still cuffed behind his back. He collapsed to his knees as the marbles found him, but then quickly rebounded to his feet. He ran through the storm like some bizarre, bound chicken, crossing the entire campus, heading straight for the stadium, smiling for the first time in years.

Sara Rauch

Aleta Alehouse

At the far end of the bar, the redhead sat with a book splayed open, sipping a clear fizzy drink through a swizzle stick, tucking a curl behind her ear. She reminded Tom of the cardinal he often saw perched in the crabapple tree near his kitchen window. Besides the bartender, a silent man with smooth cheeks in a black gabardine vest and newsy cap, and the cardinal girl, the bar was empty. But it was one in the afternoon and Tom didn't have anywhere else to be. He'd been wandering the East Village for almost an hour after his brunch meeting when he saw the carved wooden sign above the bar and decided to go in. The redhead did not acknowledge Tom's presence when he sat down three stools over from her. He ordered a scotch neat and a Brooklyn Amber. In the age-speckled mirror that hung over the bottles of liquor, Tom watched the redhead turn a page and reach up to tuck her hair behind her ear again. The bartender brought Tom's beer and scotch. It was a generous pour in a cloudy lowball glass. The bartender did not make eye contact and retreated to the other end of the bar, head down.

Tom Brown gulped the scotch and slid over two stools, leaving one empty between himself and the redhead, who kept reading.

"Hi," he said.

"I'm not interested," she said, looking up from her book. Her eyes were the color of sea glass.

"But I haven't asked a question," he said.

"I'm going to save you the bother."

"Are you sure?" he asked.

The redhead sighed and rested a forefinger on the page. "I'm pretty sure," she said.

"What are you reading?" he asked.

She flipped the book shut. *Light Years* by James Salter.

"Never heard of it," Tom said. He read the newspaper spottily and *National Geographic* regularly and little else.

She reopened the book, pressing down hard along the center so the pages lay flat,

and began to read again. Tom said, "Can I buy you a drink?"

"You're not from the city, are you?" she asked. Along her jaw ran a serrated scar that disappeared up behind her ear and into her hair.

"Different city—Boston," he said, sipping his beer. "Well, outside of Boston."

"Do the girls in Boston respond well to your ineptitude?" She looked at him, more with curiosity than annoyance.

"Dunno. I've been married for almost a decade. I don't spend much time in bars."

"So what are you doing here?" She tilted her face, concealing the scar in shadow.

"Business trip," he said.

"For?"

"What's your name?"

She regarded him for a second before turning the book over on the bar. The cover was worn, and its edges curled up when she moved her hand, which she extended across the empty stool. "Liz."

"Short for?" he asked, taking her hand in his. It was dry and small, its slight heft like the body of a sparrow.

"Just Liz. Short for nothing."

"Liz Nothing."

"At your service."

"Tom Brown. So. Drink?"

She raised her eyebrows—very pale, much paler than the shock of red hair that fell around her shoulders—and said, "I'll have a vodka tonic." She pronounced *vodka* with a slight chirping of the vowels.

The bartender brought her drink. Liz moved onto the empty bar stool, closing the gap between them. She wore a simple black sweater with a wide boat-neck, and Tom saw a tattoo edging across her shoulders. He couldn't tell what it was, a tree branch maybe, or a vine.

"What brings you here on this beautiful Sunday?" More often than not now he hated the stilted words that came from his mouth.

"My roommate's parents are in town, and I didn't want to have lunch with them. What kind of work do you do?" she asked, letting her eyes dart to his wedding band.

"The soul-gobbling kind."

"That bad, huh?" She smiled, revealing very white, very straight teeth.

"Insurance." He nodded in the bartender's direction for another beer. "Liability and data breach."

"That sounds boring."

"It is. Ungodly dull. What do you do?"

"I work for a non-profit. Literacy in inner city schools."

“That’s noble,” he said.

“Yeah, but I can barely afford to share a tiny apartment, and I only eat rice and beans.”

“Money isn’t everything,” Tom said.

“People with money say that a lot,” Liz said, bobbing her head and sipping her vodka. “What’s your wife’s name?”

“Abigail.”

“Is she in insurance, too?”

“She takes care of our son.”

“That’s sweet.”

“It’s fine. She seems happy with it.”

The door of the bar opened, and two women came in. One had a shaved head; the other wore her hair styled like Mia Farrow in *Rosemary’s Baby*. The shaved head one caught Liz’s eye and nodded. Tom thought he saw Liz flinch. She focused on her vodka, stabbing the little plastic straw into the ice. He asked, “How long have you lived in the city?”

Instead of answering, she lifted her tumbler and drank the vodka down in one smooth gulp. “Want to go somewhere else?” Liz asked.

“Where?” he asked.

“Wherever,” she said, snapping the book shut and tucking it into her canvas bag. She pulled on her coat. Tom settled the tab. He paid for Liz’s first drink too, the one she’d been almost finished with when he arrived. The bartender brought Tom’s change, dropped it on the bar—he had tapered fingers and his nails were cut short and very clean. Tom wasn’t sure why this observation jumped out at him. He left the tip, filed the other bills into his wallet.

On their way out, the shaved-head woman held up her hand in a gesture that looked like both peace offering and wave, and said, “Hey, Liz.” Liz did not break her stride. She lifted her hand and said “Hey” before pulling the door open and stepping out onto the sidewalk. Behind her, Tom smiled toward the woman and nodded, but the woman frowned and turned away.

Out on Fifth Street, they stood in awkward pause. Liz was fine-boned but tall, almost as tall as Tom. Taxis and pigeons flew past. The upper bricks of the buildings across the street caught the sun. Two doors down, a fire escape decorated with pinwheels and streamers refracted metallic light into the afternoon air. Liz’s gaze followed Tom’s to the offering of radiance. She said, “Ever been on the Staten Island Ferry?”

He shook his head. The sky beyond the bricks was sharp blue, scalloped with cirrus clouds.

“How long do you have?”

“I’m free the rest of the day.”

“Alright, Tom Brown. Let’s walk down. This is our first real spring day.”

He hadn’t noticed the weather at all since his arrival the day before. Sometimes Manhattan felt like an airless dome—not a real ecosystem at all. Early April was the same as December or August here, he always thought. But he saw now the purple-headed crocuses butting up from hard-packed dirt, the tiny green buds emerging from slender branch tips. Liz was beside him, ruffling her red hair with her hands, waiting for him. Pigeons preened and strutted along the concrete, their heads nodding. He said yes.

Liz wove their way downtown; as they went, the streets and sidewalks became narrower. Tom had no idea where they were until he saw Chinese characters printed across red awnings. They skirted the Canal Street artery—he’d taken Abigail here once, after college, in search of a knockoff Coach bag—until the overcrowded bustle and teetering vegetable carts gave way to stately buildings. The Brooklyn Bridge appeared to their left before Liz cut across a thin finger of a park and led them down into the close alleyways of the financial district.

The warm air felt good and the streets were full of people; Liz’s body, mere inches away, gave off a tempting smell and a static charge that he was drawn to and scared of. She spoke with a lilt, and as they walked she pointed out things he wouldn’t have noticed: a community garden locked behind tall iron gates, a pair of dachshund puppies drowsing in a pet-store window, seven crows roosting atop the Courthouse, a blini shop she said made the most divine blueberry blini. He said, “Let’s get some.” She bit her lip, and Tom thought he saw a moment of hesitation—the kind that alights when being offered something too good to be true—but she agreed. They ordered blueberry and apple and raisin and ate them standing in front of the shop, watching people rush past.

“Everyone’s in a hurry here,” Tom said. “Even on a Sunday.”

“Bound up in busy. Careering toward death.”

“That’s intense.”

“New Yorkers don’t live by the same clock,” Liz said. She wiped her mouth with a paper napkin. “Ferry time.”

At the terminal, Liz stood aside and waited while Tom bought their tickets. She had pulled on a pair of fingerless gloves made of soft-looking purple yarn. When he handed her the boarding pass, their fingertips touched. There it was—a taut electricity that raced through his body and hit him in the stomach. They boarded. She told him there were cheap tall boys of Budweiser at the concession stand, so they went upstairs and ordered two. Tom bought a paper boat of nachos as well, covered with congealing orange cheese. “In case the blini weren’t enough,” he said. Liz plucked one and gobbled it, then looked guilty.

The boat pulled away from the dock; with it came an unsteady floating in his stom-

ach. He did not like water, could not swim. But this was a big boat—they sat at a table in a room that was easily bigger than the bar they’d just come from. There were life jackets and lifeboats somewhere—he knew that—it was impossible there weren’t. He wrapped his fingers around his can of beer. The condensation, the coolness, settled him.

He asked where she grew up, and she said Connecticut in a way that did not allow further elaboration. He pictured her, for some reason, on a sloping green lawn, how incredible her red hair would look aflame against the trees. He imagined laying her down in the grass, undressing her, finding the soft spots between the knobs of her spine, under her arms, pressing his mouth into the softness, smelling the sweat of her up close. Wrapping her hair in his hands. Biting her neck. Her nipples like tight buds between his teeth. Slid-

Their bodies were no longer touching, but she turned her head to look at him—he felt her eyes watching him as tangibly as he had her upper arm and hip.

ing his fingers inside her. Heat rippled through his body, and he sipped his beer, tried to calm himself. “Have you lived in the city long?” he asked again.

“Ten years. I went to Columbia.”

“Grad or undergrad?” He tried to gauge how old she was. Her skin was pale, almost translucent, and very smooth, but she had what his wife called “the parentheses,” two deep creases framing her patrician lips. She was at once innocent and resigned, impish and old-soul.

“Undergrad. English major. Poetry minor.”

“So, you’re—what, twenty-eight?”

Something about her seemed to skitter away from the question. A window was open to their left, and her narrow face flushed even as the cool air rushed in and tousled her bright hair. “Twenty-seven,” she said, pulling her hair out of her face and twisting it into a bun.

“You’re young.”

“You can’t be much older.”

“Thirty-five,” he said. He wondered, if he were to reach out and touch her cheek, how she would react, if she would pull away.

“That’s nothing. You don’t even have any grays yet.”

They finished the nachos, and Liz said, “Let’s go to the front deck.”

Wind whipped Liz’s hair back, uncoiling the bun she’d knotted. The scar along her chin glinted a vivid white in the sunlight. She stared out over the water for a long time without saying anything.

Governor’s Island passed by on their left, unassuming and bland. Liz walked away from Tom to the other side of the deck. He hesitated, followed her. She turned, sliding her hands along the metal rail as she moved back toward him. When their trajectories reconnected, he saw that her fingernails were chewed to the quick, distinguishable from his own only by their smallness. Liz settled close to him, resting her arm and thigh against his; she said, “I always think about the Titanic when I ride the ferry. Like we could go down here. It’s grandiose really—to imagine such an enormous loss of life repeated in this little bay.”

“Grandiose and entirely possible,” Tom said. Liz laughed and rolled her eyes.

Tom looked up at the clouds now streaking across the sky, dulling its blue to the pale color of a robin’s egg. In college, Tom had been a painter, obsessed with mixing colors to match the sky—a seemingly endless task—the sky was a new shade every day, every hour. He rarely studied the sky anymore; there was no time for something so capricious.

Despite the chill blowing off the water, he felt Liz’s warmth pressing into his body, felt it seep into his stomach and ascend his spine. He wanted to touch her hair, the fiery redness of it. Gulls swooped and shrieked, their caws carrying through the crystalline air. Tom and Liz stood there, arms and thighs alive against one another, until the boat docked on Staten Island. They disembarked in the tide of passengers, circled around, waited to board again.

They returned to their place on the prow. Across the water, the tip of Manhattan shimmered, tiny and jagged. Missing an essential piece, Tom thought. There would be a new tower—they’d already begun constructing it—a replacement. But there were no new lives for the ones lost, nothing shiny and rising into the sky. In a way, he thought, death was only about what was left behind. Never about what came after.

He worried about his mortgage and marriage and money—that these were the necessities of his life, the things that would remain if he were gone—and this bothered him. It bothered him that he’d gone looking for his *Encyclopedia of Birds* one recent afternoon, and unable to find it, had asked Abigail where it was. She said, “That old thing? I let Andy take it to school for a project.” Andy, upon questioning, could not recall the book. Tom had said, “It’s a big book, with a hawk on the cover?” Andy had shaken his head, his serious eyes darkening with confusion, and said, “I don’t remember, Daddy. I’m sorry.” “It’s okay, buddy. It’s just a book,” Tom had said. The book was not essential; the book was easily replaced. But Tom had not yet bought another copy.

He said, “I’ve always wanted to live in Manhattan.”

“Why?”

He thought it odd—he thought *Why not?* He said, “It’s alive here. There are answers here to questions no one has ever asked.”

“That’s deep,” she said.

“Don’t patronize me.”

“I’m not.” Their bodies were no longer touching, but she turned her head to look at him—he felt her eyes watching him as tangibly as he had her upper arm and hip. She said, “Where do you think those answers are?”

“All around us. Circling the way birds do buildings.”

“Occasionally crashing into us and bleeding to death on the sidewalk?”

He laughed. “Maybe the birds don’t always murder themselves against the glass. Maybe they pass through sometimes and keep going.” The wind and sun and glare of the water pushed at their faces, made them squint. He liked it. He liked standing next to this woman, the smell of diesel and dirty water mixing with the woody aroma of her.

“That’s romanticizing this place. People who don’t live here do it all the time. If you lived here you would know about homeless men asleep on broiling sidewalks with flies swarming their shit-stained pants. About roaches the size of mice, how creepy the sound their antennae make tapping the walls. About what it was like to live through the aftermath of the towers—to live forever with that dust inside you. Buildings are solid, Tom Brown, until they fall down.”

“You were here?”

“I was.”

“Did you—?”

Liz closed her eyes. After a moment, she jerked her head from right to left, just once. Her scar flashed in the fading light. Sharp. Definitive. But yes or no he could not tell. He had not even finished his question.

“Have dinner with me tonight?” he asked.

“What about your wife?”

“My wife.” He thought of Abigail’s shiny brown hair in a ponytail, how rarely she kissed him goodnight. He thought of the pair of crimson boxer briefs he had found stuffed into her nightstand drawer. She must think him so daft.

“I don’t think your wife would appreciate your taking me to dinner,” Liz said.

“I’m not going to tell her.”

“Where’s your hotel?”

“Tribeca.”

“I’m gay, you know,” Liz said.

“I didn’t,” Tom said. “I wouldn’t have guessed that.”

“No one ever does,” Liz replied. “Not that it matters.”

When they were back on Water Street, Liz said, “I’ll walk with you to your hotel.”

Dusk had settled between the buildings, the last rays of daylight illuminating windows and softening shadows into inky smudges. He wanted to ask again about dinner, did

not want to leave her scent—it was pine, he had figured out, now that they were off the water, pine and something grittier: moss, tree-bark, humus—or the buzzing her proximity created in his body. She was gay. And he was not the sort of man who cheated on his wife. None of it made any sense.

They walked with a thin inch of space between them, Liz humming. “What street is your hotel on?” she asked. It was apparent that Tom had no idea how to navigate the grid-less downtown streets.

“Hudson,” he said.

“And the cross street?”

“I don’t know. I’ll recognize it when we get there.”

Liz smiled, and he saw then that her first smile, the one in the bar, had been a fake.

“Who was that woman?” he asked.

“Which one?”

“The one in the bar.”

“No one,” Liz said, and the smile faded. “Someone I used to know.”

“An ex?”

“An ex of an ex,” she said.

“Something happened between you?”

“Something always happens.” Her voice went cold, far away.

“I suppose it does.”

“It’s different from the straight world.”

“I don’t think it is,” he said. His wife, when he came home from work, smelled like the sweat of another man.

“And you’re some sort of authority on the matter?”

“No. I just think relationships are complicated.” There was his wife’s false cheeriness as she prepared dinner, the way she talked only to Andy at the table.

“You know you came into a gay bar?”

“What about the bartender?” he asked.

“What about her?”

“That was a woman?” He felt suddenly stupid. Of course. The smooth chin, the narrow shoulders and fine hands.

“Kylie. Yup.”

Tom let out a low whistle, and laughed. “Wow. I just thought the sign was clever.” He remembered its carved image of a sawed-off tree trunk from which overflowed dozens of little birds, some with bows atop their heads, others adorned with bowties. “And I wanted a beer.”

“Aleta’s is a lesbian institution—”

“How would I know that?” he asked.

“You’re a strange duck, Tom Brown.”

“How was I supposed to know Aleta Alehouse is a gay bar? It’s not like there was some rainbow over the door.”

Liz glanced at him and raised her eyebrow. “You’re right. You couldn’t have known.”

They lapsed into silence—but it was an easy silence, nothing like the one he and Abigail had struck—until he saw the hotel sign looming ahead.

“It’s this one,” he said, pointing. They were in front of a deli, buckets of bright flowers on display under terrible fluorescent lights. Liz’s hair matched the dahlias. She angled toward him and studied his face before she extended her hand and said, “Nice to meet you, Tom Brown.”

With her gloves on, her hand no longer had the weightlessness of a sparrow. She felt sturdier, wrapped in protective raiment. “Come up for a drink?” Tom asked, still holding her hand.

She dropped her eyes and studied her feet. Then she drew a line in front of her with her toe. “I won’t cross that line,” she said, looking up at him.

“What line?”

“You’re married.”

He nodded, held her stare.

“One drink. Then I have to go.”

In the hotel room, Liz removed her gloves and jacket and shoes. She was not wearing socks, and had a purple orchid tattooed over the top of her right foot. “Vodka tonic?” Tom offered and she nodded, sitting on the bed. She used the remote to turn on the TV, flipping to CNN before hitting the mute button. Then she leaned back against the pillows—huge and fluffy, repositioned by housekeeping after Tom had tossed them on the floor—and closed her eyes. Her sharp collarbones jutted upward, visible beneath the drape of her sweater.

Tom removed his tie and his work shirt. In his t-shirt, without the required buttons and knots, he fixed the drinks, more vodka than tonic, before sitting on the bed next to Liz. She opened her eyes, but instead of taking the drink from his hand, she said, “I wouldn’t have guessed,” touching his left forearm, which was covered in tattoos. “The Little Owl,” she said, tracing the outline of the bird on his inner wrist.

“Aleta means ‘winged one’ in Greek,” he said.

“It’s the owner’s name,” she said, taking her drink from his hand.

They sipped and stared at the TV screen, where the image of a woman kneeling and wailing in a shattered street flashed and disappeared.

There was nothing, Tom knew, watching the etched lines of the woman’s contorted face, nothing even remotely interesting about his own suffering, about the question he

asked himself as he let his foot relax and rest on Liz’s ankle. She did not flinch or move away, kept her eyes on the images on the screen.

Abigail had been sleeping with their neighbor—Jones, Tom called him privately—and Tom had let it go on for over a year. Let it go on while he paid the bills and loved his son and mowed the lawn on Saturdays. Let it go on because there was always food in the refrigerator, and a warm body beside him when he fell asleep at night. What was infidelity in the face of death, of loss? Nothing. A drop in the bucket. Not even large enough to ripple. He knew what he had done wrong: accept as true the respectable adult life that was his McMansion on a cul-de-sac in the suburbs with a woman who wanted nothing more than facials and lawn parties and her child in private school. What he had done wrong was accept the job that paid for it all and let Abigail buy him ties, hundreds of them, every time she needed to give him a gift. The image on the screen flashed to footage of men running, their narrow backs pursued by clouds of smoke and plaster. The banner below read *Air Strikes in Gaza*.

Liz rolled onto her side, balancing her drink on the mattress. Tom shifted toward her and put his hand on her hip. “I’ve been thinking about leaving New York,” she said. Her mouth tipped down.

“Why?”

“Why not? I don’t love it here. I’m tired. This city is a habit I can’t break, nothing more.”

“Where will you go? Back to Connecticut?”

“I’ll never go back there.”

Tom took the vodka from her hand and leaned over her, setting it on the nightstand. His heart thumped against her shoulder; he felt the flutter of her breathing. When he moved back to his spot, her body followed him. He kissed her. She kissed him. She leaned into his chest, wound her arm through his, gripped his hand. Then she ducked her head, so his mouth was on her hairline, and said, “It’s been a long time since I kissed a man.” She let her face fall back and they stared at one another. She kissed him again, leaning in with vodka on her lips and with something akin to hunger. He had not felt it in her before, but now he understood—she was starved. They both were.

How long they kissed, he lost track—his hands in her hair, on her neck, down her back until he pulled her narrow hips into his, feeling their fragile boniness against his stomach. She kissed slowly, carefully, against his fervent motions, and said, once, *Gentle*, before closing her eyes to him, before tracing her tongue in a circle around his lips. But when he went to unbutton her jeans, to slip his hand down—she was not wearing underwear, his fingertips met only silken skin and a wiry brush of hair—she intercepted his hand and said, without hesitation, *No*.

He blinked, and she came into focus, her eyes blue and clouded, her body still in full

contact with his but the refusal plain on her face. “I can’t,” she said. “I won’t.”

“But haven’t we already—?”

“Crossed the line,” Liz said.

Tom nodded, did not release her from his arms.

“One line. But there are others. You must know that.”

“I don’t know. I’ve never done this before.”

“I don’t believe you,” she said.

“You should,” he said.

“My parents disowned me when I told them I like women. I’m not straight. I made that decision a long time ago. This wouldn’t be fair. To either of us.”

It hurt, to hear the words. He liked kissing her, liked the surrender of her body in his arms, liked her scent and her bravery. Liked, above all else, the possibility of her.

“What’s it like,” he said, “to believe in something so fiercely?”

“It’s not belief. It’s my identity. But it’s like anything else, I guess. You launch yourself into the air and hope you can figure it out before gravity gets wind of you. You get up every morning and pretend you know how to keep aloft.”

“Do you think we’re all pretending?” Tom thought of the dead chickadee his son had found in the yard last week—black feathers worn away from its cap, the dull, sandy body in Andy’s cupped palm. Andy cried while Tom dug a hole in the sodden ground to bury it, and when Tom told Abigail this later, she rolled her eyes and said, *He’s so sensitive. It’s just a bird.*

“To some extent, I do.”

“And right now?”

She rested her forehead on his shoulder and let out a long sigh. “Not now. But this isn’t real life.”

“What is it?”

“It’s a moment. A glimpse into the essential.”

“Have you tried to talk to your parents—about being gay, about being happy?”

“They’re spineless bigots.”

“That’s harsh.”

“They deserve it,” Liz said.

“My wife doesn’t love me any more,” Tom said.

“How do you know?”

“She never looks at me. She’s fucking someone else and barely hides it.”

“So that’s what this is? Revenge.” Liz’s body moved almost imperceptibly away from his.

“No, actually it isn’t. I like you, felt pulled toward you in some way.”

“Why should I believe that?” she asked.

“You don’t need to believe anything. But I’m telling you.”

Liz was quiet.

“Where will you go?” he asked again.

“California, maybe. Near the redwoods, the ocean. But maybe I won’t leave. Maybe I like the fantasy of someplace else.”

“I think we all do,” Tom said.

“There aren’t any answers here,” Liz said. “Any more than there are anywhere. We all live under the same sky.”

“If that’s not romanticizing things, I don’t know what is,” he said.

Liz stifled a laugh. She said, “Now you sound like a New Yorker. There’s hope for you yet.”

He let his mind trace back across the years to all the shades of color he’d mixed: purple and magenta and orange and every variation of blue and gray. How his neck ached constantly from craning his head backward, studying up. He wanted to tell her how much he missed it.

Liz’s body relaxed into his and after a few minutes, he felt the evenness of her ex-hales, how her body nestled into itself as she dropped into sleep.

Why the sky? everyone had asked him, Abigail included, and he never had an answer.

In his arms, Liz’s body softened further, as if relieved of some great burden. He bent his neck and rested his face on her hair, inhaling the earthen dustiness of her. The neckline of her shirt gapped and he saw then the tattoo inked on her shoulders: wings. Delicate feathers, spread to fly.

Timothy Day

Lila and the Box

The box arrived two months after Lila's roommate Veronica moved out. It had no distinguishing features. It was brown and square and medium in size, with VERONICA written on it in small, black letters. Like all boxes, its inside would attract more interest than its outside. Lila wondered what it would be like if people were more like boxes in this way, then decided that the idea sounded like a bad commercial written by a woman who produced such sentiment with utter apathy while chewing day-old gum. Lila put the box down and called Veronica. While the phone rang, she imagined that Veronica had been sent an actual person and that this person was sitting scrunched up in the box, listening as best he or she could to the world outside. She wondered what the call would sound like. Maybe it would sound like a cartoon.

Hi, a box came for you.

Pshebebuah?

It doesn't say.

Pshebebuahbobuh?

I don't know, there isn't any name or address.

Pshebebuah...pshemumuhmamuhbuguhjubemubabobuhumobebuhum.

Okay, are you sure?

Psshbe.

Lila set the phone down and took the box cutter out of the drawer. She had only opened someone else's mail once before, 16 years ago, at the age of eight, when her father got a letter from his first wife. The contents were all very unfriendly. He had taken the letter from her and told her in a calm and patient tone that what she had done was a very serious offense and that something terrible would happen if she ever did it again. She had studied the features of his face, his narrow and protruding beak-like nose, his sterile grey eyes that never became too big or too squinched behind the thin, silver frames of his glasses, his curly hair that reached backwards as if trying to break free from his scalp. She had decided right then: the terrible thing that would happen must certainly be death.

But as Lila moved the blade along the edges of Veronica's box, no feeling of impending doom came over her. When the cutting was done, she set the blade down and looked at the newly vulnerable box resting on the counter below. She picked up the phone again.

You're definitely sure?

Yes! Jesus, Lila, it's not a big deal.

Okay.

She lifted the cardboard flaps of the box that protected whatever lay inside, ready to be seen and discovered and loved. Her eyebrows narrowed.

Veronica?

Yeah?

Nothing's in it.

What?

It's empty.

Are you sure?

Well, I mean, yeah.

That's weird.

Maybe it's a soul. Did you buy a soul on eBay?

Ha ha.

Or maybe it's from someone who really wants you to send *them* a gift, so they're trying to drop the hint by supplying the packaging for it.

That's probably it.

Probably.

Lila put the box on the couch and sat down next to it for a long and awkward moment, as if getting to know a stranger. Turning on the TV felt like giving up, admitting that there was nothing interesting happening in her life that night. Tonight the on button felt particularly cold and devastating. A cooking show appeared on the screen. The man on it was slicing carrots and preparing broccoli as if this was a very exciting activity. Lila imagined a universe in which she collapsed on her bed at night and fell asleep within seconds, completely fulfilled, thinking about what an experience it had been cooking vegetables that day. The idea was nice, but there was something missing. It reminded her of her father. She turned off the TV. In the silence of her apartment, she heard the elevator ding in the hallway outside and footsteps exit. As there were only three apartments on the floor, this could only be one of two people. It could be the old woman who always smelled like soup, or it could be the man who had just moved in and had been carrying a potted plant on both occasions that Lila had shared the elevator with him. She had looked at it the second time and said,

I like your plant.

And he had looked over and said,

It's glued to my hands.

That seems unlikely.

The man had then stretched out his arms and offered the plant to her.

Here. Try to pull it off, and see what happens.

And she had reached out and taken the plant and smiled at him. And he had said,

Wow. You're really strong.

Lila stood next to her door and wondered if it was the man getting off the elevator and if he was still carrying the plant. She thought about pretending to check her mail just to see if it was him, but she had already gotten her mail and she didn't want any interaction with the plant carrying man to take place under false pretenses. She looked at the box. Suddenly, it seemed like an unwelcome intruder, judging her for not having as simple an existence as it did. She heard the door close to the left of her apartment, meaning that it had been the old woman. Lila suspected that she was a nurse, and really it would be perfect if she was because soup would be a great thing to smell like in a place full of sick people. She probably hadn't even had to speak in her interview. Once they got a good whiff of her, they must have hired her on the spot. Lila put the TV on again and went into the kitchen and made soup without any vegetables in it. She averted her eyes from the box for the rest of the night.

Somewhere in the mish mash and cluster buster of her dreams, Lila dreamed of her father knocking on the door. He looked the same but with dirt on his face that Lila imagined must have come from climbing out of his grave. He looked at her as if this was no big deal, as if he had not just risen from the dead and come to see her for the first time in three years. And he said something like,

Did you get the package I sent?

No.

Yes you did. I see it right over there.

He pointed, and Lila followed his finger to the box on the couch, which was now looking tired and sad somehow.

That was for Veronica.

No, it was meant for you.

There was nothing in it.

There was a soul in it.

No there wasn't. I would have been able to tell.

And her father shook his head and said,

That's the thing about souls. They only attach themselves to the second person they see. An idiosyncrasy of their kind, I suppose. That's why it was addressed to Veronica.

But I already have a soul, and it's a perfectly functioning one.

I thought you must have lost it, since you never came to see me in the end. I'm not

trying to be confrontational, that's just really what I thought.

I didn't think you wanted me to. Or cared either way.

Her father brought his dirty fingers up and scratched at his eyebrows, then re-adjusted his glasses and said in a steady tone,

Since you didn't come visit me at the cemetery and ask for forgiveness, I realized you must not have received the soul. I knew that this could only mean one of two things. The first was that you didn't get the box. The second was a far more serious matter, but now we have to deal with it.

Lila shook her head wildly as everything around her started to twist and bend and wiggle.

I didn't want to do it. Veronica made me.

Her father shook his head.

He looked the same, but with dirt on his face that Lila imagined must have come from climbing out of his grave. He looked at her as if this was no big deal, as if he had not just risen from the dead and come to see her for the first time in three years.

It doesn't matter. It's done. But really, being dead isn't so bad. It gives you that same feeling of peace and contentment as, say, cooking vegetables.

Lila screamed silently as her father reached his arm out and took her by the shoulder, and the ceiling started to rain well-cooked broccoli and carrots.

When Lila woke up, she peered around her bedroom door and examined the opened box sitting on the couch. She approached it hesitantly, as if dealing with a wild animal. After peeking over the top at the empty space inside, she grabbed the box on both sides and rushed quickly to the door. The hallway was quiet and still and vaguely soup-smelling. Lila pushed the box as far away from her door as she could without it being closer to another door. After this, she went inside and took a shower, then studied her face in the mirror. She imagined what it would be like if she woke up with a different face every day. Scary but exciting. Why couldn't more things be like that? Mirrors programmed people into routine, a fresh reminder every morning. Look. See? You're the same. Your day will be the same. You're as alive as the glass you see yourself in. Lila made wild facial expressions at the mirror to prove how alive she was. She put her glasses on upside down and ran her hands like mad through her short blonde hair, leaving it in complete disarray. She spoke to the mirror telepathically. See? I can do anything I want. I'm not a part of any scheme or system that you operate on. Your glassy oppression will affect me no more. She got dressed and left the apartment, quickly resetting her glasses when the man next door got on the elevator with her. Lila was disappointed to see him without foliage.



I model mittens made for Siberian tigers.

That's boring. What do you really do?

I'm a hotel clerk.

Now I'm interested. That's the second most exciting job there is.

What's the first?

Working at a plant shop.

The day was filled with people telling Lila their names and giving her credit cards that she swiped and handed back to them like some sort of swiping and handing back machine. They would say thank you, and she would smile and tell them to have a nice stay. Initially, she had tried to make her smiles genuine, but now they felt phonier and phonier every time, as if she was slowly turning into plastic. To be a plastic person was on the very top of her list of greatest fears, above giant spiders and regular spiders and dying and finding contentment in cooked vegetables.

When Lila got home, she found Veronica in the hall waiting for her. She stood with her hands on her hips and her sunglasses lowered to the tip of her nose. She pointed to the box sitting down the hall and asked,

Is that the box?

What happened to your plant?

He looked at her uncertainly for a moment before saying,

You got it off my hands, remember? I don't have to carry it anymore.

Oh, that's right.

He smiled. Lila was happy to see that he wasn't wearing a suit. Suits made her think of businessmen, and businessmen made her think of cubicles and water coolers and discussions about the weather. Instead, he was dressed as casually as she was, though his hair was more in order.

So what do you do?

Lila hesitated, then said,

Is it okay if I make up something that's more interesting?

Sure.

Yeah.

I thought you said it was empty.

It is.

And Lila went and looked in the box and saw that she was wrong. There was a potted plant inside, the same one that the man next door had been carrying. She picked it up, then looked back at Veronica.

Sorry. My neighbor must have put it there.

Veronica looked at her skeptically, then said,

Whatever. I just came for the box, anyway.

Really? Why?

I don't know, it just feels like it's still my box, even though it's empty. Maybe I can put some shit in it or something.

Okay.

Veronica picked up the empty box and said goodbye, and Lila went into her apartment with the plant. She took a deep breath as the elevator dinged in the hall and the box made its way out of the building. For the next three minutes or so, she sat on the couch and ran her fingers over the small clay pot in her hands. The plant resting in it was small but quietly beautiful, with bright and colorful leaves hidden inside a nest of green. The doorbell rang, and Lila answered it with the plant still in hand. It was the man from next door. He smiled and said,

I like your plant.

It's glued to my hands now.

The man reached forward and grasped the pot. His fingers intertwined with hers before they stopped moving, frozen against the clay.

It's stuck to me too now.

What should we do?

I don't know.

Maybe we can find a box to put it in.

Maybe. Or maybe we don't need a box.

Maybe not.

DAVID GAITHER
Paintings



The Mural of Synthetic Maximalism



Bruce H. Hinrichs

The Elements

On the northwest corner of the intersection of 19th and Jordan Avenues stands a neighborhood grocery store. The corner is busy. It is a popular neighborhood in the large city, one that is both middle-class residential and service-oriented. There are plenty of coffee shops (of course), video stores, beauty salons, adult bookstores, tattoo parlors, and specialty stores selling condoms, S&M paraphernalia, and other goodies. There are several psychics who will read your palm or feel the bumps on your head. Pedestrians, car traffic, bicycles, even skateboarders and rollerbladers populate the area day and night.

Although the grocery store has been called Peterson's for many years, the current proprietor is Mr. Blaine. Right now Mr. Blaine, wearing his usual fresh, crisp, white apron, is standing in aisle 4, meticulously aligning the soup cans. Mr. Blaine spends a great deal of time aligning and straightening things. He enjoys it. It soothes and occupies his body and his mind. His doctor, Rosemary Rongley, says that he has some sort of psychological disorder known by some silly initials, something like OCD. Mr. Blaine thinks that Dr. Rongley gets some wild, esoteric ideas. She analyzes too much. There's nothing wrong with aligning things. It's better when things are neat and straight. Instead of me, perhaps it's other people, people who don't like things nice and aligned, people who live in a dirty, messy world; perhaps it's they who have some fancy, initialed psychological disorder, like maybe DCO, Mr. Blaine thinks. Mr. Blaine smiles a wry smile to himself, then turns a chicken noodle soup can ever so slightly, just a hair, counterclockwise.

Directly across the street from Peterson's grocery store stands a large brown duplex with a small attic window at the very top. Right now, just as Mr. Blaine is busy aligning his cans and smiling wry smiles, a balding middle-aged man, Mr. Peter Dunlap, is gingerly crawling out of that small attic window and carefully shinnying out onto a narrow ledge at the top of the second floor of the brown duplex. His hands tightly grip the edge of the eaves while he moves to a position directly above a multi-cracked, wide, gray sidewalk, a position from which he will shortly jump.

Rrrriinnnggg. Rrrriinnnggg.

At this moment the telephone rings at the house just next door to the duplex from which Mr. Dunlap is about to jump.

"Hello?"

That's Mrs. Ethyl O'Hare, who has lived with her husband Matthew in this same house for nearly 23 years. The house is painted a dull yellow and has pretty lilacs, hydrangeas, geraniums, hyacinths, and pimpernels blooming just inside the somewhat dilapi-

His hands are tightly gripping the edge of the eaves while he moves to a position directly above a multi-cracked, wide, gray sidewalk; a position from which he will shortly jump.

dated white picket fence surrounding the house. If you look closely, you will see a bumblebee buzzing from stamen to stamen collecting pollen. Precious butterflies and delicate, ruby-throated hummingbirds sometimes visit the O'Hare's yard. Today there is a sticky, bloodstained hypodermic syringe lying partially hidden in the soil beneath the bushes.

The O'Hares have two children. Right now, 14-year-old Eric is in the upstairs bathroom masturbating. Tiffany, 19, is institutionalized with depression and an eating disorder. Right at this instant Tiffany O'Hare is in a tiny white room in a large brick building across town, repeatedly cutting the inside of her forearm with a razor blade, experiencing what her therapist calls a dissociative state.

"Did you get the money? Can you bring it this afternoon?" inquires the voice on the other end of the telephone speaking to Mrs. Ethyl O'Hare.

At that precise moment, a young woman, Miss Margaret Chaps, enters Mr. Blaine's grocery store (Peterson's), smiling and carrying a fashionable brown purse with some carefully inscribed designer initials on it, even on the inside, where no one will see them, save Miss Chaps. The initials are something like YSL or YLS, but certainly not OCD. Miss Chaps is a bit anxious and panicky because of the PTSD she now experiences ever since the sexual assault some months ago.

Ting...tinkle...ting. Mr. Blaine has attached a small bell to the upper inside part of the front door of the grocery store. Mr. Blaine loves to hear the gentle tinkling sound.

"Margaret! Hello, how are you?"

"Just fine, Mr. Blaine. I need some pans for baking cupcakes. Do you have any?"

"Yes, yes, of course. Right over here."

Mr. Blaine, followed by Margaret Chaps, begins to move sprightly to aisle 6, the last aisle, where he has neatly stacked the pots and pans. However, before they even reach aisle 5, they hear a car's brakes screech just outside the store. They both stop, frozen in time, pupils dilated, mouths gaping. Then immediately, there is a very loud, horrifying,

metal-crunching CRASH!

The sound of the crash is heard by everyone nearby. As a consequence, at the very same moment Mr. Blaine and Miss Chaps stare wide-eyed at each other, Mr. Dunlap, in a state of bewilderment, grips the eaves even tighter while he peers down at the waiting sidewalk, Eric O'Hare turns his head slightly toward the bathroom window (but is in no position to stop what he's doing just now), and Mrs. O'Hare pauses in mid-sentence on the phone. Of course, Tiffany O'Hare is completely across town and couldn't possibly hear the loud crash, so she simply continues her cutting, looking impassively at the jagged lines on her arm and the bubbly red blood emerging from them in oozing, runny modules.

Mr. Blaine and Miss Chaps now hurry out the grocery store front door, where they see a small, red car neatly crunched and wedged beneath a large black truck. Both vehicles are smoking profusely and blocking the intersection. Traffic is tangled and horns are honking. The bumblebee merely visits another anther while a stickworm inches up a sycamore branch, each oblivious to the commotion.

"...How do I know that this will be the end? How do I know you won't just ask for more and more money? How do I know you won't tell my husband, anyway? You know it would kill him, it would just kill him!" Mrs. O'Hare has continued her conversation after the brief pause caused by the crash. She's thinking that if the ladies at the church find out about this messy affair she will have to leave the Guild for sure.

Mr. Dunlap had just decided that this would be as good a time as any to jump from his overlooking ledge at the top of the brown duplex when the car crash interrupted his thoughts and momentarily captured his attention. Holding tenaciously to the eaves and scrunching his size 11 shoes onto the narrow ledge, he notices a small crowd forming at the scene of the accident. Chagrined, he concludes that his suicide must wait a few minutes.

The driver of the red car seems pinned, even squashed, behind his steering wheel. He is quite still. Probably dead. The crowd is talking fast and loud, saying things such as, "What kind of car is that? It looks like a Porsche. Boy, I wish I had a Porsche!" and "God, did you see that? Can you believe a car could squeeze under there? That is way cool!" and "Like, ohmygod, like, that's literally like what I just actually saw on TV like just yesterday, like, I mean, ohmygod, so..." and "Bitching, man, bitching."

The driver of the truck is now emerging from the bent door of the truck. A bloody gash on his forehead is leaking. His face is pure white, in high contrast to his tanned body and dark, dirty clothes, and, of course, to the bright-red leaking blood. His rolled up T-shirt sleeves reveal a large, prominent tattoo on his upper left bicep. It says JESUS SAVES in blue letters that are surrounded by a swirling red ribbon. It looks as if there's an arrow passing through the words diagonally from lower left to upper right, but it could be a

poorly drawn cross.

One of the observers in the crowd is Mr. Steve Clay, who was wandering the neighborhood on his way home from a doctor's appointment. His doctor—coincidentally, Mr. Blaine's doctor, Rosemary Rongley—had just told him that a second test had verified that he is HIV-positive. More initials. Mr. Clay, of course, is in a state of shock and confusion. He hasn't even been able to tell his wife that he is gay, now how will he tell her this? He is staring, unblinking, at the blood on the forehead of the truck driver and thinking about four-and-one-half years of lying, of nervous sneaking around, of clandestine assignations, of certain, well, acts. And he is thinking about AIDS. Even more initials.

Now 10-year-old Jimmy Swenson, milling amongst the crowd—excited, hyper, a sufferer of ADHD—has spotted Mr. Dunlap standing precariously on the narrow ledge of his duplex. The attic window is still open. The wind is blowing dust, leaves, and bits of nature into the attic to join the memories that have accumulated there over many years, memories that include a red, loose-leaf notebook full of poems written by Mr. Dunlap many years ago, poems that now sit forlorn and unattended—unwanted. His friends had often warned him that he was too sensitive.

A small insect has alighted on Mr. Dunlap's forearm, irritating him. He is unable to shoo it away because his hands are still tightly gripping the eaves. Mr. Dunlap is squirming and twisting his upper body and blowing at the insect in hopes of motivating it to leave him in peace. At this very moment, Jimmy Swenson begins pointing at Mr. Dunlap and shouting things like, "Look up there, a man's gonna jump!" Possibly as a result of the simultaneity of hearing the shouting while staring at the insect, a disturbing image pops into Mr. Dunlap's head. It is an image of Gregor Samsa, Franz Kafka's cockroach-man. Inexplicably, this makes Mr. Dunlap feel very brave and determined—he is going to jump.

Meanwhile, Mr. Blaine and Miss Chaps have arrived at the accident scene from the grocery store, naturally without the cupcake pans. Someone in the crowd is yelling to call 911. Miss Chaps suggests to Mr. Blaine that they return to the grocery store and place the call. Mr. Blaine knows this is a problem because Mr. Blaine knows a secret. He stands quiet, staring, thinking (if only he had a quick, nimble mind instead of an OCD mind). Mr. Blaine is hesitant and troubled because Mr. Blaine knows that his telephone is in the kitchen and that right now his wife, Mrs. Blaine, is lying dead on the kitchen floor in the tidy apartment in the back of Peterson's grocery store.

The voice on the other end of the telephone says to bring the money today, or else he will certainly tell Mr. O'Hare all the gory details of the affair and its gruesome, criminal denouement. Mrs. O'Hare is dumbfounded as to how anyone could possibly know what happened between her and Mr. Fitzgerald or how she had arranged for his death to look like an accident. How could anyone know? But one thing she knows for sure: she must not allow Matthew or anyone else to find out.



Matthew O'Hare is at work this morning, even though it is a Saturday. Mr. O'Hare is planning another Boy Scout outing. Mrs. O'Hare thinks of her husband Matthew as a kind, giving person—a respectable businessman who happens to like children. She doesn't know the real reason for the Boy Scout outings. She doesn't know about Mr. O'Hare's "problem." But soon she will know. Soon everyone will know.

As it happens, little Jimmy Swenson has been on some of Mr. O'Hare's Boy Scout outings, and only two weeks from now little Jimmy Swenson, suffering from ADHD, will blurt out the secret of the outings during a tense interrogation that he will receive after being caught attempting to rape six-year-old Anna Cokato, who lives next door. Jimmy Swenson knows the secret because on one particular Boy Scout outing, Jimmy only pretended to swallow the sleeping pills. Therefore he was not unconscious during the... well, "acts." While small forest animals scurried outside the tents, Jimmy remained quiet, embarrassed, and feigned sleep. Hence, Mr. O'Hare's secret was revealed to little Jimmy Swenson, who will, in just two weeks' time, reveal the secret to the local police.

One of the first people to arrive at the scene of the accident is Mr. George Rivers, who teaches mathematics at the nearby high school. Mr. Rivers is just on his way to hear a lecture in Emerson Hall, the auditorium at the local private college, Starks University. The lecture is being given by the eminent physicist Dr. Murray Gell-Mann, who is best known for his theories about quarks. In fact, he coined the term—or, rather, borrowed it from literature.

Mr. George Rivers read in the local newspaper that scientists recently discovered the last of the theorized six quarks, the so-called "top" quark. Quarks are supposedly what everything is made of. What we are made of. Murray Gell-Mann is one of the few people on earth who knows what this means and why it is important. Mr. Rivers has always been curious about such things. Ever since he was in junior high school, Mr. Rivers has carried in his pocket a small, folded copy (now quite ragged and worn) of the Periodic Table, listing all of the known elements. The universe in his pocket. And all very neatly aligned.

Mrs. Amelia Rivers, his wife, often asks George why he bothers to carry such a thing with him all the time. Does it have some religious or spiritual meaning, she wonders? Is it sentimental? Or is it practical in some way that she can't fathom? Mr. Rivers chuckles explosively to himself, quickly cupping his hands to his mouth. He remembers one such occasion when, feeling especially witty, he had replied to her, "It's elementary, my dear Mary, I carry it in order to be universally understood."

Mr. Rivers enjoys making puns, although he is quite aware that no one else seems to enjoy them. No one ever laughs or even smiles at his clever puns. In fact, no one seems to have much of a sense of humor at all, it suddenly dawns on Mr. Rivers. For humorous conversation, most people simply recount TV show plots, talk about celebrities, and, of course, go on and on about the weather. Mr. Rivers finds nothing funny in those things, nothing funny at all. "People," he whispers disdainfully under his breath, "what a bunch of humorless jerks."

Only a few feet from Mr. Rivers, oblivious to his disparaging remark, Mr. Blaine is now staring blankly at Miss Chaps, who continues to appeal to him to go back to the grocery store to call 911. In this frozen moment, Mr. Blaine suddenly recalls the unpleasant details of this morning, this morning in the kitchen. The events flash through his mind: Mr. Blaine remembers feeling the hard, gritty piece of metal pipe in his freshly cleaned hand. The grit on the metal was so nauseating to him, so filthy, that even now the memory makes him want to wash his hands again. If only she would have stopped nagging him. If only she would have kept quiet. If only the piece of metal pipe had not felt so cool in his hands, so cool in contrast to the kitchen's morning heat.

The truck driver is now staggering amongst the crowd, repeatedly mumbling something about God granting him a miracle. Upon hearing this, Mr. Rivers, the high school teacher with the table of elements in his pocket, smiles a sideways, smirking smile. He thinks that the word "miracle" is used only when there is a disaster. If someone says there has been a miracle, then you can safely assume that something bad has happened. No one says it's a miracle there wasn't an accident today, or it's a miracle a plane didn't crash, or it's a miracle I don't have cancer, or it's a miracle I didn't drop dead at the breakfast table this

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morning, or it's a miracle the earth didn't crash into the sun, and so on, Mr. George Rivers thinks. But if someone is injured... there's a miracle lurking for sure. Mr. Rivers tries hard to fit into society, but he feels progressively more and more left out.

Miss Chaps has already started, hurriedly, toward Peterson's grocery store with the intention of calling 911. She's forgotten all about the cupcake pans. Mr. Blaine is stammering at her, but his OCD brain has not yet created an excuse, so he trails behind her, his arms flailing wildly, his mind flailing wildly. A small brown bird is startled by the sudden movements and glides swiftly away from the scene, emitting a high-pitched tweet.

"Tweet."

Mr. Dunlap, still gripping the eaves tightly, yells at Jimmy Swenson to mind his own business, to shut up. Some people in the crowd, including HIV-positive Steve Clay, are now looking up at Mr. Dunlap and wondering if Jimmy is right—that Mr. Dunlap is planning to jump. Steve Clay is wondering if maybe that's a good idea for him, too. The thought now materializes in his mind: an image of crawling out on the ledge, joining Mr. Dunlap, peering birds-eye down on the chaotic scene below, and then bringing a swift, unequivocal end to his HIV nightmare. Then, suddenly, both the insect and the image

flutter swiftly away from their respective sites—Mr. Dunlap's arm and Mr. Clay's conscious mind.

Mrs. O'Hare is just now hanging up the phone after having agreed to bring the money to the designated location, as Eric O'Hare, apparently finished with his bathroom business, is bounding down the stairs, running out the front door to join the fun outside. Mrs. O'Hare's mind works faster than Mr. Blaine's, and she has already conjured up the crude outline of a plan that will bring an unpleasant but necessary end to the man on the phone. Mrs. O'Hare walks patiently but with cold determination to the bureau in the den, opens the hidden drawer, and firmly grasps and removes a gleaming, silver, steel pistol. Only need to load it and put it in her Gucci purse, then she's on her way to "pay off" that damn blackmailer.

At this moment, Miss Chaps has burst through the entrance into Peterson's grocery store with Mr. Blaine right behind her. He is yelling at her to wait, but her mind is not processing his protestations. She moves quickly past the neatly aligned cans to the back kitchen door and begins pulling it open. Mrs. Blaine's dead body is lying just inside the door; a stream of dull red blood, partially dried, lies in stark contrast atop the clean, white linoleum floor.

Mr. Blaine is just behind her, shouting, "WAIT!" But Miss Chaps grasps the door handle and pulls on it hard; the door swings open wider and wider. Miss Chaps sticks her head into the kitchen, focusing her eyes on the wall, searching for the telephone. Her head turns from side to side, searching. She begins to step into the kitchen where the odor is a bit raw... the body is only a few feet away, lying still, quiet. Mr. Blaine stands paralyzed just behind, his heart racing, his body limp and shaking, his mind numb.

And then, quite unexpectedly, a series of loud screeching sirens pierces the air, penetrating ears everywhere, including the ears in Peterson's grocery store. Miss Chaps's brain promptly registers the loud, shrill clamoring, and consequently she spins away from the kitchen (and from Mrs. Blaine's dead body, which must remain to be found later by the police) and stares directly at Mr. Blaine, his chubby face now covered with sweat, his eyes opened wide, and his mouth gaping.

"Oh, they're here already," Miss Chaps says and instinctively releases her grip on the kitchen door handle, allowing the door to slowly swing closed behind her. She steps toward a still somewhat anesthetized Mr. Blaine.

"Yes," he gasps with a sigh of great, unexpected relief, but is then suddenly aware of an intense, sharp pain in his left chest, now spreading from his neck down his left arm. He instantly feels faint, recognizes an impending loss of consciousness, and begins to lose his balance. Miss Chaps stares at him in shock and disbelief, her face a picture-perfect look of pure inconceivability. Mr. Blaine glances quickly, anxiously, down at the floor, studying it, worrying about dirtying his clothes, and then falls directly, flatly, to the grocery store

floor. The impact creates an echoing thud, and the vibration causes a slight disruption in the alignment of the cans on the shelves. The chicken noodle soup can, the very one that Mr. Blaine recently aligned, now in response to the vibration rotates ever so slightly, just a hair, in a clockwise direction, and finally rests in the precise orientation it was in before Mr. Blaine aligned it. Meanwhile, Mr. Blaine is utterly, unflinchingly, instantly dead from a heart attack, his body lying not far from the body of his wife, Mrs. Blaine.

Several police cars and an emergency vehicle jockey for space at the busy intersection. A flycatcher suddenly darts from his perch in a nearby tree, snatches the very insect that just buzzed off of Mr. Dunlap's arm, and just as suddenly the flycatcher vanishes back into the dense branches overhanging the O'Hare's pale yellow house.

Despondent, HIV-positive Steve Clay has lost interest in the accident scene, having more pressing issues on his mind. He wanders aimlessly, bumping shoulders with this person or that, his thoughts a jumble of breakfast mush, the image of the red blood on the truck driver's forehead branded insidiously into his mind. Without purpose, he meanders away from the bustling *mélange* of people and sounds and takes refuge inside his own introspections. He is walking just now on the cracked, gray sidewalk directly below Mr. Dunlap, who is feeling a bit at ease now that the insect has left his arm and the image of Gregor Samsa has left his mind. Mr. Dunlap peers down and finds that he can stare straight onto the top of Mr. Clay's head. From this vantage point, Mr. Clay appears to be staggering in slow motion.

A local high school student, Bill Bagget, has recognized his former teacher, Mr. Rivers, and begins talking animatedly with him about the crash, with an occasional swat at a persistent horse fly that buzzes around their heads. The paramedics have emerged from their vehicle with their usual idiosyncratic metal and plastic equipment, stretchers, cases, and flexible tubes. They are carrying what appears to be a tank of oxygen.

"That's oxygen, isn't it Mr. Rivers?" asks Bill.

"Yes. That's oxygen."

"We studied that in chemistry class. I think oxygen has atomic number eight. Is that right, Mr. Rivers?"

"Yes. Atomic number eight, atomic weight 16." Mr. Rivers knows his elements.

Bill Bagget's curiosity continues: "That container they're carrying the oxygen in, it looks so shiny, what kind of metal do you think it is? Is it titanium? Uhhmm, what's the atomic number of titanium again, Mr. Rivers?" Bill Bagget looks anxiously, curiously at Mr. Rivers, a look that might be taken as one of respect, respect for Mr. Rivers's knowledge.

Mr. Rivers is delighted—absolutely thrilled—to have this opportunity to use his Periodic Table. He proudly smiles at Bill Bagget and reaches into his back trousers pocket saying, "Well, let's just have a look here..."

Mrs. Ethyl O'Hare has secured her shiny steel pistol, stowed it in her Gucci purse, and is now heading out the front door of the pale yellow house. Naturally, she is oblivious to Mr. Dunlap perched on the ledge next door, although she does see a number of teen-aged boys skateboarding on the sidewalk in front of her house. She puts her head down and walks stoically toward her car, which is parked at the curb. On the paved pathway leading from the house, she inadvertently stomps on a small black ant, squishing it and pasting it to the bottom of her red shoe.

Now as Mrs. Ethyl O'Hare exits the gate of the white picket fence, the teenaged skateboarders suddenly, purposefully, converge on her. Her mind on other matters, she is taken aback by the sudden swarm of young arms and legs. She back-pedals rapidly, flailing her arms in an attempt to catch her balance and to ward off the attackers. One of the many young arms grabs her Gucci purse and tugs it viciously from her grasp. Now several hands pull at the strap of the purse, and the purse abruptly flies open, and the silver, steel pistol tumbles into space, glistening in the morning sun. All eyes, very wide open, are on the pistol as it falls to the ground and comes to rest in a soft patch of grass. A blur of gnats rapidly disperses from the spot where the pistol lands.

"Titanium ... titanium ... uhhh," Mr. Rivers's finger moves conscientiously across the squares of the Periodic Table, "... uhhh, here it is, yes, titanium, atomic number..."

Just then, in the precise moment of Mr. Rivers's proud success, a gust of wind wrenches the worn, fold-marked piece of paper from his hand and carries it flying like a tiny tail-less kite, flapping and rippling through the air. "Oh, my!" blurts Mr. George Rivers, who immediately gives chase.

Meanwhile, the staggering, slow motion figure of Steve Clay, seen top-view, transfixes Mr. Dunlap, who, tired and drained, has momentarily loosened his grip on the eaves. He's thinking: it's now or never! Mr. Dunlap's size 11 shoes inch forward on the narrow ledge, and his arm muscles tense as he prepares to push away from the house. Mr. Dunlap has decided that now is a good time to jump.

On the street below, several young hands have snatched the prized silver pistol from its grassy haven and wrestle for it, lifting it high above their young heads. Voices yell garbled, macho sounds, and Mrs. O'Hare screams. Her screaming, quite naturally, is due in part to the surprise assault on her and also to the fact that the shiny pistol has been revealed, but in addition Mrs. O'Hare is screaming because she now recognizes that one of the young hands reaching for the gun is attached to her son, Eric, who, standing nearby when the foray began, has now joined the tumultuous struggle for possession of the shiny treasure. The bustling of young feet on the patch of lawn has disturbed a tiger beetle that now scurries, waddle-like, from his sanctuary in the tall bluegrass to a somewhat safer location near a clump of dandelions and thistle weeds a few feet away.

As luck would have it, the wind blows Mr. Rivers's piece of paper with the Periodic

Table directly into the face of Eric O'Hare, and expressly at the exact moment when he secures a solid grip on the shiny, steel gun. The paper, flapping wildly, lands precisely across his eyes, his left eye struck by the square marked "22, Ti, Titanium" and his right eye by the square bearing "47, Ag, Silver."

At the very moment when the struggle for the pistol proceeds on the street below, at the top of the brown duplex, Mr. Dunlap closes his eyes tight, bends his knees down low, takes one, last, deep breath, and then jumps from the narrow ledge, pushing his body up and away from the house, propelling himself helplessly into the empty space of the morning air. His arms are spread wide and flapping, as if he intends to fly, or perhaps to balance himself in space.

The sudden, unanticipated blindness created by the Periodic Table blown tightly against his eyes startles Eric O'Hare, causing him to reflexively contract his muscles. By a strange quirk of fate, his finger is just at that moment resting on the trigger of the pistol; the reflexive muscle contraction causes the gun to fire.

BOOM!

The sound of the pistol shot is loud and numbing to Mrs. O'Hare, Eric, and the boys nearby. Several people in the crowd turn their heads toward the noise. Some of them point. Several tiny sparrows burst from a nearby tree, fluttering their wings rapidly.

The bullet travels upward at an angle of approximately 75 degrees. Now, who would have guessed it, but just as Mr. Dunlap reaches the very peak, the apex, of his arcing suicidal plunge—his arms spread, his eyes open wide—the bullet from Mrs. O'Hare's pistol strikes Mr. Dunlap (while poised in midair, arms palpitating) straight through the left temple, killing him instantly. His body immediately goes limp, his muscles lose all tone. Then Mr. Dunlap's sad, lifeless body, lured by the cold certainty of gravity, plummets directly down, quickly gathering speed, toward the point on the wide sidewalk directly below precisely where Mr. Steve Clay has momentarily ceased his wandering and has paused, suspended by the sound of the gunshot.

THUMP!!

Mr. Dunlap's limp, dead body lands squarely on top of the unsuspecting head of Mr. Steve Clay. A splattering, thunk-like sound emanates from the collision, and the two intertwined bodies now lie sprawling on the cracked, gray sidewalk.

Meanwhile, the folded, worn, piece of paper with the Periodic Table on it has since flown from Eric O'Hare's face, has been whisked away by the wind, and is now gently wafting down avenues and alleys, flittering blocks from the bedlam of screaming and shouting near Peterson's grocery store.

Dr. Murray Gell-Mann has arrived for his lecture and is walking the short distance from the parking lot to Emerson Hall. The President of Starks University, Dr. Morris Champlin, a former chemistry professor who has just finished his phone conversation

with Mrs. Ethyl O'Hare, and who later this month will be taken into custody by the local police on suspicion of soliciting prostitution from teenaged boys, walks with him. They are discussing the recent laboratory discovery of the top quark. A small flock of grackles sit quietly on a nearby tree branch, placidly observing the two men. One of the grackles lets out a penetrating, "Caw."

Coincidentally, the piece of paper containing the Periodic Table of Elements has settled in a place on the walkway just ahead of where the two luminaries are now ambling. Unbeknownst to Dr. Gell-Mann, who, of course, has other, much more important matters on his mind, a small bit of chewing gum is stuck to the sole of his brown size 12 dress shoe, and now that very bit of gum on the bottom of Dr. Murray Gell-Mann's shoe comes down exactly on top of Mr. Rivers's piece of paper containing the Periodic Table. The paper is stuck to the bottom of Dr. Gell-Mann's left shoe. The two men continue into Emerson Hall, both oblivious to the piece of paper, which remains stuck to the brown dress shoe of Dr. Gell-Mann.

Following a wonderful introduction by Starks University President Morris Champlin, Dr. Gell-Mann stands at the podium staring out onto a sea of bright eager faces, including the bright, eager face of Mr. George Rivers. Still completely unaware that he is standing atop the very neatly aligned table of elements, Dr. Gell-Mann is about to begin his presentation. Members of the audience have already formulated their questions and are earnestly awaiting their turn to offer intricate inquiries about the makeup of the universe and the mysteries of quarks.

And so, with the Periodic Table firmly stuck to the sole of his shoe, Dr. Murray Gell-Mann begins his rather complicated explanations of muons, leptons, bosons, neutrinos, and other exotic subatomic particles.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Dr. Gell-Mann intones, "there is a principle which I like to call the Totalitarian Rule of Physics..."

Mr. Rivers settles comfortably into his seat, his lost Periodic Table temporarily gone from his thoughts, his attention riveted to the eminent man of science at the podium.

Dr. Gell-Mann, standing firmly atop the table of elements, continues, "The Totalitarian Rule of Physics states that anything that isn't forbidden is compulsory. That is," Murray Gell-Mann patiently explains, "if the laws of physics do not rule out an event, then that event not only *can* happen, it *must* happen!"

Mr. Rivers smiles a contented smile.



MICHAL (MITAK) MAHGERETEH
Paper Collage



Tina Tocco

Reinvention

When my father's new wife asked about the girl in the picture, he said I came with the wallet. Bernadette told me this herself the first night I stayed at the house in Santa Clara. Bernadette does mani-pedis on Tuesdays and Thursdays at Neil's Nails, and I tell myself the combination of polish remover and nail gel encouraged her to believe his tale. When she started out, Bernadette could only paint stripes—diagonal, in one direction—but by the time she moved on to shapes, it occurred to her that the girl in the picture had gone from pigtails to a pixie cut. Bernadette worked at a hair salon before reinventing herself.

My first night at the house, and every night, she called my father "Jack." Every uniform from every place he ever worked said "Juan." But he didn't work at a place that made you wear a nametag anymore, and he didn't call me *mija* when he shut the door to the spare room that night. At lunch that last afternoon, he called *empanadas* "turnovers," and as he steered me through the airport, he tipped a skycap \$10 to carry the duffle bag I'd borrowed from Mom.

So at the terminal, when my father said, "Bye, Carly," which is not exactly me, I didn't bother to correct him. And when Bernadette called, "See you soon, Carly!" over Connor's stroller, I didn't bother to correct her, either.

Louis Gallo

The Abortionist

Philadelphia 2008

My pale, salamandrine grandfather Abraham Saul growled between his yellowed teeth as he davened, “Can’t fall if you’re already lying down.” We called him The Rabbi because he always spouted off this Yiddish crap and only sometimes translated. Well, I’m lying down, Abe, which my literary acquaintance at the library tells me is no way to start a story. I am not a writer, but I do intend to tell a story. The last thing I intend.

“Why not?” I asked.

Shank relished the slow, proclamatory edict. We had played this game before. “Because the Iowans say so.”

I sucked it in, envisioned endless wheat fields, cows and freckled milk maidens rooted like potatoes in the heartland.

“Spare us what we can endure,” I said and laughed.

Shank wheezed, rattled in his rib cage. They had given him another six months.

I’ve been a businessman all my life, so I don’t know much, but during the early phase of my retirement I took quite a few courses at the university campus downtown. Philosophy, literature, art, music... everything I’d missed in my halcyon heyday, all of which I still regard as tripe. So I know what Shank meant by “the Iowans.” And I vow that no Iowan, however robust and salty, will ever dictate rules, not one, to this olive-skinned, kinky-haired-albeit-balding, apostate yid.

Oh yeah, that other caveat. Make your character sympathetic, likeable. In league with happy faces and “have a good day.”

I am thoroughly unlikeable; let’s square that away.

Thus:

Crinkled, jaundiced dawn seeps into the room and ribbons its way into my eyes, which I knuckle, while at the same time trying to loosen rheumatoid knots and stiffness from an increasingly decrepit body. In this manner, I greet the daily onslaught.

There will be a full moon tonight. I must prepare. Don’t worry, no werewolves in this neck of the woods.

I’ve wound up back in Philadelphia, actually for many decades now, here in my efficiency on Market Street. The efficiency is new. I gave up a more spacious apartment on Chestnut because I no longer have the will nor energy that frantic maintenance demands. And the rent, you would gag. I’m close enough to the Allegheny Hospital to hobble over if anything goes askew. Chinatown isn’t far, and sometimes I drift there for a meal. The Chinese don’t see me, I don’t see them, I’ve become invisible. But monosodium glutamate revs me up. I can live with the hives. Now and then I check out what’s cooking at the Franklin Institute, despite its preposterous multi-tiered, concrete entrance stairs, which tire me just looking. Recently it was King Tut, and you had to battle bus loads of pandemonious kids, from Iowa no doubt.

Be all that as it may, I think there’s something wrong with me. Other than the usual, I mean, and far more occult. Not merely that I can’t think normal thoughts anymore, you know, the mind flowing from one idea to the next like different cars of the same train, discrete yet coupled... and that’s only part of it, an attendant disorder or reverse abreaction, the condensation on a window. To relay this account, I must speak into a clunky old tape recorder; otherwise, nothing, me sitting here at my kitchen table like a golem, a vessel with no fluid, as if my mind but not my tongue has forsaken words. I am the tree that falls in the forest, a communications theory nightmare. And this is one reason I live alone—I can no longer relate to other people in any humane, meaningful, or remotely cordial manner. A few old friends still visit, Semoncioni, for instance, the retired plumber, and sometimes I frequent the local coffee houses; I still shop, drive to the post office, walk my blind old cur Peaches, browse in the library for books not yet written—but mostly I stay home, read women’s magazines, watch the Weather and History channels, fiddle around with my antique cigar label collection, keep myself as fit as possible with yoga, wheat germ, and alfalfa sprouts. The streets are dangerous. The homeless, and therefore desperate, congregate everywhere in hive-like conspiracy. This city has become outrageous. I do carry a weapon, but mum on that. Who knows into what hands this testament will pass?

Every so often even Rachel calls. I plead with her to let me alone, but she refuses. That’s Rachel for you.

I despair of seeking rational causes for my ailment. (I won’t even bother you with the physical complaints endemic to anyone my age except to mention low thyroid, enlarged spleen, hemorrhoids so insufferable I have no choice but to ignore them, the throbbing bursitis of my left elbow.) Pesticides, antibiotics, and hormones in the food supply? Plastic residue from microwaved Stouffer’s? Prozac, lead, cadmium in tap water? Radioactive iodine and God knows what other leftovers from Nevada and Chernobyl? It hardly matters. Or might guilt over my abandoned heritage have amounted finally to a phase shift?

Truth is, I don't feel guilty. *Yahveh*, those mystical letters; they mean God is hidden, which explains the expulsion from Eden. And what is Eden but health? It's true, Abe, health first. You can always hang yourself later. We do not have to forgive God.

I know no other secular Jew with my particular symptom of reducing people instantly, upon first sight, to their genitalia. If I see an old man walking down the street as I drive to Food King, the wretch himself entirely disappears, and I sense only his shriveled

I am not obsessed with genitals; genitals have become obsessed with me.

gray dick dangling there like a soft, grotesque plumb bob, the balls, mossy, fetid figs. With women, it's all too obvious what I behold. Maybe, like Descartes, I have bracketed out the superfluous in order to arrive not at an immaculate, noble grail like the Cogito, but rather schlongs and pussies. Or am I closer to Freud, who shared my obsession with sexual organs, though obsession is hardly the word? With me, anyway. I have known obsession. It's a form of malignant interest stalking as you try to sleep or contemplate the infinite or listen to late Shostakovich; it is the refrain in your own demented requiem.

I am not obsessed with genitals; genitals have become obsessed with me.

When I peer into busy, intricate wallpaper or any decorative commodity, say tapestry pillows and ottomans, Oriental rugs, the first thing I notice in the patterns, the rorschachs, is women giving blow jobs. In the wood grain of my ancient pine doors and floor boards, there they are: blowjobs. I see blowjobs in the clouds as others spot dinosaurs, giraffes, ships, angels. The whole world has become a vast mural of blowjobs, great and small, shallow and deep. Oddly, I was never an aficionado. The oral embarrasses me, perhaps because I am the sole un-circumcised Jew in the universe. That discolored, wrinkled sheathe I have lived with and suffered for over sixty years—a curse upon it! I may be a reborn non-Jew, but my parents rebelled against the faith with passion and dementia. I recall partaking of the Seder's bitter herbs once, but by the time Bar Mitzvah rolled around, I too had become a saboteur, a nihilist. My parents, double suicides much later in this narrative, rejected circumcision as unnatural, a mutilation. (They had changed our name from Saul to Sol—“more Hellenistic via the Roman Empire,” my father chuckled to Abraham's black, furious sorrow.) Hence my condition. Abe used to insist that imaginary diseases are worse than real diseases, but I say, what's the difference?

Don't spare me... I sense your reasoning, anticipate it. Latent homosexuality! I assure you, I am no queer, though it would not disturb me one way or another. I happen to love women, or rather, I once loved women. If you require evidence, call Rachel. I lived with her so long that, in effect, we became man and wife, if never officially. This was in my New Orleans days when I ran the abortion clinic on St. Charles Avenue across from

Corrine Dunbar's. We called it a “women's center” to ride the feminist wave and appear respectable. I chose New Orleans because the city seemed so laissez-faire and backwards – this long before Katrina—I assumed that carpetbaggers could get away with anything. To be arrested for implementing abortion in New Orleans is like prosecution for slow motion in remote regions of Mayan Mexico—Mexico, the slowest country in the world, according to scientific surveys. (Japan, naturally, the fastest.)

I had to get out of Philadelphia anyway, for a while, to escape the fury of my brother-in-law and partner in our upscale dry cleaning chain, PristineKleen. We had equipped each unit with a little coffee shop, for God's sake! Supplied classy magazines like *W* and *Interview* and Victoria's Secret catalogs. But Ben made it pristinely clear that he would pursue me for embezzlement if I didn't leave Dodge by sundown. Fucking western movies! Not that Ben's own spindled fingers hadn't fondled the pie. I can't complain (though that's all I do) because he supplied me with modest set-up funds for new ventures in terra incognita. Think St. Charles, you think million dollar turn-of-the-century mansions, nouveau extravaganzas, but our building was a shabby, one-story construction block square with a corrugated roof. We didn't fit in, despite the wall prints by Van Gogh, Monet, Wyeth, Hopper. Or the more sedate classics piped through the rooms from our music system, calming melodies like Mozart's “Elvira Madigan,” Debussy, Vaughan Williams, Dvorak's lark. I didn't know much about art or music then; I ordered our decor from a bulk-rate office supply house in, bless my soul, Des Moines.

I ran the show in my status as what you would now call a CEO, hired two part-time Charity residents with degrees from Tulane Medical School, a registered nurse, and three young, kind-hearted, blond assistants. Like one of the founders of our country, Captain John Smith, I was partial to blonds. As the man behind the scenes, I never cut anyone. Nor did I ever watch the procedures. The sight of blood repels me to this day. Besides, there was money to be made, and money takes up all the time in the world. You don't make money wishing you had more. The heaviest load is an empty pocket. Usually, our head nurse Regina, a middle-aged, brooding, sunken-cheeked matron, or one of the more pleasant, always nubile assistants, interviewed potential clients (we used that term rather than patients); but on one particular soggy, blistering day, Regina had to rush home for an emergency – her cocker spaniel had accidentally swallowed a bottle of Librium—and one assistant, Beth, was already dealing with a client, the two others at lunch. So when this raven-haired beauty wearing a scarlet halter with no bra beneath struts in like some Persian queen, I, young then and bloated with ridiculous chutzpah, gawked with both pleasure and anguish. Anguish because I knew the thing was fated, and, if you ask me, fate never works out.

“If tongues don't have eyes,” she said, laughing at my admittedly crude salivation, offended, defensive. Though, why, I must ask still after all these years, do women dress in

such fashion if not to incite salivation? Those creamy upper mounds of breast, swelling when she inhaled, so perfectly smooth and supple. Epidermal nougat. And don't think I missed the gawky crucifix almost impaling itself into her cleavage. I didn't see blowjobs across the board in those days, but I shudder to imagine what I might espy in that crucifix if suddenly time reversed itself for everyone but me, and Rachel reappeared, out of nowhere as she looked then, in this sad room muted with shadows, regret and grief.

All I could think to say was, "How far along are you?"

She crossed her arms, pivoted back on her spine for a better view, and stared, I the specimen on a glass plate. Don't let anyone tell you women don't have the power.

"Do I look at all pregnant?" She laughed again, softly this time, friendlier, her caution melting like butter left on the counter.

At first I believed her of the tribe, the way she invested certain words with character and xylophonic shifts of resonance, and yet the accent was British—and how could I forget the hanging redeemer for one second? Well, there are British Jews too, I figured, even Christian Jews. Who knows, maybe there are Jewish Jews! Turns out that she was Welsh—imagine such an origin—and the father a member of the Cherokee nation. They're always Cherokee, never Apache or Comanche or Aztec—why is that? The two met in the ever-shifting diaspora after World War II, coupled, separated instantly. The mother, Bette, cast her line and instantly secured a befuddled young GI who escorted her and the fetus to America. If Rachel was hopelessly insane, what can I say of Bette, who, unlike her daughter, made no attempt to hide or disguise it? The woman ranted, launched into public invective over imagined slights and trifles, assailed Americans as barbarians, attended the Queen's birthday parties at the local consulate, only to be escorted out by officers at some point. Yet she could be charming, even flirtatious, and didn't look half bad for her years. Big honor when she invited you to tag along to one of the diplomatic royal affairs. I politely declined on two such opportunities availed to me, but I understand that Rachel's husband got suckered once or twice, only to be chewed out by the woman because, as she claimed, he had dressed like "the village idiot." And inevitably, the attack would turn against Rachel, that "very naugh-ty girl," which her mother never tired of broadcasting to the world. That Rachel *was* naughty is irrelevant.

Ah, Rachel's husband. Let me draw a bead on that absurd, artsy-fart dago who, even after they separated, still occasionally sniffed at her hemlines. Remembered pussy is often as potent as the prospect of new. And yet, who can believe anything a woman tells you about her previous lovers (you may number among them soon enough)—but this guy... he pranced around the French Quarter wearing a beret and black cape! Fancied himself another Pynchon, claimed he had scribbled nine hundred pages of a *picaresque* novel. That's the word he used, *picaresque*. I only knew what it meant because of a literature class I'd taken in college. Fiction and poetry were and remain closed doors for me. Use-

less, effete, boring, fit only for women and queers. Forgive my lack of tact, my fascist pig heart. I did warn you. The politically correct crowd can take a nose dive up their own asses. Bunch of cringing, feeble noodles, ask me. So better not ask.

We spotted the wop flitting about town with one gorgeous vixen after another. You

So when the blue-black raven-haired beauty wearing a scarlet halter with no bra beneath struts in like some Persian queen, I, young then and bloated with ridiculous chutzpah, gawked with both pleasure and anguish. Anguish because I knew the thing was fated, and, if you ask me, fate never works out.

cannot account for taste; you must give up on it altogether. He liked showing them off at the Napoleon House, where—needy exhibitionist that he was—he would down two or three shots of chartreuse, feed his date the same, after which they would proceed to paw at and fondle each other in public. Rachel said he told her that he fucked one of these broads in a car parked right on Bourbon Street (you could park on Bourbon in those days) as crowds passed and gawked. We despised each other the first split second of our initial meeting, the day he came to the Center to drop off some books and cassettes Rachel had left behind.

By then, Rachel was my employee—her aim all along—what she secured via Lauren Bacall slinkiness and molten sensuality. I screwed her that very first day she showed up, in one of the Center's examination rooms—she, the furthest from blond you can imagine. And oh, how my pecker reared in pride over buttoning that dago's wife, even if they were technically no longer married. This is normal, after all. It's what we did back then: we met someone, a few hours later we screwed, screwing all the time, wives, husbands, former girlfriends of our friends, their sisters, and believe me, the women proved just as eager and sporty as we men in this tournament. No call for male bashing. In fact, half the time the women initiated it, and we wound up screwing someone whose name we didn't know or we didn't like or found loathsome. We screwed each other all the time, and I remain amazed we're not dead, though some of us are, from STDs or AIDS, because there was so much sex you couldn't keep track, and nobody used rubbers, those goofy balloons. Sometimes a new one every night of the week, all within our discrete, socioeconomic circle, with the usual cross-overs from other circles, and I'm sure the same thing was going on within each circle, all the way up to those spooky Boston Club ghosts down to the denizens of the Ninth Ward, that frenzied, non-stop, crazed, fifty-first state of the union and disunion, until—imagine—it became tiresome, and you hooked up with one or the other for a while just for relief or nostalgic longing for the old Norman Rockwell standards of home, hearth, children, white fence, station wagon, and visits to the optom-

erist.

Did I love Rachel? Of course I did.

And for all my misgivings and however sad I am to have witnessed her precipitous, agonizing descent into madness... let me celebrate here, once and for all, the astonishing erotic prowess of Ms. Rachel Wren. Never in my life has a woman ravished my brains so steadily, explosively, and thoroughly. Yes, the brain can be ravished, with or without

“Everyone is always awaking from a dream. The universe is a dream.”

protection, but you do get tired, even when relatively monogamous, and therein lies the problem. Rachel, Mt. Vesuvius of the orgasm. I guess I hated that dago husband some because no doubt he had ploughed the same fertile delta first, before me, I, Mel Sol ex-laundromat tycoon and abortion king. I laugh now at the preposterous grandiosity of it all. Old gods are dead gods. This guy, his name was Quarticio, told Rachel that I was crude, an ignorant swine, a rube. Moi, a rube! I wanted to throttle him, and I could have, too, the twerpy dilettante. But the long, wild beard alarmed me, and I gleaned Charles Manson in his perpetually languid, wet, Sicilian eyes. He claimed Roman ancestry, but doesn't every guinea? They're all from Sicily, trust me. And there idled Rachel, actually enjoying the battle, studying it from afar, gloating on her pedestal as she fed us both tidbits of incendiary information. Good enemies, bad friends... what's worse?

“And another thing,” Shank gasped, his throat full of phlegmy rhizome, “you can't tell too much. You've gotta show.”

This exchange took place at a coffee house where we sometimes met, a place with bright brass railings and spiffy solid oak floors and fake Tiffany lampshades.

“Show and tell.” I laughed. “You mean like kindergarten? Show, tell... what's the difference? I vow to tell everything. Strike three, eh?”

“And never start with someone waking from a dream.”

“Everyone is always awaking from a dream. The universe is a dream.”

“Or use bar rooms as sites of action.”

“I no longer frequent bar rooms, but I will re-open the story. Because I can't, I will. We're in a smoky, murky, Sammy Davis, Jr.-type lounge, swilling—I like that word—swilling martinis, vodka straight up with an olive or two. A swanky club. No, change that to the Seven Seas down in the Quarter, no doubt the roughest white bar in the city, where you could get absinth, I kid you not. The place smells of rot, sweat, hormones, paleolithic stench, and they crowd in like your typical sardines.”

“No clichés.”

“I intend to employ every cliché in the book, itself a cliché. Clichés are clichés because

they're true, and I want truth for a change, finally, bone-strong, glass-clear truth, though I know in my heart there's no such thing.”

“You are an obstinate man, my friend.”

I never saw Shank again after that exchange but caught his meager obituary in the paper a week later. I didn't show up at the funeral. What's the point? May no one show up at mine.

Despite it all, those were the days down in balmy, licentious, exotic New Orleans, a place unlike any other in North America, for which we must thank the Catholics, blacks, and Creoles. Money rolled in with the minutes. I drove a black Jaguar convertible, wore Gucci and jewelry and v-necked my shirts. If pierced ears had been *de rigueur*, I would have had my lobes drilled. We dined at Galatoire's every Friday night, met friends at the Napoleon House or Blacksmith Shop afterwards, lived without regret or remorse. About five years into it, my sister Robin, Ben's wife, called about our parents. They had left behind a note—*life is for the young*—before careening to their deaths off some mountainous dark road in West Virginia. Young? I am far older than either of my parents were at the time of their demise. They were right, of course; *life is for the young*. Not many have their courage. And it goes without saying that the young are, collectively, an assemblage of aimless, hysterical morons who will, most of them, plummet off their own West Virginia cliffs in due time.

Legally speaking, my father owned PristineKleen, and no doubt it had something to do with evading taxes. So by rights, Robin and I inherited the chain, despite Ben. Robin wanted nothing to do with business—she tended to lock herself up in dark rooms and weep and receive visits from a local Baal Shem, a fraud if you ask me—and promptly handed over her share to her husband. Ditto I, for a good price. I rolled in the greenbacks, dismissed the future as too distant to count, basked in filthy lucre, fucked Rachel (though my eye had roved to one of our new assistants, Leslie from Newcomb College, a voluptuous, tawny-haired, freckled Californian who gazed at me with intent, she nearly half my age). I was not bad looking in those days; I worked out at the Tulane gym, swam fifty laps a day, watched the calories. But I had to keep it subtle with Leslie because Rachel had taken over our books, and woe unto you if a jealous woman works the ledgers. Rachel, no stranger to violence, either. She told me more than once about the time she attacked that shvitzer Quarticio with a kitchen knife—I mean a big one—and aimed for his heart. He lurched backwards, wound up with a gash on his shoulder. They had just returned home from the grocery. She yanked a carton of eggs from one of the bags and hurled them at him one by one, missing every time, and the slimy albumen and yokes crashed against then slid down the kitchen wall. (No one ever cleaned up the mess, by the way. The egg fluid hardened over the weeks, become resin-like, glued to the wall. Rather than

scrub, they just moved—to the outrage of their landlord, who seized the appliances they planned to pick up.) When she rushed him with the knife again, he sideswiped her, and she deflated to the floor; he pinned her down and tied her up with some clothesline they had bought. He swore between panting that he would untie her after she calmed down. She started rolling herself across the linoleum, laughing raucously from the belly, cursed and launched into her favorite Streisand songs, all the while bound in the straight-jacket of nylon clothesline. The story alarmed me; I knew instantly that it was only a matter of time before I packed my bags. The woman was, as her mother put it, “daft.” And this isn’t the only incident involving that wop. Once he rushed her to the emergency room, so they could pump her stomach after she swallowed an entire bottle of aspirin.

Well, you understand why I eventually had no choice but to exorcize Rachel from my life. Or why I plead with her not to call, even now, so many years later. The calls intensified after Katrina. She had scraped together a little money and put some down on a modest cottage in this dreary, dying neighborhood called Gentilly Ridge, but Katrina pretty much destroyed the place—ten feet of water, fungus, wild dogs, the usual—and she wound up in a FEMA trailer propped right beside the ruins of her house. She spends her days tearing down molded drywall, shoveling debris, salvaging whatever can be salvaged. By dusk she’s exhausted—she’s no spring chicken either, though she claims not to have sprouted a single gray hair (must be that Cherokee DNA)—locks herself in the trailer and gets drunk on Sloe Gin, the foulest spirits ever concocted by man. “I have this portable television, a four-inch screen,” she recently sobbed into the phone, “and I watch one horrible reality show after another. No cable yet. Nothing.” I told her I’d send her a few bucks, but I haven’t yet. Give an inch, they take a yard. Besides, how much money have I already sent?

What destroyed our nest back then had nothing to do with love or lust or sex or anything remotely personal, not even my doubts about Rachel. Yes, I pined for Leslie, but nothing came of it. I was either too busy working or frolicking, too pussy-whipped, too afraid of that looming kitchen knife (what is any story if not a warning?), too old maybe, even then when I was young. A singular event, happenstance, a blurb on the five o’clock news is what changed everything. One day you’re in business, the next, it’s all over. I should have anticipated the likelihood, given the swelling discontent among the city’s pro-lifers—they had begun to form protest lines outside our doors, on the sidewalk, lines of them, dour and stern, wearing placards, waving signs on behalf of embryo rights, holding news conferences. Nothing unusual, happening all over the country at the time. (I know, Abe, snakes deserve no pity, but it’s not pity I seek, nor forgiveness, nor absolution, nor leniency. I am what I am and have done what I’ve done.) Not once did I question the legitimacy—you could say morality—of our operation; not once did I pause to *think* about what these maniacs were trying to convey. Embryo, fetus... guppies in broth,

certainly not human, why not claim rights for an appendix or kidney or tonsils? And why shouldn’t a woman raped, say, by Hitler, deserve her own rights of abortion? But enough, you can argue until Doomsday... or you can secure a weapon, a simple revolver, invade, fire at random, massacre the staff, seek out doctors and, of course, the CEO.

July, 1978. A slim, young, long-haired man wearing John Lennon glasses, a JESUS IS LORD t-shirt, and patched jeans saunters into the Center and nervously approaches the receptionist’s desk. Nothing odd, everyone who comes here is nervous. The receptionist, Judy, smiles, *Can I help you?* at the very moment Regina, defined by her nurse nametag and white uniform, enters from a side room to retrieve a file. The young man whips out a Taurus 85, clutches the wrist of his shooting hand with the other, takes precise aim, and shoots Judy between the eyes. Regina receives a bullet in her neck, which perforates the external jugular. Two of the blondes rush into the room, shriek, and the assassin whips around. Leslie drops to the floor with a slug in her hip. He shoots the other, Joan, through the heart. Within an instant, it’s a blood bath. I’m secluded in my office, and one of the Charity interns, Dr. Coleman, is washing his hands in the operating room, preparing for surgery, his patient partially anesthetized. JESUS IS LORD scouts the place, finds Coleman, fires, and Coleman drops; he inserts the pistol’s barrel into the vagina of our patient, an eighteen-year-old girl from Tupelo, Mississippi. “Death to the murderers!” he screams, rants, over and over, a howl I will never forget. My office is practically sound-proof, and I thought I heard a few slight *pops*, only to dismiss them as outside firecrackers and maybe a female scream or two, but “Death to the murderers!” comes across with the clarity of an air raid siren.

JESUS IS LORD heaves against my door, rips it off its hinges, and bursts into the room. He steadies himself, legs V’d in predatory stance, lifts the Taurus toward my face. I am too stunned for fear and robotically raise my hands in surrender. The realization that I am in effect dead floats serenely in some other part of the universe; the “I” standing behind my desk merely gazes, almost with disinterest, at the Angel of Death. I lower my eyes and note that dust has gathered on my glass paperweight. I meant to Windex the thing but never got around to it—always another phone call, errand, consultation, whatever. JESUS IS LORD and I maintain our respective positions for what seems a frozen moment. Sweat glistens on his forehead; his tawny hair hangs long in greasy festoons; his pale blue eyes radiate not hatred but the impossibility of love. He seems to age precipitously on the spot, a demented Moses facing not burning bush but satanic flame. I feel exhausted, bored, impatient, and compelled to speak. “Ok, my man, let’s get this over with, shall we? What’s today, Tuesday, right?”

JESUS IS LORD grins, looks me in the eye, lowers his piece. Radiant, composed, probably stoned, he stands limply, actually curls his finger around the trigger, which, and I cannot say *why*, alarms me.

“Whoa, man, got that safety on?”

He waves the pistol back toward my face. “I killed them all, your minions.” He speaks softly but with intense pleasure. “Death to the murderers,” now more whispered, muted.

What is he waiting for? He wants to watch me squirm, but I have eased beyond squirm. I assume my parents knew a similar release, a sanctity, as the tires of their van rotated in mid-air.

“You are an abomination,” he almost sings in childish fashion. So there.

He cocks the trigger, moves closer, aims again between my eyes. *I shall fear no evil.* And I don’t, though my body betrays me, and a rush of urine besplotches my trousers.

“Look at you,” he says, “you coward. You *will* be haunted.”

I expect to be shot instantly, but JESUS IS LORD yelps in triumph and abruptly jams the barrel against his own temple. He fires in a grand finale of annihilation. His body lurches backwards, shudders, then sinks to the floor as gracefully as a ballerina executing her adieu. The man’s brains are splattered all over one wall, the ceiling, my desk and paperweight, my clothes.

Rachel missed all the action. It was her day off.

Within minutes, police and medics swarm through the Center, and I realize that I am out of business. Turns out JESUS IS LORD was a philosophy instructor at the University of New Orleans lakefront campus, one Stephen Miller, ABD. No radical activist, no previous record, no principled warrior of fanaticism. His wife had secretly aborted their baby three weeks prior, informing him afterwards as she packed her bags. Just another schlemiel driven to the brink, crazed with grief. But of course the pro-lifers seized their opportunity and initiated legal action against me. So again I chose to slip out of Dodge before sundown. Without Rachel. That sizzling, humid September, 1978, a year when the People’s Republic of China released its ban on the works of Shakespeare, Aristotle, and Charles Dickens; when vandals stole Charlie Chaplin’s casket; when police captured Ted Bundy; when the Red Brigade kidnapped Aldo Moro, killed him and dumped his body in a parked car; when John Paul I reigned as Pope for 33 days; when Alice Cooper got out of rehab—

Lousy times.

Thirty years ago as the buzzard flies.

Midnight approaches during this night of lunar fullness, and I sit on a kitchen chair jammed against the window for full effect, my legs stretched painfully over its left and right edges, my lower back insecure, brittle, pinched with spasms. Milky light filters through the smudged glass, a shroud-like haze, the moon at its most florescent apex, a disc of mirrored platinum. I am blank, as usual when not connected to either transmitter or receiver, whether human or machine, and sense the invasion as physical mayhem,

a visceral envelopment, the fugue of internal organs, chromosomes, mitochondria. An ancient fête. It begins like salty mist in the face when standing on a beach overlooking the sea, a wet silt-like ablution charged with negative ions. Then the intensification, that old knowledge that it’s time to leap off the train before its steel wheels churn any faster and there’s no return. And it is true that for many years I leapt, too cautious, too afraid to pursue such madness. I am too old for madness, though old age is by definition madness.

Over time, the intensification itself intensifies, exponentially. It began four years ago when ghostly fingers, spirit yet flesh, the bones of the dead, stroked and clasped my fingers. My heart palpitated, and the fingers withdrew tenderly as if aware, too much too soon. You do not want your victim to drop dead on the starting block. Victim I assumed I was, though the touch of that supernatural hand had the reverse effect of peaking my interest and longing. And I waited several moons before it deigned to return, the same fingers, and I let them explore a bit further as they fondled my bare arms, my face, my naked back. I craved their touch and lived only for the next, each month at midnight. The spirit grew ever bolder, manifesting more of itself, pressed its ribs into mine, wrapped its arms around my torso, rubbed my cheek with its cheek, kissed my lips.

Tonight, as I wait, my grandfather Abraham comes to me in a dream. “You are not the first prey of the dybbuk, Melvin. The dybbuk has roamed the universe since before time. It acquires many guises and is in this sense manifold. Do not be afraid.”

I am inclined to identify this particular dybbuk as the soul of Stephen Miller’s aborted child, if only because I can guess no other, unless each lunar communion represents a plurality of souls, all my aborted children. Talk about soap opera titles! Ay, no time for joking, though what better time to joke than when beyond salvation, kaput? I have become the aborted; I am the abortion. And tonight the demon promises absolute subsuming. I feel it in every cell of my body, every pore, the way you know a phone will ring.

An owl flies between my window and the moon, hanging like a hawk for a moment, then dropping from view.

The light coalesces, condenses; the air thickens, and I slide easily into the realm of Abraham’s dream. From a distance more vertical than vast, I hear his chanting, my grandfather, the tzerddik, the holy man, whose wisdom I rejected. *He will deliver thee from the snares of the fowler, and from noisome pestilence.* And yet I do not believe. The light twists in noisome eddies about me; the eddies gel into rope-like strands as they further evolve into sinew, tendon, membrane, flesh... *Thou shalt not be afraid of the terror by night, nor of the arrow that flieth by day.* “It’s too late, Grandfather,” I try to wail, but my voice has disappeared, evaporated like morning fog, because there is no one real enough to receive it. *Nor the pestilence that walketh in darkness, nor of the destruction that wasteth at noonday. Only with thine eyes shalt thou behold and see the reward of the wicked.* Next should come the command to rout the dybbuk, but Grandfather, too, has diminished, faded from my ears

The Abortionist

and eyes... I have willed it, fought him, for I desire the demon's wrath and torment... and it comes, taking the form of a mouth of light hovering above. I sit stiffly in need, in great need, of its succor, its retribution, because only in extremis can we know the full weight of that pain which by some mystic process reverses all misery before and after. "Behold this Evil Eye," I cry silently as the orifice descends, its rubbery eelish lips consuming me slowly, wholly, my entire body engulfed. My silence claws at the silence of the universe. I am mute, blind, dumb, paralyzed. The mouth sucks me in, spits me out, sucks me in, spits me out, like a piston, the mouth, corporeal vision born of darkness, as I, brittle, erect ziggurat, a delirious appendage, submit meekly to its hunger, offer myself in homage as tribute and sacrifice, without scruple, trembling with the blackest of joy.

And afterward, as if stillborn, I awaken once again on the floor encrusted with fine moist ash. It seems years later, but only a few hours have elapsed. I grasp the edge of the windowsill and pull myself up, now face-to-face with my reflection. Its face takes a greenish hue, has shed its skin and seems composed entirely of small fragile bones and darkened veins. Its bulging, jet eyes, fish-like and unblinking, gaze with neither remorse nor wonder; they see without seeing and judge nothing. I am monstrous, reptilian, a throw-back to some eon before evolution. I straighten up, wipe the ash from my shriveled, appalling old body, and await the countless rebirth.

Biographies

Denise Emanuel Clemen has worked as an art model, a merchant of her own blood plasma, and an assembly-line worker in a factory, where she became an expert at assembling toy manure spreaders. Her fiction and essays have appeared in the *Georgetown Review* (including an honorable mention for their prize), *Two Hawks Quarterly*, *Literary Mama*, and *The Rattling Wall*, among others. She's received fellowships to the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, Vermont Studio Center, the Ragdale Foundation, and was an Auvillar fellow at Moulin à Nef in France in 2009. Denise received an MFA in creative writing from the University of Nebraska in 2010. She regularly walks the beaches of Ventura County, California, hunting for treasures to take home to her 89-year-old mother. Her household is home to three generations and an elderly cat. She blogs at <http://leavingdivorceville.blogspot.com/> and <http://deniseemanuelclemen.blogspot.com/>

Mame Ekblom Cudd received her BA in Economics from Wells College and a Masters in Social Work from Columbia University. She worked as a psychotherapist until she was finally able to turn her attention to her love of literature and writing. She attended The Community of Writers Conference in Squaw Valley, 2009 and 2011. Her work has appeared in *The Puritan*, *SNReview* and *Crack the Spine*. She lives in Chester springs, Pennsylvania.

Sally Deskins is an artist and writer, focusing on women's roles, imagery and feminist issues, heavily inspired by artist Wanda Ewing. Her art has been exhibited in galleries in Omaha, New York, Philadelphia and Chicago, and has been published in publications such as *Certain Circuits*, *Weave Magazine*, *Her Kind: A blog by VIDA Women in Literary Arts*, *Vagina*, *CLAP* and *Whitefish Review*. She has curated various solo and group exhibitions, readings and performances centered on women's perspective and the body. Her writing has been published internationally. She edits the online journal *Les Femmes Folles* and has published two anthologies of art and writing. Femmesfollesnebraska.tumblr.com and sallydeskins.tumblr.com

Timothy Day is a college student living in Seattle, WA. A restless sort, he often writes characters who share in his fear of routine as well as his perpetual search for transcendence through imagination and connection. Clumsy and absent-minded, Timothy considers it a miracle that he has yet to walk into a pole. He rarely eats soup with vegetables in it.

David Gaither is a contemporary artist from Atlanta, Georgia. He is known for his expansive paintings, which combine warm, bright colors with innovative shapes, organic feeling/expression, contemporary technology and pioneering methods. David constantly experiments with various types of paints such as acrylic, composites, gouaches, etc., to bring new depths to his art. His paintings blur the boundaries of the figurative and the abstract; reality and fantasy.

A self-taught artist, David began his progression around the age of three. Over the years, he has worked in various genres of art, ultimately transitioning to unique methods reflecting his own style, as well as his heritage, culture and world travels. The unique methods involve a fusion of light with chromatic experimentation, where colors and shapes complement and contrast one another to create beautiful experiences. David crafts pieces of varying sizes, from large murals to smaller paintings. The theme of each piece guides the size and type of canvas, paints, and other materials and methods involved.

David is currently exploring a movement termed "Maximalism," in which he employs a myriad of intricate shapes and ultra-saturated colors, over-emphasizing the detail and infinite combinations of the respective shapes and colors. Pieces employing his Maximalism theme include the recent piece entitled "Infinite Maximalism." Other Maximalism pieces will be displayed in the near future. His aim with his Maximalism style is to take contemporary art to the next level.

Louis Gallo's poetry and fiction have appeared in *Berkeley Fiction Review*, *Southern Quarterly*, *The Ledge*, *Glimmer Train*, *Rattle*, *New Orleans Review*, *Xavier Review*, *Portland Review*, *Baltimore Review*, *storySouth*, *The Journal*, *Wide Awake in the Pelican State* (LSU fiction anthology), *Texas Review* and many others. He has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize on several occasions. He is former founding editor of *The Baratavia Review* and *Books: A New Orleans Review*. He now teaches at Radford University in Virginia, where he lives with his wife and daughters.

Bruce H. Hinrichs is a professor of scientific psychology who writes nonfiction books and articles about brain science, film, and art. Bruce is also a musician, artist, and author of short stories and poems. He lives in Minneapolis and teaches the biopsychology of sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll. Bruce says that he writes fiction to try to break the frozen sea inside and to not die of the truth. His favorite animal is the moose and his favorite film is *Persona*.

Michal (Mitak) Mahgerefteh is an award-winning poet and artist from Virginia. Her art has been published in print and electronically, and exhibited in galleries around the country. Michal's art is currently exhibited by the Chrysler Museum in Virginia and Anne Frank Museum in New York. www.michalmahgerefteh.com

Dennis Must is the author of two short story collections: *Oh, Don't Ask Why*, Red Hen Press, Pasadena, CA (2007), and *Banjo Grease*, Creative Arts Book Company, Berkeley, CA (2000), plus forthcoming novels: *The World's Smallest Bible*, Red Hen Press, spring 2014, and *Hush Now, Don't Explain*, Coffeetown Press, Seattle, WA. His plays have been performed Off Off Broadway, and his fiction has appeared in numerous anthologies and literary reviews. He resides with his wife in Salem, Massachusetts. For more information, visit him at www.dennismust.com

Nicolas Poynter is finishing his MFA at Oklahoma City University. His work has recently appeared in *North American Review*, *Citron Review*, *The Siren* and *Red Earth Review*.

Sara Rauch's writing has appeared in *Crossed Out*, *Inkwell*, *upstreet*, *Glitterwolf*, *The Newer York*, and in the anthology *Dear John, I Love Jane*. Her poetry chapbook, *Soft Shell*, is forthcoming from Chantepleure Press. She edits *Cactus Heart Press* and lives in western Massachusetts with her partner and five felines.

D.E. Smith bides his time in Northeast Mississippi, spending the bulk of it with his wife and two dogs. He received an M.A. in philosophy from the University of Mississippi in 2011 and has since engaged wholeheartedly in the near Sisyphean post-graduate task of attaining economic viability, enthusiastically applying his academically acquired analytic prowess to positions as varied as landscape technician, pizza oven operator, and community college tutor. He is currently a library assistant and adjunct instructor at a local community college. This is his first publication.

Tina Tocco's work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Harpur Palate*, *Passages North*, *Potomac Review*, *Italian Americana*, *Clockhouse Review*, *Inkwell*, *Border Crossing*, *Voices in Italian Americana*, *The Westchester Review*, and *The Summerset Review*, among other publications. In 2008, her poetry was anthologized in *Wild Dreams: The Best of Italian Americana* (Fordham University Press). Tina earned her MFA in creative writing from Manhattanville College, where she was editor-in-chief of *Inkwell*. "Reinvention" was a finalist in CALYX's 2013 Flash Fiction Contest.