New Haven Review

Anonymous

Alex Greenberg

For Gabriel Reyes,
14 years in solitary confinement

Each day, I enter my life at the same moment:

the guard with the leaden boots is slipping bread
through a slit in the door,

    his nails the color of burnt glass
    rotting the honey wheat,

his mouth inventing a sin out of silence.
This is the same man who lost his youngest boy
to child services and appropriated my body

for parenthood:
disciplined & upbraided me, bruised my hands so well
they still fall lake-wide whenever I try
to make a fist. He starved the other inmates for days.

I was the far-off field who was just spared of the fire.

Now, I am alone in the corner
trying to teach myself how to love the inanimate:

I dip my head between the shoulder blades of the wall
but emerge shivering. I bend light over the objects in my cell
to make shadow people who I undress until there is nothing left.

    It is not a mistake to want this.

After my prayers have clotted so thick they trigger the smoke alarm
in the cell four doors down. The guards relocate us,
we frantically try to recarve the tally marks into the stainless steel tables
without embittering our fingers.

You ask about torture?

Last night, they smogged the windows from the outside.
They wore black gloves
when they delivered our food,

played an interment song on mail day.

Speak to the others. We haven't asked much of our religion.

A window,
or better yet,
a piece of edgeless glass
we can carry in front of our faces
stand with our backs against the door,
and pretend we are on the outside
of this cruel & dismal exhibit.

Tapping the glass with our tooth-chiseled nails
to coax out whatever poor animal is inside.

Home Is Where You Park It

The hows and whys of living on the road, full-time

Amy Alvey

This morning I wake up at a rest stop near Kansas City to the sound of diesel truck engines snarling. It's a far cry from the peaceful mornings in Bishop, California, where I was only a month before. Back then I could rely on the morning sun to gently stir me awake, until it showed its impatience by threatening to turn my van into an oven. The engines snarl again. I grab my toiletry basket and walk out to the rest stop bathroom in slippers, not at all concerned with hiding my lifestyle to others using the facilities. In fact, these folks more or less understand. They too are passing through, catching some quick shuteye before their next drive.

I'm a full-time musician, part-time dirtbag rock climber, and I'm living the dream out of Irene, my 2008 Chevy cargo van. Since March 2016 I've been lucky to call Irene my home. When I'm on tour, I play shows every night in a different town. Between tour runs I post up in cragtowns, small towns in Buttfuck, Nowhere that have little to say for themselves except for the climbing: Orangeville, Utah; Stanton, Kentucky; Victor, West Virginia. I've lived in these places very cheaply for weeks at a time, with the little money spent going toward nominal campground fees, groceries, and gas. All this is to say that even though I sleep, change clothes, and sometimes cook in Irene, much of my life is spent outside of her.

As you can imagine, this kind of life is not for everyone. If you're the type who unwinds from your steady, full-time job with overpriced Chinese takeout while you Netflix and chill, there'd be an adjustment period. Those of us who've decided to live this way have learned a lot from the roving lifestyle: how to be frugal, accept income instability, and find the best places to sleep. For most of us, it's about reducing our overhead so we can spend as much time outside as possible. Unless we're pulling a Class-C RV that's got all the plug-ins, or a tricked-out Airstream, when we're not driving it, the vehicle is just a place to lay our heads.

So how did a girl like me end up at a rest stop parking lot like this? It took nine months of planning and some monetary help from my parents for vehicle purchasing power (thanks Mom an Dad). But all that was driven by a love for one thing that came out of nowhere and completely took over my life: rock climbing.

And how did I get into climbing?

When some personal friend-cest entanglement made clear to me that I needed a different social circle, I searched for a new activity. One where I wouldn't see my ex and my best friend happily together; one where I could make a group of friends that, you know, wouldn't date my exes. I also needed to lose weight, at least according to the irrational part of my brain. So I signed up for a climbing gym membership in July 2013, not completely understanding just how it would ruin my life. First I made the new friends. Then came some new muscles. The obsession grew as I got stronger and chased my new limits, measured by number grades in the gym. When I started climbing outside, I became a full-blown addict. Spending a whole day in nature, working one isolated move on a route just to get a little higher, was just enough purpose to give my healing heart what it needed.

The thought of living on the road full time to climb didn't materialize until the early spring of 2015, shortly after I sublet my apartment to hit the road with my duo Hoot and Holler. After that tour, I pursued my first proper climbing trip, meeting my friends Gabi and Brandon in El Paso, Texas to climb at Hueco Tanks State Park. They were on their ninth month of a year-long road trip. For a month the three of us lived in their 1979 Shasta trailer, and I floated easily on the extra cash I had in my pocket from tour. We climbed with reckless abandon, ate burritos, and talked about the climbs while eating said burritos. We were all realistic enough to know that we would never be paid to climb, let alone sponsored, but there was never a question that what we were doing was worthwhile. It felt good in the soul. It felt right.

When I arrived back in Boston that March, I craved the freedom of a car, but not the stress of having a car in the city. Rents were skyrocketing, even in once-affordable suburbs like Somerville, and showed no promise of slowing down. Hoot and Holler was looking to spend more time out on the road. You've heard this before, but it's pretty damn hard to make a living as a freelance anything, especially a musician. Thanks to Spotify and YouTube, consumers are used to streaming their sad boy/girl breakup song playlist for free. If you want to make money you either 1) sell your soul, roll the dice, and write a pop song that heavily alludes to sex, without actually talking about sex, or 2) hit the road and hope for the best. Until my acoustic old-time duo pens our sexiest Americana single, I'll take what's behind Door Number Two.

Immediately the scheming began. I had to figure out a way to combine my two passions. How could I split my time between music and climbing? What sort of rig would I travel in? Would performing alone when Hoot and Holler wasn't on tour bring enough cash flow to sustain myself? Where would I sleep, or shower for that matter? These details became all-consuming, even as there were times that the excitement for my new life path turned into doubt of my sanity. My parents weren't exactly thrilled with the idea of their twenty-six-year-old daughter stealth camping alone, vulnerable to every chance of petty theft or assault. But as a seasoned traveler, both nationally and abroad, I felt confident with my personal awareness of my surroundings, and considering the circles I run in as a fiddler and rock climber, sketchy situations were unusual and easily avoided. I started sending Craigslist ads to my parents every day of different vehicles within my budget (under $4,000). They learned that I was going to live in a van whether I had their approval or not, and I'm forever grateful that they eventually embraced my plan, and even stepped in when we found something over my budget. To them, it was worth it to spend some of their money to make sure I got something reliable that was built out professionally. I brought the plans of

my layout to a company called Quality Coachworks to outfit the van with insulation, full-size cabinets, a bed, and a simple sink system.

It wasn't a cheap job, and I'll say it again: I'm very lucky that I was gifted this tiny roving home. Though if you have the time and the resources, you can build out a car affordably. Everyone has different needs, depending on how long you're on the road and what your priorities are. If you're doing a three-month cross-country road trip, your build can be as simple as a platform in the back of a sedan for a bed and a couple slide-out shelves underneath. For more long-term travel, there are DIY buildouts in Sprinters, conversion vans, converted ambulances, teardrop trailers, Airstreams, truck campers, Scamps, and RVs. I planned to be on the road indefinitely, shuttling expensive gear and instruments, so discretion was important. My cargo van, on the outside, is blank white.

The cliché is true: I've met some of the most inspiring people while out on the road. I've never encountered another touring musician, but anyone who's full-time road-doggin' it must get creative with supplemental income. When I first met Gabi and Brandon, Gabi had just finished up her accounting degree and Brandon was a copywriter at a Boston ad agency. In their first year of climbing full-time, Brandon took on some freelance writing gigs and Gabi managed the accounts for her mother's hair salon while they built their brand, Just Go Climb. As of this writing, they have almost 20,000 followers on Instagram. In the summer of 2015 they renovated a 1972 Airstream Overlander into their ideal live/work space for their roving video production and photography company, BG Captures.

Jess and Andy Wickstrom are another couple I met doing a similar thing under the monikers Wickstrom Design and DesignEgg. Jess and Andy left their apartment in Chicago to live in their Scamp trailer, splitting their time between work and climbing. Wickstrom Design gives them an income. Under DesignEgg, nonprofit organizations, artists, and entrepreneurs may apply for their creative service awards to receive custom design, photography, and website services.

Successful applicants receive these creative services at no charge. The Wickstroms themselves are compensated through DesignEgg's two successful Kickstarter campaigns, which raised funds for their services.

These are a few of the lucky ones who are able to make a sustainable living on the road, and I hope to join the ranks. Some people save up and take off until their money in the bank runs out. When that happens, they find a seasonal job until they have enough to live for a few more months on the road, and the cycle repeats. Holding a steady job with a company is rare, but not unheard of. Last winter I was in Trader Joe's and offhandedly mentioned I was going to start living in my van.

"I've been living out of my van for the past two years!" my cashier said.

Her name was Ruthie, and we ended up meeting for coffee to talk about living in a van as a single girl. I was especially curious how her employers felt about her lifestyle. It turned out they were nothing but supportive. She slept in the Trader Joe's parking lot, and she was not alone; there were four or five other RVs doing the same, making it a pop up neighborhood. Even though sleeping in the parking lot was technically illegal, the security patrolling the area turned a blind eye. Of course, Southern California was easier and safer to live in your car than, say, Detroit.

The van-dwelling stereotype is changing rapidly, no doubt in part to the growth of web-based jobs. Coding, web design, and the rise of the blogosphere as a way to earn money means that access to wifi creates access to a paycheck. This former fringe lifestyle is moving away from the dirtbag stigma and slowly adopting an aesthetic straight out of an Anthropologie catalogue. Search #vanlife or #vandwelling on Instagram and you'll see the trend in action: Sprinter vans with laminate wood flooring, flannel blankets on the bed, a fresh cup of French press coffee steaming in the hands of a hot outdoorsy significant other. I admit I fell for it a little, as those

Instagram images stoked the flames of my wanderlust: scarf dancing on sand dunes, sleeping under a sea of stars, rustic camping in a damp mossy forest. “Only through travel can you find yourself.” Bullshit like that.

The reality is, well, a little more real. When you #neverstopexploring your car alternator may decide to die 200 miles from the nearest town. You learn how to take an effective hobo shower in a gas station sink. Long days are spent in a coffee shop to take advantage of the wifi. #meetthemoment, indeed.

Still the internet was an incredible resource for me as a newcomer to van dwelling. I found countless blogs with a common thread: Couple becomes jaded, saves money, leaves corporate job to travel the country for a year in their van, can’t go back, is now on the road indefinitely. If these people could do it, then I could too. Then there are blogs dedicated to camp cooking, how to save money for your house on four wheels, and Westfalia maintenance. If you’re about to build your van out, there are extensive how-to’s, plans and videos that outline every step from insulating a vehicle to installing a propane tank. I know someone who was fed and housed by an ex-van living couple that he met through Instagram.

The usual response to my housing situation is one of envy. People’s eyes light up. “That’s great!” they say. “Do it while you’re young.”

Another common response is, “I wish I could do that.”

What they can’t believe is that with some planning and saving, anyone can do it, for as cheaply or costly as they want. They say money can’t buy happiness, but I disagree. Money can buy my gas to the next town, where I can spend time and trade tunes with old friends, or share beers by the campfire after a day of climbing in the Sierra Nevadas. I travel solo, but I’ve never felt truly alone because of this inherent sense of community.

I grew up in a generation sold on the idea that a college degree would lead to a good job, which would allow you to buy a house and raise a family. These days, the only guarantee in a college degree is

tens of thousands of dollars in debt. There's so little room in the job market. Affording a house is becoming less of a possibility for many people. Among some of us millennials, there's thus been a shift, investing in experiences and travel rather than concrete Things. For me, I'll take that road. Now, would you pass me that beer?

The Hate Room

David Leo Rice

Rodrigo and Johann met at the bar of the Eco Pampa Hostel in Buenos Aires and got together as soon as they did, having both characterized themselves, at almost the same instant, as drifters, half-jokingly, over chips and beer at three in the afternoon.

Traveling onward as a couple was an easy decision for both, as each seemed to be or have something the other wasn't or didn't have, or had lost, and now wanted, or wanted back. The first few weeks were a rush, carrying them through the rest of Argentine, Chile, and across to New Zealand, then up the Australian coast to Thailand, Laos, and finally Japan, which Johann said had always been his number one world destination, a place he'd been saving for the right time in his life.

They'd both quit their jobs—Rodrigo's in Madrid, Johann's in Hamburg, both an hour from the towns they'd grown up in, and both in the financial sector, which each had fallen into after learning that what they'd been taught to understand as the Humanities was not, or was no longer, an actual profession. They were 33 and had reached respectable positions, but not enough to keep them from leaving for South America, planning only to avoid Europe until they were sure they'd become different people. They were both lucky, they agreed, on their first night together, exploring Buenos Aires' untouristed outer districts thanks to Rodrigo's Spanish, to have gotten out when they did, before the appeal of stability grew unshakeable or the time to do something else was no longer ahead of them.

"We're both still young!" was their toast, those first few weeks, as they drank to excess without calling it that. "33's the new 23!" They both thought about how little they'd known at 23, as it turned out, though the amount they'd thought they'd known then far outstripped the amount they actually knew now, as far as they could tell.

"If I hadn't left that office when I did," Rodrigo added over cocktails in Bangkok, as they were worrying if the ice was going to

get them sick, “I would’ve killed myself and everyone in it.” Without quite knowing how, Johann understood that he meant this literally. He nodded and pushed his cocktail glass away, waiting for Rodrigo to change the subject.

They’d both saved up respectable sums, enough to land in Tokyo with the freedom to splurge on food and wine and clubs in Roppongi and designer jeans in Harajuku and three weeks in a Sofitel near Yoyogi Park, but on a Saturday night at a sushi restaurant in Shibuya, supposedly the best in the city you could get into without a months-ahead reservation, the money finally ran out. Each had told the other he’d saved more than was strictly true, so, together, they’d lived more extravagantly than either would have on his own.

After both of their debit cards came back declined, Johann took out his credit card while Rodrigo looked away. The waitress kept apologizing as she ran the charge, like this was all her fault, an embarrassment she sincerely wished she could’ve spared them and would still feel guilty about years from now. Johann reassured her twice and left a 35% tip, despite the nagging thought, in the part of himself he wasn’t proud of, that she’d feigned concern for exactly this reason.

That night they moved to a hostel in Koenji, carrying their bags on a walk of shame across the city, and checked into a six-person room which, luckily, had no one else in it tonight.

Rodrigo balled himself up in his sleeping bag on the top bunk while Johann lay with his eyes open below, shivering and sweating like he’d had a pot of coffee with dinner, picturing Rodrigo’s sweaty back overhead, glistening through the thin cotton. After inwardly reciting the names of all the world’s major rivers and the cities they flowed through in an attempt to hypnotize the worry away, he got up, stepped into his flip-flops, pissed in the dark of the communal bathroom and washed his face in the sink that also smelled like piss. Resigned to insomnia, he wandered to the computer lounge, where he sat alone in front of the TV with a beer from the self-service fridge.

He'd taken it without paying for the first time in his life. Though he knew no one would care—probably most beers from this fridge were taken without paying—he hoped, with an edge of real concern, that no one came in and saw him with it. He even scanned the ceiling for cameras, his eyes lingering suspiciously on the light fixtures until he had to blink.

After blinking, he trained his eyes on the TV, where a run of commercials was ending and a show was picking back up. It looked like a game show: three pudgy men behind podiums, burlap sacks over their heads with melon-sized wedges cut to reveal mouths, shouting whenever a buzzer went off. It wasn't clear—both because Johann spoke no Japanese and because the volume was on its nighttime setting—whether they were shouting words, perhaps answers to questions only they could hear, or shouting in pain from some unseen source, perhaps a stinger beneath the podium. Johann let his attention fixate the way it used to at work, when he was locked behind the bank of computers, following the minute ups and downs of the market, always ready for the phone to ring with a client demanding to know whether to buy or sell. And he couldn't be wrong. That was the only rule of his old job, which right now, despite his effort to focus on the screen, a large part of him was busy wishing he hadn't quit. He tried harder to tune this part out. It felt good to revert to the old mode of attention, letting go of the rest of his situation here in Tokyo, even Rodrigo, who'd so far refused to admit that the money problem worried him. Johann, if he was honest, found this disturbing, the way Rodrigo left it to him to worry, saying only, of course, "You shouldn't worry either," when he'd brought it up before bed. Typically Spanish, he thought, not unaware that his thinking was just as typically German. Both of us doomed to be who we are forever. Focus on the Japanese people in the show, he reminded himself, forcing his gaze back to the screen, where one of the contestants had vanished and the other two had their teeth clamped on a long wire. Johann felt the shock in his own back teeth, like biting down on tin foil, as one of the contestants fell back from the stage into a tank

of water, which seemed to electrocute him further. The crowd, or crowd-sound, despite the low volume, cheered like all its dreams had just come true.

The last man standing let his arms be hoisted by the show's host, to more applause, and then he passed out. Leaning the unconscious body against himself like a mannequin, the host revealed what Johann assumed was the prize—a thick envelope—and then the screen went black and a phone number flashed across it, and, though this wasn't at all like him, Johann took out the flip phone he'd bought in Akihabara and dialed the number, not wondering what he'd say if someone picked up.

After three rings someone did. She started speaking Japanese. On instinct, Johann replied in German. This went on for twenty or twenty-five seconds until the voice switched to English, inviting Johann to do the same, which after a further moment of confusion he did.

"You call to be contestant?" the voice asked.

Johann nodded, remembering to add "Yes" when nothing happened.

There was a sound of rustling papers, then the voice said, "Ah … actually, we have cancellation for late show tonight. We tape 3 to 5am, broadcast tomorrow. You available short notice? How old you? You strong boy?"

This time Johann didn't need to remind himself to speak. "Yes to everything. Where do I go?"

She told him the address and hung up. He repeated it to himself five times as he walked out the door without going back to the room to check on Rodrigo or put on his windbreaker or any shoes other than the flip-flops he was already wearing. He did, however, take another beer for the road, feeling better about taking it this time because he had a sense of purpose. Being broke, he'd have to walk, asking people to guide him as he went. The whole time he kept thinking, Is this how things really happen? He got no answer aside

from the occasional stopping of taxis, the drivers grunting come-ons in Japanese.

By 2:45, Johann had found his way to the studio, in a warehouse district behind Waseda University. He dropped his beer bottle, which he'd carried empty for a long time, walked through the open side door, and was taken to the makeup room as soon as he explained who he was. In what felt like the next instant, the makeup people had finished with him, he'd signed what he assumed was a waiver, and he was being prodded onto the stage, a burlap sack over his head, the mouth-hole wet from the previous contestant. He heard the shuffling of others near him, but could see nothing except a boil of colors through the scratchy mesh over his eyes.

Standing where the handler put him, he tried to prepare for whatever was coming—he hadn't understood the exhausted English of the show's host, who'd dropped by backstage to brief him. There was a moment of silence, and then the applause sound, and then a brief announcement in Japanese, followed by an excruciating pain in his left ankle. He almost tipped forward, to even more applause. When he'd righted himself, tasting blood, something shocked his lower back, like a Taser shot into him from afar, and he buckled again, but was galvanized by the thud of the fallen contestant on his right.

Now that it was one-on-one, he did what he'd been trained to do at work, quieting all his peripheral anxieties as the announcer shouted, "ROUND 2!!"

He allowed nothing but the thought of money to enter his mind as a pair of hands spun him through the cheering and offstage, down a flight of stairs he could barely keep up with, into what smelled like the kitchen of a Chinese restaurant. He heard the sound of suds melting in sinks and almost fell over when he was pushed forward, the hands of others on his arms, plunging them under a crust of hot, oily water, down to a pile of plates at the bottom. He silenced the thought that

there might be knives down there by accepting that there certainly were. As he soon as he thought this, he felt one, or a shard of glass. His fingers and palms opened, streaming out into the water.

As he started scrubbing, assuming this was what he'd been ordered to do, he felt a pressure on his head as well. Someone, or some machine, was ripping his hair out. First only a few hairs at a time, then thick clumps, the equivalent of fistfuls if the ripper were human, which, from its methodical brutality, didn't seem possible.

Pushing a fat-covered platter to the side, Johann felt a small round nub in the corner of the sink, and intuited that this was the panic button, his to press if it got to be too much, though his fingers were so raw that even touching the button hurt. He recognized now as the moment to press it, if he was ever going to, but then he heard his opponent shrieking, followed by shouting and blubbering and imploring in Japanese, and found the strength to commute his desire to quit into his opponent's, so that as this other man was pressing the button Johann felt his relief.

Besides, now all his hair was gone so either the worst was over or some much darker game was about to begin. He blacked out on this thought, feeling the dishwater cool like rubber gloves around his wrists.

When he came to, he was sitting on a bench in the green room with two ice packs strapped to his head, his hands stacked in his lap. They were so covered in stitches and ointments they felt fused together.

He stared at the mirror without focusing his eyes while the host stood behind him and explained that he was this round's Winner and what he'd won was a small island off the northwest coast of Kyushu, in the south of the Japanese archipelago, complete with an inn that he could restore or inhabit or sell, it was entirely up to him. The deed was already drawn up and plane and ferry passage had been paid for. He, and anyone he chose to bring with him, were booked to leave at 8am. Would it be possible to exchange the deed for cash? No it would not, the host informed him.

When he'd absorbed all this as best he could, and the ice packs on his head had gone soft, Johann let himself be escorted into the show's private car, which returned him to the hostel after a long trip around the city at dawn, trying to find it. He got out and hurried to the 6-person bunk and shook Rodrigo, whose body felt too thick and heavy to be merely sleeping.

Overcoming the fear that he was sick or dead, he shook Rodrigo again, announcing the good news as soon as he stirred. "So we have to leave right away?" Rodrigo whined, like he didn't know he was speaking aloud.

Their flight touched down in Fukuoka, Kyushu's largest city, and by the looks of it not one they'd be spending time in. From here, they took a bus to the shore, and then a private ferry for six hours and thirty minutes, according to Johann's Swatch, which had survived last night's dishwater, until their island came into view. According to the property deed it was known as Futo, a satellite of the somewhat larger island of Makioko. They disembarked, unable to tip the driver because they still had no cash—transit for each step of the journey had been included in the prize, but nothing extra. Finally, they helped the driver unload the tandem kayak, which he said was theirs to use for runs to Makioko, just over a mile to the north, the only accessible source of food and supplies, though Amazon would deliver for an added fee.

They thanked him and watched as he turned the ferry around, leaving them stranded. When he was gone, they followed an overgrown trail a hundred yards to where the inn sagged on its foundations, looking like no one had visited it since WWII.

"Nice digs," said Rodrigo, affably enough that Johann ignored the latent sarcasm. He grabbed Rodrigo's hand, wincing at the pain on his stitches, and led him through a doorway that had no door in it.

That first night they ate crackers and nuts from the plane and slept on a tatami mat they'd found rolled up in a corner.

After Johann was out cold, desperate to recuperate, Rodrigo found himself on his feet, barely more conscious than a sleepwalker, moving along the corridors. He rubbed the smooth walls, luxuriating in their skinlike texture, until he felt a hollow place and, instinctively, bore down on it. The rice paper gave way and he fell through. Whatever part of him was awake expected to fall out of the inn and onto wet dirt, but he landed instead in a drafty, rectangular room, unconnected to the rest of the mostly open-plan interior. Facedown on the floor, he rolled onto his side and looked around in the dark, getting a sense for the place he was in, picking up a low but definite hum, almost a groan. He began to groan along with it, connecting the taste in his mouth with the smell in the air, and both of them to the sound.

When he'd groaned his lungs empty, he rolled onto his back, looking up and trying to make sense of where he was, holding onto the outside possibility that he was still dreaming. But most of him knew he wasn't. If anything, this room felt realer than any he'd found himself in since his life had first started to feel like it was drifting off course, somewhere around 25. The groan, though it didn't seem to have a tangible source, sounded like it was meant specifically for him.

In the morning, Johann found Rodrigo already in the kitchen, regarding the empty French press. "There's no coffee," he said.

Johann nodded, put on his shoes, and went down to the beach to get in the kayak, shouting for Rodrigo when he didn't follow.

They rowed around the island to the north side, from which Makioko was visible. Johann wore a pair of work gloves he'd found in the shed behind the inn on his way to the beach, thick enough that the paddle transmitted pressure but not pain to his hands, and he wore a floppy fisherman's hat over his ruined scalp, sniffing its mildew compulsively as he rowed.

After a floating break to rest their arms, they rowed the rest of the way and disembarked in the small vacation town on Makioko to

buy all the groceries and cleaning supplies they could carry, putting everything on Johann's credit card. Then they went to an Internet café where they posted the first listing for the retreat center they'd decided, somewhere in the course of rowing, to open and try to run.

It had been Rodrigo's idea, suggested spontaneously when Johann asked him if everything was okay. In order not to discuss the room he'd stumbled into last night, he'd decided to introduce an idea that would occupy all interaction between them for the foreseeable future.

Posting the listing made the idea real. Unlike the vagueness of transferring capital from one account to another, servicing real guests who paid real money would give them both, they agreed, a means of reconnecting with the reality they knew had been there, just beneath them, all along, despite their mutual feeling of having dangerously lost touch with it somewhere around 2010.

They loaded everything into the kayak, almost capsizing it when they got in, laughing, and rowed back to Futo to set to work cleaning the floors and stocking the cupboards.

Johann eyed the extra materials Rodrigo had purchased—what looked like the makings of a rock garden, four new rolls of tatami mats, a bag of tea lights, an antique record player—and made a point of not asking what they were for, despite their having been lumped in with the sum charged to his credit card. This is the kind of man I can be now, he thought, as he washed the first round of dishes in the sink, his fingers still tense with the fear of knives, his stitches softening and beginning to dissolve. The kind of man that observes certain things without auditing them.

After six weeks of hard work and twelve more trips to Makioko, the burden of credit card debt hanging ever more heavily over them—over Johann anyway—the retreat was ready for its first confirmed guest, George Kreeble, a dentist from Boston who'd booked two nights and made the down payment of $225, half the total for those who booked online.

Johann and Rodrigo celebrated with haircuts and shaves at the expensive salon on Makioko, and a steak dinner—fish was so common here it had started to seem like a vegetable—all on the credit card, before rowing the kayak back to Futo. This is the vessel they'd pick George up in tomorrow, though soon, if guests kept coming, they'd have to buy a motorboat from the dealership on the other side of the island, which they'd stopped by to visit today, picking out the one they wanted, a snazzy blue 2014 Yamaha with yellow stripes down the sides.

George Kreeble was a smiley red-faced fiftysomething with a gut that hung under his floral short-sleeve shirt, and gray curly hair and no chin. "Hey guy!" he said at the ferry terminal. His tone conveyed that he was in Japan for the first time and had nothing invested in hiding it. "Thanks for picking me up!"

Johann smiled under his moldy fisherman's hat and rowed the kayak back across what he'd come to think of as the Gulf of Futo. He focused on keeping the pain in his hands imperceptible; this struck him as appealingly Japanese, somehow part of the thing he'd come here to find.

When they reached the newly refurbished inn, George gushed, "Wow. I mean, wow. You guys weren't lying." Johann went to the kitchen to open the bottle of chilled rosé they'd advertised as a gift for guests who booked two nights or more, while Rodrigo, who'd been reading in the dining room, listened to George talk about his wife in Boston, who'd left him because she never took the time to find out who she really was when she was young. Rodrigo nodded, exaggerating his accent and leaving out every fourth or fifth word when he replied, hoping to give the impression that his English wasn't good enough to get into matters of this depth, not that it seemed George needed to be understood in order to go on talking.

When Johann returned with the rosé, George turned sullen, making no secret of his desire to be left alone with Rodrigo. Johann

took the hint and left. Rodrigo didn't watch him go, focusing instead on setting the table and then slicing salmon on the kitchen counter, aware of George's unashamedly hungry gaze on his lower back.

After a tedious, pervy dinner where nothing much got eaten, Rodrigo showed George to his bedroom. Then, before returning to his own, part of him hoping to find Johann asleep, he remembered to show George one more thing. "And right this way," he said, George following gladly, "is the Oasis."

He slid open the wood panel to reveal a room with a miniature indoor rock garden and the antique record player he'd purchased on Makioko when Johann had been on the phone with the credit card company. There were silk curtains painted with Tibetan mandalas, pillows everywhere, and a row of Yankee Candle Midnight Jasmine candles, ordered from Amazon, flickering along one wall.

The Oasis had been his project, accomplished not only without Johann's participation but in light of Johann's palpable unease. "If I'm going to stay here, the inn has to be half-mine," was all Rodrigo had said in his defense, determined to cover up whatever had groaned at him on the night he discovered it. "It's crucial for me to build this. I won't be your employee," he'd been ready to add, but it hadn't been necessary. And it was true, he thought, both while building it and now while showing George around: it really had been crucial for him to build, even more than he'd known. It was, if he stopped to think about it, the first idea he'd followed through on since the onset of adulthood.

"A room for relaxation," he said, proud of his English now. "Meditation, breathing, stretching, reflection… whatever makes you feel good." Despite his distaste for George, he couldn't swallow his pride.

George nodded, clearly hoping Rodrigo would add himself to the list of options. When he didn't, George wandered into the room and began rifling through the records.

"Well I'll leave you to it," Rodrigo said, sliding the door closed behind him.

He got in bed beside Johann, who didn't stir, and picked up Kenzaburo Oe's *A Personal Matter*, which he'd taken from the hostel in Tokyo and started seven times without getting a foothold, not because he wasn't determined to glean the insight into the postwar Japanese crisis of masculinity that Johann swore it contained, but because he always started it when he was already half-asleep, as he was now, the book falling onto his chest and scraping his chin …

Eyes closing, he felt the inn rattle. He feared an earthquake, aware that they were common in Japan. Shaking off the beginning of a dream about a steep cobbled hill in Malaga, he leaned onto his elbow, about to wake Johann when the inn filled with language:

Dumb shit cunt fuck bitch whore freak crap piece of mother-fucking fecal bag of dead fucking clumps of asinine whore shaft vomit filth bitch twerp damned fucking rotten trashcan slop puppy cum hole …

The words echoed down the hall, timid at first but steadily gaining in volume and sincerity, until Johann woke up too, looking around with a beatific expression, his mouth half-open in a yawn that hadn't kicked in yet, his hands and scalp covered with aloe gel.

The stream of profanity remained unbroken, spewing out, filling all the space they'd refurbished together. George's voice was so loud and forceful Rodrigo was afraid he'd have a heart attack.

"Should we do something?" he asked.

Still partly outside the world, Johann shook his head.

So they lay back down, holding each other, listening to George scream his lungs out in a stream that only broke when light began to shine through the spaces between the wooden slats of the walls.

The inn seemed to pant.

At breakfast, two hours later, George looked rosy-cheeked and well-rested. He even appeared to have lost weight.

He sauntered into the kitchen, where Rodrigo and Johann were sitting over the French press, not talking, and said, "Morning, gents. What's on the menu?"

Neither answered until he sat down at the table, landing heavily on the fragile chair. He looked at the two of them, then cleared his throat, about to ask again.

"I'll fry some eggs," said Johann.

Rodrigo sat there, staring out the window. He felt sick from last night, infected. He could hear George talking about the wonders the fresh air and quiet were doing for his system, which he didn't mind admitting had gone into the red in Boston this past year, especially during the bad winter, the worst on record since 1979, a year he smoothly segued into droning on about. Rodrigo focused on not listening, blurring the sound in his head the way he'd blur an image by squinting.

He got through all of breakfast this way, tipping the eggs down his throat like oysters, until George announced he was going to the beach and would be back for dinner at dusk.

They passed the day wandering the inn, picking up dirty plates and putting them down, making George's bed, which he clearly hadn't slept in, and taking turns trying to nap.

When George reappeared around five, sunburned and smiling, he asked if they could put some steaks on the grill and Johann said, "Sure." After their steaks, which Johann had defrosted from the newly stocked long-term freezer and then burned slightly, George drank the rest of the rosé in the fridge and said he was going to retire early tonight, in preparation for his early departure in the morning.

Neither Johann nor Rodrigo replied, keeping their gazes on the Japanese characters on the empty bottle on the table as the sound of George's screaming returned. It was even louder than last night, a combination of cursing, shrieking, sobbing, pounding the walls and floor, and stomping like a six-year-old denied an ice cream cake in the grocery store freezer aisle.

It went on so long that Rodrigo and Johann had to walk to the beach, reentering on tiptoe an hour later, praying George was asleep.

Mercifully, he was.

In the morning, he emerged showered with his bags packed, and said, “I’ve greatly enjoyed my stay here. I’ll be letting certain of my friends know about your Hate Room upon my return.”

He said nothing more as Johann rowed him back to the ferry terminal on Makioko, where he reiterated his thanks and tipped handsomely. Johann spent the tip on a bottle of sake, which he felt he deserved, though he knew it was Rodrigo who’d absorbed the brunt of whatever had just happened.

The Hate Room quickly became the heart of the inn.

As George promised, others like him appeared, and the inn began to turn a profit. Johann paid off his credit card debt, opened a savings account on Makioko, and bought the motorboat, leaving the kayak for guest excursions.

They remembered how it felt to have money.

All the guests, all men, came with the same air of pleasantness stretched thin over seething self-hatred, and they all availed themselves of the Hate Room just as loudly and angrily as George had, bellowing out a kind of soul-deep loathing too potent to uncork in their native Boston, or Chicago, or wherever else in America they started to come from, as word of mouth spread.

One night Johann and Rodrigo tried to have sex under cover of the shrieking, hoping it might revive the basically extinct flame between them—a flame whose extinction they’d only noticed a month or so after it’d gone out—but neither could invest enough of himself in the other to get beyond foreplay, so they ended up back on the beach, ten feet apart, staring into the water, trying to make out distant islands in the dark. The shrieking from the inn drifted along the path toward them, louder than the crashing surf.

They could hear tonight’s guest throwing himself against the walls and barking, screaming out his hatred for God and his wish to be put out of his misery right now.

Johann closed his eyes and pictured the money coming in. Whatever it is, he thought, it's bearable for a price.

But Rodrigo couldn't take it anymore. "They're desecrating my Oasis," he sobbed, stumbling to his feet and kicking sand until the beach became grass on his way back to the inn.

After he was gone, Johann sat on the beach alone, scratching the scars on his palms where the stitches had been.

Word of the Hate Room spread to the point where the inn was often double-booked and Johann had to turn people away. He was managing everything now that Rodrigo's depression, or anxiety or chronic exhaustion, not that he called it any of these things, had confined him to bed, *A Personal Matter* tented across his chest, his eyes squinting at the ceiling, an orange pill bottle open on the nightstand beside him.

Whenever Johann went in the Hate Room after a guest's departure to clean out the spit, urine, semen, and occasional blood and shit—all of it congealing into a molasses-like black matter—he found himself wondering whether the room was haunted by a Japanese spirit whose nature Rodrigo had perhaps intuited as soon as they moved in. Something about it, he thought, must draw the black matter to the surface of these men, just as the inn draws the men themselves all the way from America. It's not just a place for them to let it out, which they could do at home—it's a place that draws it from them, peeling it from their bones and organs so they can purge what would otherwise have remained lodged inside them, turning to cancer over the course of their 50s.

He always entered the Hate Room soberly, steeled for the grim business of cleaning the black matter out, but he left it rattled, in more of a hurry than he wanted to be.

Business peaked by the end of the long summer, the inn filling and emptying with hate-sick guests, each staying two days. This

seemed to be how long it took to get the black matter up and out. One day wasn't enough for a full purge, Johann thought, and three days would begin to eat into whatever in them was still healthy.

There were times where he felt almost meditative, executing his daily tasks like a monk, scrubbing out the Hate Room, which he'd taken to calling by its actual name, unlike Rodrigo, who, lying in bed like a child, could still only call it the Oasis, when he spoke at all. Johann had always known there were people in the world, intelligent, competent people, who spent full weeks in bed without being physically ill, but, nevertheless, the sight of it, manifested through someone he had feelings for, was incredible to him. He wondered what kept Rodrigo from taking a turn in the Hate Room himself, and he wondered if he wanted to know.

Though this wasn't how he'd envisioned his 30s turning out, he would've spent them like this if it'd been up to him, but it wasn't. When the General arrived on Makioko—that's the name he'd entered on the online registration form, *The General*—Johann could see right away that there was something even more wrong with him than there had been with the others. The others, he thought, eyeing the General's sweat-shiny work shirt buttoned to bursting around his neck, only hinted at where a person can end up. Now here is a man who's ended up there.

He handed Johann his duffel bag without saying hello, and sat down in the motorboat, lighting a cigarette and scowling at nothing, or at the fish smell in the harbor. Ferrying him back to Futo, Johann wondered if it might've been possible to refuse his patronage, and, if so, when the chance to do so had come and gone.

The General got out and marched up the beach, along the path, and inside, tracking sandy water onto the wood floors. Most guests had been happy to remove their shoes, but Johann could tell that with the General it'd be dangerous to even ask.

He went to the fridge and took out the pitcher of welcome sangria—he'd added this to the inn's profile after the rosé had started to

seem cheap—and two glasses. The General marched up to the table, took the pitcher, poured both glasses full, downed them, and filled them again.

"Well, let me show you to your room," said Johann, clearing his throat after the General had drained the pitcher.

The General burped, wiped his mouth, and, taking up his clinking duffel bag, said, "Show me to the Hate Room."

Johann exhaled as slowly as he could into his fist. Then he nodded and said, "Right this way, sir."

"Don't call me sir," spat the General, a piece of pineapple flying from his mouth and sticking to the rice paper wall.

Johann went back to the kitchen after the General had locked himself in the Hate Room. He thought about rousing Rodrigo, letting himself imagine that, if he did, Rodrigo would run to the door and stop the General before it was too late, like all along he'd been saving up the energy to do just this.

But in reality he mixed up a fresh pitcher of sangria from the leavings in the fridge and dragged a chair outside the Hate Room, sitting and drinking as the General raged:

Scat fuck bitch shitspew skag rag burning hell motherfucking blood blister full of …

The words were the same as ever, but the intensity of the General's hate went beyond anything Johann had ever heard. It struck a chord of such pure loathing for life itself that Johann recoiled, like it was an affront to his life too, a curse with actual power.

In the first moments when the General's voice began to gurgle under the effects of the knife, all Johann could do was grip the sangria pitcher.

Cu—u—u—unt … gurgled the General's voice, through the sound of blood splashing the walls and dripping onto the tatami mats.

Johann felt the sangria fall from his mouth, soaking his upper shirt in sympathy with the General's death throes. He held

his breath until the Room was silent. Then he exhaled through his fingers and hoisted open the paneled door, wading in. The blood and black matter came up to his ankles and partly submerged the white, drained body, the face abstract as a bad wax figurine's. The knife had floated away and come to a standstill in the corner.

Eyes, ears, testicles … the General had removed them all before succumbing.

After taking in as much as he could, Johann removed his shirt—without asking himself why—and picked up the body's feet. He dragged them through the inn, smearing blood over the floors that he and Rodrigo had hand-polished what felt like a decade ago, when they were both still young, and continued through the back door onto the path that led away from the beach. He dragged it into the woods, flies and mosquitoes swarming the sweat on his lower back, until he reached a point where he could convince himself the body would never be found.

He began by kicking up the soft dirt; then he bent over to dig with his hands, feeling the small roll of fat that had grown on him since quitting his job blimp out over his belt. He kept turning to check on the body, feeling it watching him despite its eyelessness.

When he couldn't stand this anymore, he pushed it into the shallow hole—just deep enough that it didn't rise above the ground—and kicked the dirt and leaves back over it, wiping his face with his inner forearm so as not to smear his mouth with blood. He backed away from the grave, wary of turning from it, until he bumped, hard, into a tree. Then he did turn, running straight back to the inn.

Johann came through the door to find Rodrigo standing at the edge of the blood pool in the dark, only the light of the bedroom on behind him, *A Personal Matter* hanging limply by his side.

"That was him?" he asked, like some bogeyman from his dreams had finally materialized.

"Yeah … Your pills wore off?"

Rodrigo didn't respond, only let the book slide through his

fingers and float away. A look of total resignation covered his face as Johann stepped forward, embraced him, and pushed him down on the bed, his body heavier and more inert than ever.

When they couldn't lie like this any longer, they got up and scrubbed all the inn's surfaces, in awful reenactment of their first days of preparation.

Then they got in the motorboat, planning to go to Makioko for a decadent breakfast at the American diner—milkshakes, pie—before booking a flight back to Europe.

But they just sat there in the waves, counting them. Johann stared at the motor, unable to reach out and start it. When it got dark, they had to go back inside.

Inside, they subsisted on crackers and cocktail nuts in bed, like their first night here, not speaking until, almost a week later, a motorboat from Makioko pulled up and a young woman stepped out.

They watched her like two sad dogs through the front window as she tipped the driver and waited for him to speed off before approaching the inn and knocking on the door, at first gently, then pounding on it until Rodrigo ran to bed and Johann shuffled over.

He pulled the door open and stepped aside to let her tumble past without looking at her, though he knew, dimly, he should be careful in case she was the police.

She was the one to turn on the lights. The first thing she noticed was the mess—half-full bowls in the sink, a French press with a skin of mold over the coffee in the bottom, a steak on a cutting board on the dinner table, its juices hardened into a shell around it.

"I'm here for my father," she said. "I know he's here. I've seen his credit card bill."

"Your father?" Johann asked, already giving up any hope of lying to her.

She stared, waiting. He got the feeling she hated his German accent, maybe hated Germans generally.

"Just show me where he is."

Her American accent was very clean and he could see something of her father in her. The kind of mental toughness he must have had before it turned on him. He wondered how much longer until it turned on her.

"Fine," he said. "Follow me."

He started toward the Hate Room, thinking he'd begin there, giving her an abridged version of what'd happened, but decided against it at the last minute and kept moving, through the back door and into the woods.

He replayed the night he'd dragged the General out here, until the rational part of his mind faltered and he couldn't be sure this wasn't the first time: perhaps his would soon be the body and this woman the one to bury it.

Instinct led him back to the grave. He almost took his shirt off again, but he got himself together and started kicking the dirt aside. The woman's eyes fixated on the parting ground in the instants before her father's face broke through.

When it did, the body nearly opaque with black matter, which must have seeped from its bones, the woman kneeled, cradling the head in her arms. She turned back to Johann, surprised to see he was still there, and moaned, "Leave us."

Johann nodded and backed away. He would've kept going had her moaning not begun to climb in register, out of the low sad weepy place where it began and into the realm of the confident and the cruel.

He crouched against a tree, barely concealed, to watch her in the failing light. Now she was screaming, pressing in on the head in her lap, bellowing into its open mouth, "Fuck you! You slimy fucking piece of …"

Johann listened as she went on, venting what sounded like a lifetime of pure, unrelieved hate, beyond even what the General had visited upon himself.

"It's not me! It's not me!" she shrieked, over and over. "You're the one that's nothing! It's your black matter that killed mom and is killing me, not the other way around!" She reached into her purse and pulled something out and, while Johann stood there, started cutting what was left of the body apart, first its lips, then pieces he couldn't identify in the dusk.

She flung them deeper into the woods, venting hate through her nose now that her voice was gone, and he pictured wolves coming up from their dens to eat what she'd thrown their way and wait for more, until there was none left and they were fighting over the bones and she was long gone, deeper into the woods, to haunt the island forever.

Though he didn't know how it would end, he knew he'd seen enough. He hurried back to the inn before it was too late, without asking himself what too late might mean at this point. He was aware, rationally speaking, that he'd likely see her again, and have to deal with her in some way—that she'd entered the order of things here, not merely passed through it—but he kept himself from worrying about this now.

Back in the inn, he burst into the bedroom, grabbed Rodrigo from where he lay, and carried him into the Hate Room.

He closed the door, tore his pants down, tore down Rodrigo's, shoved his head against the stained tatami, climbed on top of him, and yelled, though he knew Rodrigo couldn't hear him, "From now on, this is where we'll fuck until we're rich enough to retire."

As he scrabbled for position, squeezing Rodrigo's shoulders and bearing down on his ass, he started to see the black matter oozing up from his pores and out his mouth. The harder Johann fucked him, the more came out, seeping in a trail across the floor, merging with the remnants of the General. He realized that, if he kept going, he'd squeeze Rodrigo out like a tube of toothpaste, and that the quantity of black matter would be more than even the Hate Room could hold.

If only Rodrigo had come in here and let it out a little at a time, like the rest of them … Johann thought. But he hadn't. He'd kept it in.

Johann tried to stop, but he'd passed the point where he could. In passing it, he saw that Rodrigo had built the Hate Room to die in. He'd known this moment was coming. It was that simple.

He closed his eyes and pictured digging a new grave in the woods, a deeper one, and he cried, and abandoned himself to whatever sensation was still to come as the last of the body beneath him gave out with a groan that went on and on and on.

What Do Ghosts Need?

Kathleen Balma

A ghost needs an audience or it is pointless.
But does a ghost need a point? No.
Never mind then.

Closure, clearly, is a ghostly need.
A ghost needs a therapist.
Yes, but not a couch, for they rest floating.

A ghost needs a locus
to which it can be tethered
by an airy umbilical, but who

or what is at the other end, refusing
the quick snip? A ghost must need
an otherworldly obstetrician

or midwife. Is the psychic medium
a spirit's shrink or accoucheuse?
Neither, she's the doula.

The ghost needs a doula? Alrighty then.
Better a ghoul's doula than a hallow's evil
wet nurse. That's poltergeist stuff.

Some ghosts seem to need chains.
Some people also seem to need them.
Ghosts were once people; this makes sense.

The chain might replace the tether
in some cases, depending on whether
the role of haint is self-imposed.

To cast yourself in a shade monologue
and saturate a place with your own inner suds
is a far banshee cry from being sentenced

to limp around in a heap of invisible bling
à la Sid Vicious, neck padlocked, keyless. Sid Vicious
is definitely a ghost. He was a ghost when alive,

and a very bad one. He had no talent for it.
He was all circumstance and no pomp,
but he pulled it off. Probably lesser ghosts

hated him. Ghosts are player haters.
They need to step back, be less aura, more
trace. A ghost needs Ghandi, Twelve Steps,

or a massage of the gossamer pressure point
that leads from the power left foot
to the I-don't-give-a-damn center of the brain.

Ghost brains all have reverse Alzheimer's.
They can't forget, can't feign, can't faint
at the sight of real or ethereal blood can't pass

out can't nap through the boring bits can't
shake it off can't make light can't take
a joke can only emote, emote, emote! My God,

you ghosts, get a grip! What you need and can't get
is Mick Jagger singing "Satisfaction"
until you bleed blue luminescence from the sheer

grist of it. What you need is validation,
dear ghosts. What you need is a celestial telegram
from your mama. STOP. A ghost needs, *is,*

an S.O.S. A ghost needs Morse code
but goes with the Bat Signal.
A ghost in binary code needs one zero.

Tom Silex, Spirit-Smasher

Nick Mamatas

The covers of the pulp magazines were about as lurid as I had expected them to be—astronauts in bubble helmets, tentacles spilling forth from dark corners, and the breasts of women bound to slabs just barely obscured by wisps of silk or crackling pink lightning. I glanced over at Jeremy, who was looking across the diner booth table at the pulp magazine collector, who also looked just about as ridiculous as I had expected a pulp magazine collector to look. Plaid and suspenders in the Arizona summertime, a Santa Claus beard, and a peculiar bleating voice—as though he rehearsed his sentences, then recited them. There was a shard of French fry hanging from his fuzzy upper lip.

"So Ms. Martinez, as you can see, Tom Silex, Spirit-Smasher never made the covers of the magazines in which his adventures were published, but your grandfather's byline is—"

"He wasn't my grandfather," I said. I smiled, not apologetically. There was something about getting to interrupt an old white man that always made me smile. "He was my grandmother's first husband. She was very young when they married, and it didn't last long."

"When was that?" Jeremy asked.

"1950—she got a divorce and could never go back to church after that," I said, stabbing at one of the pulp magazines with a thick finger. The pulp collector winced. "Grandpa was forward-thinking for the time and married her anyway. She always called Marcus Goulart 'the rat bastard' after that. "

The pulp collector opened his mouth to say something, but then closed it.

"I'm Rosa's ... advisor," Jeremy said. And boyfriend, obviously. He was a tall man, all long limbs, but he didn't have to sit thigh-to-thigh with his client, as he was doing. "So, you believe that the rights to this detective character, Tom Silence—"

"Silex," the pulp collector said.

"Silex," Jeremy said.

"Silex is Latin for 'flint,' you see."

"And … I'm not following."

"Marcus Goulart was born Tom Flint," the pulp collector said. "Many pulp authors wrote under pseudonyms, but Goulart actually legally changed his name."

"Did you know that?" Jeremy asked me.

I shrugged. "I literally just told you every single thing I know about Goulart."

"I looked into Goulart's estate and copyrights very deeply," the pulp collector said. "I searched every public record available. He never divorced your grandmother. They separated, surely, but there was no divorce." The pulp collector smiled. "Do you understand what this means?"

"My grandmother was a bigamist?" I said. "My grandparents were never married?" My hand went up. I hardly even knew why. I wanted to smack the whole world across the face.

Why was the pulp collector still smiling?

The waitress brought me back to reality with a sharp, "Anything else over here?" She looked down at the magazines crowding the table and sneered. The pulp collector didn't seem to notice.

"It means that you own Tom Silex," the pulp collector said. "I'd love to publish the collected adventures in a new edition. As the sole copyright holder, you could license the stories to me, and even give me permission to solicit authors to write new Silex adventures."

"What about Grandma?" Jeremy asked. He turned to the waitress and dismissed her with a twitch of his eyebrows.

"My understanding, from the Silver Alert I came across on Google, which is how I found Rosa, is that Mrs. Hernandez isn't competent," the pulp collector said. "Surely, a conservatorship …"

"No," I said. "I guess not being good at paperwork runs in the family. The not-family."

"… and there, amidst the swirling darkness of the old Wilkerson farmhouse, I heard the blasphemous chanting of a thousand psychopomps …" Jeremy read while I drove. "What's a psychopomp?"

"A psychopomp is someone — like an angel or a spirit or the Grim Reaper — who escorts the dead to the afterlife. Sounds like trouble for Tom Silex," I told him.

"Should I keep going?"

"Don't bother. Don't you think this was a waste of our time?"

Jeremy shrugged. "These stories read like crap to me. Some atmosphere. Then he pulls out his Shadow Lantern, which makes ghosts visible. The quanto-mystico-electrical light reveals the state of their souls. Then he banishes them either by providing what they want, or … hey, how did you even know what a psychopomp is?"

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"I'm just saying it's an unusual word. I didn't know it."

"And you went to law school," I said. "Unlike me with my associate's degree. Is that what you mean?"

Neither of us said anything for a long moment. Then I said, "It was a crossword puzzle answer. I looked it up." It wasn't true. I like reading fantasy fiction on my Kindle and such, but I always kept quiet about it. My parents were hyper-religious and suspicious of a girl reading. Even after a car accident took them, old habits died hard.

"I only went to law school for one year anyway," Jeremy said. He changed the subject. "Amazing how sometimes some little story or idea can become something big. The original Superman comic was developed by a pair of teenagers."

"We're not talking big, Jer. We're talking some guy who wants to photocopy old pulp magazines and sell them on Amazon for nine dollars," I said. "The offer was two thousand bucks plus royalties. How many people are going to buy—"

"That dude spent more than two thousand bucks already," Jeremy said. "Plane tickets are six hundred, plus he did the research to

find you. Even the Motel 6 by the diner is ninety bucks a night."

"Maybe we should talk to Grandma about it after all," I said. "After the homecare nurse leaves for the day."

"There has to be room to negotiate," Jeremy said.

"I can't even afford to file for conservatorship."

"I told you I could try. I just don't want to make an error in filing. You need a real lawyer."

"Grandma has to sign," I said. "That's it."

I could always tell when my grandmother was having a good day. She would smile and say, "Hello, Rosa." On a bad say she wouldn't smile for a few minutes, then finally find a word and say "Hola, bonita," and then try a smile. On her worst day ever, my grandmother told the homecare nurse to leave and when the nurse wouldn't, she lurched out of her easy chair, grabbed a rolling pin from a vase full of utensils on the kitchen counter, and swung for the nurse's head as best as her frail arms could manage. The nurse ran to her car. Abuelita followed her right out the door and then spent several hours wandering around the development in the hundred-degree heat until Jeremy found her and wrestled her back into the car. Thus the Silver Alert, and the visit from the pulp fiction collector.

Today wasn't so bad, but it was not a good day. "Bonita…y guapo," is how she greeted us. My name, our relationship, had left her mind again. I look like my mother, her daughter, so sometimes I am Daniela too. I count those as good days. The nurse—a new woman, you'd better believe it—silently started collecting her things to go.

"Abuelita," I said. "How are you?" Grandmother's eyes danced at that. She was a grandmother!

"I've been better, but I'm alive, thank God." She looked closely at Jeremy. Mostly she remembered me on some level, but casual acquaintances were beyond the ability of her mind to retain. "What's that?" She pointed at the folder Jeremy was holding. "I'm not signing anything about going to a nursing home. I have to wait for Santo.

He's coming home soon. I have to make dinner. He won't let you send me away."

Jeremy winced at the name of my late grandfather, but I had a dozen-time-a-day rote response. "Grandpa is watching over us from heaven, abuelita. But you can look at this."

I took my grandmother by the arm and led her through the open-plan living room to the kitchen table. Jeremy spread out the photocopies of the magazine covers and the Silex stories like someone in a cop show presenting evidence to the camera.

"Where are my glasses?" Silvia snapped.

"Around your neck," Jeremy said.

I dug the glasses out of the folds of my grandmother's housecoat. There was hardly a trace of dignity in our relationship anymore. "Here you are. Does any of this ring a bell?"

Grandma took a seat and bent so far forward that her shoulders and neck were nearly parallel to the floor. "Hmm, hmm," she said, which is what she said when trying to buy a precious moment or two with which to remember something, anything. America is a young nation, though its history is sufficiently bloody that the cosmic aether is stained with the dying moments of the native and settler, soldier and criminal. Her voice was strong, the words effortless; Grandma read in the casual sing-song of the substitute elementary school teacher she had once been. Into the trackless prairies I was called one summer through the secret network of learned entities known only as the Sisterhood of the Spiral to confront not just a single entity but what appeared to be the octoplasmic manifestation of a defeated people entire who—

Silvia looked up at me, owlish behind her glasses. "I did that." She smiled. "That rat bastard wanted a Brotherhood of the Spiral, but I looked right at him and told him that if I was going to type up his stories, it would have to be a Sisterhood of the Spiral. Mr. Goulart knew nothing about women, that was his problem."

Jeremy said, "So you recall all this? You typed these stories?"

“Of course I typed the stories. When we had a typewriter, that is. That machine went into hock more times than I could count,” Grandma said. She was lucid in two times at once: there, in her own kitchen where she used to cook and play endless hands of solitaire and cut coupons and make phone calls for local politicians, and in the past, as a young woman living on the other end of the continent, typing up stories from handwritten notes on another kitchen table until her husband, wild-eyed and drunk, stumbled in, spilled his own pages to the floor, and slammed the portable typewriter case shut to drag it away down four flights of steps and across the street to the store with three hanging balls over the entrance.

“Where is that pawn shop ticket? We need the typewriter back,” Grandma said. That was wrong. Something reset in her brain. “Santo is coming home from work soon. I have to start dinner.”

“I’ll do dinner, abuelita,” I said. “Why don’t you take a nap?”

“I’m not tired.”

Jeremy collected several photocopied pages and handed the stack over to Silvia. “Why don’t you keep reading, ma’am. You seemed to enjoy the story.” Silvia took the pages and I said “… in bed.”

“I need my glass—”

“Around your neck,” Jeremy said too quickly.

After abuelita was put away in her bedroom, I sat down at the kitchen table and picked up a page between thumb and forefinger, like it was a used tissue. “Spirit smasher.”

“It’s very old-fashioned, even compared to some of the other stories in the same issues, but it’s interesting in a way. Tom Silex is like a Sherlock Holmes-cowboy-Ghostbuster-Harry Potter type all rolled into one,” Jeremy said.

“Two thousand dollars,” I said.

“We can get more, I’m sure of it.”

“How are you sure of it?” I said. “Maybe that guy spent his life’s savings coming out here to talk to Grandma.”

MAMATAS

"You can call her abuelita in front of me, Rosa," Jeremy said. "White guys are capable of understanding a little Spanish."

"What's two thousand bucks?" I asked myself. "If I found even a hundred bucks on the street, I'd be thrilled. Hell, five bucks would still be an anecdote. But two grand is what, one month for abuelita in adult care? Then we get to wheel her back here and with no more money."

"Just call the guy, have him come over, and sign over the rights then. What is the hold up?"

"You were the one telling me about Superman!"

"It can certainly happen," Jeremy said. "But I'm sure that for every one Superman there's a million Tom Silexes, Spirit-Smashers out there, with a dedicated fandom of seventeen old weirdoes."

"I wonder how much of these stories Grandma actually wrote," I said. "Did she make a lot of changes while she typed them up for Goulart? Maybe she pitched ideas; they could have been collaborators."

Jeremy snorted. One of his most annoying habits. "Highly doubtful."

"And why's that, Jeremy?"

"Did she ever mention it? Ever? I mean, even when she was … not suffering? When you were a kid?"

"She barely even mentioned her first husband. Maybe she felt betrayed, and that's why she never said anything." Maybe that's why my own mother hated fantasy novels and ghost stories. All her Jesus talk aside, we went to church all of twice a year.

"Anyway, I'll call him," I said. "He can meet abuelita. Maybe sympathy will lead him to cough up a few more bucks."

The pulp collector couldn't come back until the next morning. He invited us to invite him to another lunch as well. That meant that our windfall was now two thousand bucks minus forty-five for four plates of huevos rancheros. Just like all the big movie deals for Superman, I'm sure. Abuelita had a quiet night, but a strange morning.

She picked through the Silex stories, occasionally recalling a turn of phrase she liked—the shimmering phantasm looked at me, her eyes filled not with tears but the most minute of fireflies; they flew from her cheeks and streaked through the inky blackness that enveloped the old farmhouse—or banging her little fist against the table.

"That rat bastard!" she cried out more than once. "I'd slap him square in the mouth if he were here right now."

Elders with dementia often perseverate on something, but abuelita's usual concerns—"Where's little Rosa, Daniela?"; cooking dinner for Santo, who would be home any minute; how we had to sell the house and move to Florida so "the police" wouldn't find her and put her in a home—were gone. It was almost a relief.

Perhaps I should have left her home, but it was Sunday and the homecare nurse wouldn't be available to watch her until after church services. We only had to explain where we were going—Melrose Kitchen, for food—and why—to meet a man who had some money for us—three times. Only once did she say, "But Santo is coming soon. I have to cook for him."

My poor grandfather, Santo. He had suffered through abuelita's decaying mental state for years. He prepared meals and thanked his wife for cooking for him. He repeated "Daniela is in heaven, she died in an accident" without even a blink to hold back tears. He never raised his voice to his wife, never. His only complaint, ever, was that the inflexible church wouldn't sanction marriage to a divorcée back in the old days, and so they had had to go to the courthouse, like he was applying for a fishing license.

What would Santo have done had he known that he wasn't ever married after all, that on some level—a level of spirit that he always believed in—his wife's soul was still tied to that dead drunk named Flint?

The pulp collector had decided to dress much like a giant grape. He was in a big purple sweat suit, and he had already ordered and was halfway through his omelet when we arrived. Jeremy strode ahead to shake his hand and arrange the seats around the table as I

led my stooped, shuffling abuelita across the length of the restaurant because the pulp collector decided that he needed to sit in the back. I'll give him credit, though, for standing up when my grandmother approached, cleaning his hands with a napkin, and gently shaking her hand. He repeated his name—Edgar—three times for her before we managed to get her into her seat, and each time he spoke as if it were the first. It was the first time he introduced himself to us instead of just launching into his offer. It was because of my grandmother. She he actually respected.

Then he took a conversational wrong turn. "Mrs. Hernandez, I have to know. What was Marcus Goulart like? When he was working, I mean. He named his own fictional creation after himself, so I imagine he was quite the character. An adventurer?" My grandmother didn't answer; she shifted her gaze to a spot off to the side.

"He really was one of the most underrated talents in the occult detective subgenre," Edgar said. "He was a master of generating mood and atmosphere, and he kept Silex reasonable. Too many occult detectives end up becoming too powerful—there's never a concern that he might be brought low by the forces he confronts. Silex, on the other hand, was always right on the edge of defeat."

"Really," Jeremy said. "All the stories I read—and I haven't had a chance to read them all—seem pretty similar. He gets a call from some ally, shows up at a haunted location, encounters a ghost, then shines a light on it."

Edgar turned hard. "And when I used to read *The New Yorker,* every fiction selection there was about a Connecticut businessman or New York college professor drinking cocktails and contemplating an affair. And by a different author each time. Not only were the stories formulaic, an entire generation of writers shared identical thematic preoccupations."

"*The New Yorker's* not like that now—" Jeremy started. I would have kicked him under the table if my grandmother wasn't in the way. As it was, she cut off him.

"Goulart was a drunk," she said, finally. "He was always nipping

at his flask. By three p.m., he was swaying back and forth like he was on the deck of a rusty ol' boat. He was a charmer, but you couldn't depend on him. One time I wanted to do the laundry, so I sent him out to the corner store for some soap—All Soap, that was the brand. He was gone for more than an hour and came staggering up the steps, a big paper sack draped over each arm. Then put the bags down and they thunked. You know what was in those bags, Mister?"

"What?" Edgar said.

"Chicken noodle. Clam chowder. Tomato. Pea. Cream of broccoli. The little rat bastard bought 'all soups.'" She slapped a hand against the tabletop and laughed, a solid "Ha!"

I almost swallowed my tongue. I'd never heard that anecdote before.

"I'd hoped it was a working Shadow Lantern, but that is a great story!" Edgar laughed quite a bit.

"What's a Shadow Lantern?" she asked. "Where do I know that from?"

"Let's just talk business," I said. "I'm still not sure I understand. Abuelita, this man says that you own these stories."

"Why would I own them?" She looked at me very seriously.

"Because …"

What sort of person was Edgar, the pulp collector? Would he care if I lied? Probably not. He just wanted the stories. If he could live inside a pulp magazine, swinging a Shadow Lantern at the ghosts of a thousand dead Apache, or if he could caress the gray cheek of a lost little girl who had been waiting for a playmate for a century, he would. But maybe he was literal-minded, legalistic. To him, abuelita's signature might not be any good if she weren't competent. The Silver Alert was already a strike against her.

What kind of person was Jeremy? That I should have known by now. He was definitely a first-year law school student. Everything was a potential tort, or criminal charge, or giant pain in the ass. He carried a black pen with him everywhere to make his signature on

Starbucks receipts more legally meaningful. But I bet he wanted to keep sleeping with me. He wasn't going to squawk.

What kind of person was I? What would my ghost look like under the Shadow Lantern? Was I just marching my grandmother around toward the end of her life, and giving her another little psychopomp nudge to get it over with?

"Because … you typed them abuelita. And you gave Mister Flint—Goulart—ideas, right?"

"I did!" she said. "That rat bastard wanted a Brotherhood of the Spiral, but I looked right at him and told him that if I was going to type up his stories, it would have to be a Sisterhood of the Spiral. Mr. Goulart knew nothing about women, that was his problem." Word for word what she said the day before.

"The Sisterhood of the Spiral is a major component of the Silex Cycle," Edgar said.

"Heh, say that five times fast," Jeremy said, and Edgar smiled like he was going to, but I raised my hand. "Please, my grandmother is very tired. She can't stay out long."

"I just wanted to say that the Sisterhood of the Spiral is among the most intriguing elements of the Silex stories. It's a secret society of widows whose interpersonal connections blanket the world, all with some sort of supernatural insight. They're old women, crones, with little in the way of physical abilities, but they know all and see all, and intervene as they can thanks to their sons and nephews. Silex is the grandson of the Sister Supreme, and—"

"Let's just get the paperwork out, please," I said. "And the check, if possible."

"Do you have Paypal?" Edgar asked. "I have the app on my phone."

"A check," Jeremy said, like a lawyer.

"Of course," Edgar said. He had a folder in his bag, and pulled it out along with a pen, but Jeremy had his black-ink pen ready and handed it to abuelita.

“I don’t want to go to a senior-citizen home,” my abuelita said. “I have to be at the house when Santo comes back. He’s going to want dinner. We need to stop at the store and get some soup. Chicken noodle. Clam chowder …”

I took the pen and contract both. It looked pretty straightforward. I guess Edgar wrote it up himself, rather than spending the money on an attorney. There was some nutty language: “… including, without limitation, copyrights, publication rights, distribution rights, reproduction rights, rights to create derivative works, the rights to publish and publicly display the works everywhere in the Universe by any and all means now known or hereinafter invented, and all future created rights,” and I read that aloud.

“That’s pretty standard,” Jeremy said.

“Everywhere in the universe?” I said. Abuelita shot me an upset look, the meaning of which I didn’t really understand.

“Standard,” Jeremy and Edgar agreed.

“All future created rights?”

“Like if a new medium emerges,” Jeremy said. “Virtual reality, maybe.”

“One day we may be able to inject stories. Encode narratives in our RNA,” Edgar said. “If there’s one thing pulp fiction taught me, it’s that the possibilities are limitless. We could, in the future, inject stories, even entire life memories, into our own bodies. We’d never forget anything; we could gift our own memories to our descendants …” he trailed off, sucking his teeth.

“Is it worth more than two thousand dollars for you, then?” I said.

Edgar shrugged. “Not … much more. The possibilities are limitless, but let’s face it, nobody remembers Tom Silex, Spirit-Smasher. I have a lot of work to do just to get him back into the public mind by publishing the old stories again. Oh, I brought some cover art, if you wanted to see.”

He pulled another folder from his bag and opened it up. The cover art, spread over one very large paper page was … not quite so

good as the pulp magazine stuff. It wasn't even painted art. It was bad Photoshop. There was a man who looked pretty much like a photo of a younger Edgar, struggling to hoist up what looked like the result of forced breeding between a megaphone and an old beer keg. He stood in profile in a sort of null-space. Much of the rest of the cover was taken up by a photo of a spiral galaxy, with the faces of old women just plopped on top of the galactic arms. They were all white women.

"That's mine," my abuelita said.

"I'll be sure you to send you a copy, as a courtesy, when the book is printed."

"A courtesy," Jeremy said.

"The contract doesn't give my any obligations, but I'm pleased to send a copy of the book. Obviously, I may end up relicensing or reselling the property to a larger media company—movies, video games, VR, like you said. I can't be tied to providing sample copies of Silex-branded properties to Mrs. Hernandez here."

"I did that," my abuelita said, pointing to the Sisterhood of the Spiral. "The rat bastard, he wanted a Brotherhood of the Spiral. That doesn't even sound good. I said, 'it has to be Sisterhood." Her finger drifted over to the Shadow Lantern. "That was my idea too. But it's supposed to be smaller, so you can hold it in one hand, like the Greek philosopher who looked for an honest man." She turned to me. "What was his name, Daniela? You were such a good student."

"I'm Rosa," I said, quietly. "Daniela was my mother," I explained to Edgar.

"She's getting confused," Edgar said. "We'd better have her sign." He glanced over at Jeremy, who nodded like it was his decision without even looking at me.

"No," I said. "No, I don't think so." I was surprised to hear it. "Abuelita, I want this. I want these Silex stories for me."

Edgar flipped the folder shut. "Why? You know nothing about him? You didn't even know the character existed until a week ago. You think you're going to sell it to Guillermo del Toro or something

like that?" Edgar rolled his r's ostentatiously, incorrectly even.

"Abuelita, let's go," I said. She hesitated, so I said, "Abuelo Santo is coming home and he'll want dinner." She got herself up out of the chair, a pneumatic piston. I left Jeremy to make apologetic white-boy noises at Edgar. He didn't have much to say on the trip home, which was fine. Abuelita told us the all-soups story again, only this time starring poor mostly deaf Santo instead of the rat bastard, so I told her she already had plenty of soup cans in the cupboard.

That night, I turned on my computer, clicked on the big blue W icon to bring up MS Word and thought myself some thoughts. My grandmother was dying; I was born to be a psychopomp, just for her. If I had a Shadow Lantern, and walked around my life in ever broadening spirals with it, whom would I encounter, and what would I be able to do about them?

So What Do You Think About Concrete?

Reflections on Fargo's most fearless talker

Jim Cory

On the eve of her 90th birthday, my aunt Dorothy invited several dozen people to a celebratory dinner at the Holiday Inn in Fargo, North Dakota. While she was picking at a plate of fried walleye and sipping iced tea, someone much younger asked her what it was like to be that old. Dorothy, who greatly enjoyed answering questions, looked as if she'd caught a sudden whiff of insecticide. Her eyes narrowed and dropped to the placemat. Her mouth worked back and forth. The placemat advertised, in alphabetical order, 28 varieties of pie, most of them fruit. Dorothy studied the pie drawings for a moment and looked up.

"Every day I'm more convinced I shouldn't be here," she said.

And then went silent.

The silence was unnerving, since my aunt liked to talk. Actually, she lived to. "Blue streak" only hints at the storm of opinions and quips, declarations and pronouncements that typically issued in the course of one of her conversations. In Fargo, where she spent most of her life, people knew her as an irrepressible talker. Seated shotgun in someone's car, over scrambled eggs in a booth at The Frying Pan, or ensconced on the plaid sofa in her living room, from whatever perch on which she'd landed, she fluttered from topic to topic, a Swallowtail disposing itself blissfully among summer's weeds. Encountering diffidence or a reluctance to engage, her favorite tactic was the blind-siding stem-winder of a question, originating so far out in left field it left the listener reeling for response:

"So, Jim, what do you think about Franklin Delano Roosevelt?"

Of talkers there are many types, and most are types to avoid. What separates the gabber from the blabbermouth, the windbag from the gasbag? Only volume, duration. Everyone knows that anyone unlucky enough to fall within their purview is simply a receptacle for the endless quantities of air they generate. Whether stolid

or distracted, you, the listener, exist as mere—preferably mute—foil. Their aim is not to exchange views, but to activate the vocal chords. For this purpose, an audience of one is not only better than no audience, it's the best possible audience. They want a passive but responsive listener. They would talk to a wall if a wall had ears.

Who hasn't, at some point, been trapped in a car, bus, bar booth or elevator with the drunk who won't shut up, the embittered complainer, the monomaniac whose subject, and only subject, is, for instance, the comparative strengths and weaknesses of rival supermarket chains?

But a drunk has nothing on the sober monologist. These are infinitely more tedious. You can't simply push them in a cab and bellow Good Night. They're level-headed creatures, cool to the glance, imbued like assassins with a sense of purpose, which is, of course, the determination to impress on any and all subjects. They seize control of a conversation using time-tested methods for foiling interruption. Male, mostly, if that needs saying. I recall one such silver-headed savant at a late afternoon "tea" whose discourse on European history had gone on for well over an hour when it became clear that he had no intention of ending it. As polite interest gave way to exasperation, then torture, there was a moment—

but only a moment—of total awe. How, some voice in my head asked the rest of the choir that resides there, could any human being actually be this self-absorbed? At which point I gathered my coat while the rest of the party exchanged glances and our host squirmed.

And then there are those with a cause. Loquacity being a matter not of accident but intention, their methods tend to be more polished, making escape more difficult. A man I knew, for instance, had spent most of his adult life collecting sheet music. In middle age, his apartment was a labyrinth of paths laid out between banks of filing cabinets. One path led to his bed, another to his desk, a third to the kitchen, and so forth. His knowledge was vast, internationally recognized, and he felt compelled to share it, whether on sidewalks, in

drugstores or in the middle of social occasions. Parties were a favorite. He would back the unwitting into corners, where there was little choice but to, at some point, bolt. Singles were the preferred prey.

Motormouths turn up often enough that your chances of encountering one at a dinner party are statistically significant. One in eight? (Make it one in five in Philadelphia.) It's always wise to have an exit strategy.

My aunt, to be clear, was neither a blusterer nor a blowhard. She had little in the way of ego and no actual expertise in anything. She aimed to fill time and space with talk that was always essentially mutual and to that end had long since established herself as a raconteur of trivia, the mistress of the mundane. Her sources consisted of women's magazines (*Redbook,* et al.), television, gossip and *The Fargo Forum,* North Dakota's largest paper, located around the corner from her apartment.

"So…" or "Oh, say!" is how she'd get her schtick rolling. There might follow some utterly quotidian visual detail (thimble-shaped flowers of purple hue, appearing mysteriously in a window box), then a fact or anecdote of disarming pointlessness, followed by three or four non-sequiturs. Like a good poet, she could coax an idea from topics or details most wouldn't give a thought to.

"So, Jim, what do you think about concrete?"

Once underway, she improvised, resorting to every manner and means in the effort to sustain the energy level. She worked her way outward rather than down—preferring broad to deep—reaching always for connection. She had a genius for linking the most seemingly disparate topics—bone spurs and bunions, for instance, with the effectiveness of sandbags in municipal flood control efforts—without anyone ever noticing a seam. She could talk all afternoon and into evening, and did.

It helped, of course, that, being curious by nature, everything seemed to surprise her, most often to pleasant effect. She once dispatched me to pick up a pair of pumps from a shoe repair shop at

a strip mall, which—like an archeologist removing treasure from a tomb—she extracted from their polish-spattered bag as if they were gem-crusted items of antiquity.

"I don't see how they do it," she said, sincerely floored. She shook her head, perusing a row of stitches. "I just don't!"

At age 65, the same year my grandmother died, Dorothy retired from the Burlington Northern Railroad. Its corporate offices were blocks from the apartment they shared. For 40 years she took dictation, typed reports, answered phones. There weren't many perks, but there was one. Travel. Employees could ride coach, for free, anywhere the rails went. That got grandfathered in when Amtrak took over the passenger lines. My aunt was one of those people you get to know if you ride long-distance trains. Their mode of travel is more than mere conveyance. They're romantics. They have dreams left in them.

Dorothy boarded trains to visit Texas and the Twin Cities. She rode to New Orleans and to New England. She went west to Montana, on the Empire Builder, and farther west still, to Seattle. (A stamp with a mid-nineteenth-century locomotive towing a far smaller coal car seals the flap of an envelope, postmarked 3 Oct 1985, enclosing one of her inimitable letters.) She became adept at getting a good night's rest in coach, a knack for which experience and fatigue are the only teachers.

Dorothy traveled light. She brought along packaged snacks and an extra pillow. Her luggage consisted of two suitcases in sky blue vinyl, the smaller for essentials, its parent for all else. She made a point of getting up regularly to stroll to the observation car, the bar car, or onto the station platform if the train was stopped more than 10 minutes, somewhere. Meanwhile, of course, and forever, she talked.

In the days before Androids, laptops, Nooks, Kindles, and phones smarter than their owners, there were three ways to pass time on a long train trip: read, talk or take in the scenery. But restlessness

can make the greatest scenery seem as interesting as someone else's X-rays, and turn a great book into a box of stale cigars.

So along comes this stranger whose conversation must've seemed like a great relief. All barriers were down. Dorothy talked to everyone. She was unfailingly pleasant and polite, inquisitive but not intrusive, and she could work up an interest in just about any topic or anybody's story. By the time she got off the train, she'd inevitably added a few names to her address book. All got Christmas cards. Some became correspondents. A few invited her to visit. She was not a difficult guest.

One year, on the day before her birthday, I dropped by her apartment for a few minutes after settling into my hotel. On her dining room table was a shoebox.

"Birthday cards?"

Arranged end-to-end.

"Oh, yah."

"You haven't opened any?"

"Well, it's not my birthday yet!"

Dorothy never married. **That's how someone—another aunt—** once explained her to me. Implying that all that chatter concealed an emotionally threadbare existence, a stunted life.

"Oh, that Dorothy," a Fargo cousin said, somewhat later, "she just goes on and on."

This seemed to be, I gathered from his tone, my father's view. It was the fall of 1962, and Dorothy, accompanied by my grandmother, was visiting for the first time. The two of them traveled via train from Fargo to New York, a journey of several days, grueling by coach.

My siblings and I knew Aunt Dorothy as the author of mysterious notes inside birthday cards that also contained checks for five dollars. A fortune in the Sixties.

Birthday Luff, DoDo.

Who?

We demanded to know what our benefactress was like, imagining Garbo-esque sunglasses, a leather coat, lapels of lustrous mink.

"Dorothy has her ways," my mother, her youngest sister, said.

My father, a high-powered sales executive, spread the twin wings of the evening paper before him and remained silent. He regarded Dorothy as frivolous, insubstantial.

"What do you mean, 'her ways?' my sister asked.

"Oh, you'll like her."

Dorothy was, in that year, 53, her brown hair flecked with gray en route to a pearl-like whiteness. She wore pink lipstick, pendant earrings, glasses remarkably like those worn by the nuns in our school and a slender wristwatch set in a glittering silver ribbon. She seemed nearly as tall as my father, perhaps taller. She asked endless questions.

"What grade are you in?"

"Are you good at math?"

"How's the piano going?"

She'd frown and nod, listening.

It being October in Connecticut, what my aunt wanted, more than anything, was to see "the color." After a day or two of catching up, my mother scheduled an afternoon road trip from Stamford to New Haven and back. Six of us scrambled into the station wagon, my mother at the wheel, Dorothy riding shotgun, the Merritt Parkway weeping orange.

"Gorgeous," my aunt said, as we sped past a copse of maples. "Gorgeous," she repeated, as the yellow Ford sailed by melancholy ponds, granite outcroppings.

"Gorgeous," she said, under an Art Deco bridge.

"Gorgeous," my sister repeated, as we sped past a gas station/rest stop.

In the rear view mirror, my mother's eyes registered alarm.

"Gorgeous," I said, as the station wagon whizzed past a barnyard where an old horse chomped on hay.

"Gorgeous," echoed my little brother, in the back seat.

"Alright, God damn it, that's enough," my mother said.

Thereafter, the pale blue birthday checks, loyally dispatched, served as regular reminders of Dorothy's existence. These and long distance calls. A few months would pass and there we were, gathered at the kitchen table, trying to divine, from my mother's end of the conversation, which of our mysterious relations was under discussion. Death, drunkenness and disasters popped up regularly. Who could they be talking about? Lives moving forward or, for whatever reasons, plunged into free fall.

One by one—there were eight of us—we were put on the phone and ("Say, is this Jim?") Dorothy's questions began. How did she remember which of us she was speaking to when my mother could barely manage it? She asked about friends, pets, hobbies, and vacations. ("So, did you like Fort Ticonderoga? I'll just bet!") Was Judy continuing to volunteer at the Stamford Museum and Nature Center? (Her growing responsibilities there included feeding the eagles.) Did Debby still babysit?

"You must be a Yankees fan?" she said, on one occasion, when my turn came. What could I say? Sports, all sports, struck me as only slightly less tedious than cleaning the garage.

"You know Roger Maris?"

I'd heard the name and grunted, neither agreeing nor denying.

"He's from Fargo!"

Sensing no real interest, she switched tacks and asked what I was reading. *Martin Chuzzlewit,* I informed her.

"Charles Dickens?"

"Umhmmm."

From the other end of the line came a long, low whistle.

"Oh, land'a living," she said.

Huh?

The 1960s seemed like a decade on Fast Forward, at least when it came to style. In a few years, boy's hair went from crew cuts sculpted in place with wax to Louis Quatorze tresses; the girls,

meanwhile, morphing from bouffants and beehives to flowing locks of Rapunzel-like length, secured by beaded headbands.

Whether and in what form any of this reached Fargo, I have no idea. But when Dorothy visited again, a few years later, things had changed and the changes were evidently a bit unsettling. The last time she'd seen us we wore blue and white Catholic school uniforms (polyester knit tie, fat throbbing knot). Suddenly—this is 1969 now—here are these teenage hippies, responding with cannabis titters to her endless reminiscences and remarks.

At one point she directed a glance at my brother's blond pony-tail, then to the yellow-and-black striped bellbottoms that I rarely removed, and finally at my mane of knotty curls.

"Say," she said, with a wink, "that's quite a haircut."

A few minutes later my sister walked in. Granny glasses, knee-length moccasins, buckskin jacket rich with fringe. Dorothy's gray eyes narrowed.

"Who're you," she said, "Annie Oakley?"

It's October, 1985. I'm at Dorothy's kitchen table, in Fargo, for the first time. My mother, discovering that work was about to take me to the Twin Cities, points out, not subtly, that my visit coincides with Dorothy's birthday. Surely a visit would be in order?

Fargo's somewhere I had never imagined setting foot. And—fast perusal of the atlas—it's not a quick ride. But I liked driving then. If you don't own a car, which I didn't, it can be like a toy box that gets you places. I call the night before I fly.

"Judas Priest!"

She immediately offers her foldout couch. I demur, pleading that I'll need space to work, though the issue, of course, is privacy. It can be weird enough staying with friends, but your aunt?

She suggests a hotel downtown, informing me that it's "right across the street!"

At 18 stories, the Radisson is twelve stories higher than any other building in Fargo, and Fargo is, or was then, not so much a city

as a scaled-up version of all the small towns between Minneapolis and Spokane.

I'm not in my room a minute when the phone rings.

"Oh, joy! So you got in safe?"

Safe?

In Fargo, you were far more likely to be mauled by a disgruntled tree or stung to death by scorpions than mugged, let alone murdered. In Fargo, jaywalking drew indignant stares and litterers were probably lynched. This was a place where parking was abundant and free, graffiti nowhere in evidence, and, at least in the 1980s, where the lawn of about every third house sported a flagpole from which the indigo blue-fimbriated-on-white cross, set on a field of red—Norway!—fluttered and snapped.

Her building, a four-story brick structure that looked to have been built in the Twenties, sits exactly opposite the hotel. It's clean but spare, inside and out. I step in the brown-paneled foyer with its bank of recessed aluminum mailboxes.

Number 41 reads: "Dorothy Brantseg."

Bzzzzzzzz.

Five steps down. Fumbling at the spy-hole in the door, which could pass for a U-boat periscope.

"Well, I'll be the son of a sea captain!"

Her apartment is dim, small, carpeted, subterranean and smells of air freshener, brand undetermined. In the dining room/living room windows, above the sofa, bare and trousered legs swing past. The bedroom itself is a little bit bigger than just big enough, but not by much, for a bed and chest of drawers.

"Let me take your coat."

Closets strain to contain this infinity of coats, scarves, boots, shoes and hats.

She'd lived there long enough—at least 60 years—to transform the place into her own well-tended museum, a cult of the personality in the form of objects. There, for instance, among the sofa, chairs, table and TV sits an organ, its presence in this tiny place a miracle of

engineering. A Viking ship in pewter makes its way across the lid. *Uff da,* reads a knitted wall hanging. "Sensory overload"—one definition of this amorphous and appropriated Scandinavian expression—indeed.

Near the top of the late 1960s paneling on the wall, a man in a chest-length beard of rolling curls and a woman with her hair in a bun, severe as any Shaker eldress, gaze across the room. Either they're watching you or you simply can't avoid looking at them. I try to imagine what those late nineteenth-century photographic portraits must've cost this pair of immigrant farmers. Plenty.

Pictures set in small frames arrayed on dust-less end tables. An aunt or two I recognize, the rest strangers. More photos on the wall, teens with the bored, upturned lip endemic to yearbooks. The menagerie's oddest item is a homemade collage where Dorothy has inexpertly pasted scissored heads, all sizes, all angles. They float in the frame. *Oh Christ*. My own pinched visage from 20 years previous features Tiny Tim tresses, adolescent snarl.

"Um, who are…these people?"

"That's your cousin Bob. You've never met him? A pistol! Oh, and over there, your cousin Barb, and…"

Dorothy gave a sudden start and glanced at her watch.

"Oh," she says. "Land'a living! We're meeting your Uncle Arne for lunch."

There were two boys among my grandmother's five children. The older—Donald, known as Red—was a taciturn family man and resolute teetotaler. Arne, second to last and nearer my mother's age, had always, I gathered, been a hell-raiser, and was sometimes referred to as the black sheep, though the more I came to know him, the more he seemed like an ornery buffalo stuck in a pen in some small town zoo.

They had a saying in that family: *Red never touched a drop, and Arne never dropped a drink.*

Arne liked to fish, and imbibe. Not necessarily in that order. He also liked to do both at the same time, which brought on difficulties

with the authorities. You can't always fish when you're drinking but you can always drink when you're fishing, if you remember to bring the whiskey, which Arne did. Until the state took away first his drivers' license, then his truck. Someone in that family told me that Arne was the oldest person in the history of North Dakota to get a DUI, but even if not apocryphal I'm guessing that the record's been bested at this point.

Hard drinking bubbled up like swamp gas in that gene pool. In the 1930s, Olander Brantseg, Dorothy's father, painting contractor and binger of legend, would arrive at their house in Sisseton, South Dakota, so sozzled and out of control that my grandmother and Donald had no choice but to subdue him, then lock him, raging, into the coal cellar, where he'd pound and scream till he passed out. If that hadn't shocked Red into swearing off, then the cause of his father's death certainly would have. One cold night, in December of 1934, my grandfather, age 49, left a bar. He became overwhelmed with fatigue and decided to take a nap in a snow bank, which is where they found his body.

I heard this story from my mother, who told it once and only once. I sought more details from Dorothy, but she wouldn't get near it. Nor would she talk about the family's various suicides. Her only comments had to do with the great crisis that ensued in the wake of their father's death.

"Mom worked like a Trojan after Dad died."

Pause.

"We all went to work."

Pause.

"Oh, say…"

And off she went.

The banner on the wall, in blue, reads: *Willkommen!* Arne sits in a red vinyl booth at the end of the row. We've just walked into the Sons of Norway, Lodge 25, Kringen Klub, a fraternal organization downtown.

Arne has the broad family face, masculine version. Ski slope nose, eyes quick to narrow. A shock of gray hair, straight and solidified in gel, sweeps straight back, like a sheet, from the hairline.

Dorothy orders a chicken salad sandwich and a glass of iced tea. She's quiet. When the food comes, she nibbles. She's leaving the field to Arne but Arne looks from one of us to the other. Thunderstorms gather behind that face. I think: Has he already had a few? His idea of conversation is to ask questions ("So how's your Mom?") the answers to which he is manifestly indifferent.

"How many cards ya got this year?" he says to my aunt.

"Oh, I don't know, Arne."

Arne stares at his Coke as if it were poisoned.

"Last year I sent out 200 Christmas cards," he says. He pauses. "Signed every last one of 'em."

"Two hundred?"

She says this in a tone that is supposed to register amaze.

Arne nods and looks away.

"How many ja get back?"

"Not a goddamn one."

My aunt waves to this table and to that booth over there. In fifteen minutes the place has filled. The Sons of Norway is the hot spot for a low-cost lunch downtown. Chicken and dumplings is today's special. At one point, I turn to my aunt. A dab of mayonnaise has somehow landed on her nose. It resembles a rhinoceros horn, but is, of course, tiny.

Arne is talking about something. She leans forward, listening intently, and while she nods the horn bobs.

Arne squints.

"Ya got somethin' on yer nose, Dot," he snaps.

A few years later, when half his leg's removed for diabetes, she goes to visit him in the veteran's hospital.

"You know," she tells me, "I don't think I ever really knew my brother."

"Do you think she's ever been laid?

My sister—"Annie Oakley"—again. She also wonders if Dorothy is, or has been, "a lez."

It sounds catty and lacking in all empathy (besides which, what's the point?) but my sister is actually fonder of Dorothy than anyone. They have a mysterious bond, a unity. Neither had married. They are (her word) "spinnies."

She's the one who came up with the idea of sending Sonias—peach-colored roses—to Dorothy on her birthday. The birthday is a major affair. If North Dakota were an oblast (province) in Russia, they'd be towing missiles through downtown Fargo for her. If North Dakota were in Spain somewhere, people would be jumping across the hoods of parked cars to escape bulls.

But my sister's question, once raised, sort of sits there. Watching Dorothy toy distractedly with the sterling silver angel pinned to her jacket lapel (she believes angels are everywhere, a thought I later find articulated in Swedenborg's *Heaven and Hell*), or listening to her elaborate on the uses of shredded coconut in Jello recipes, it seems impossible that my aunt had ever touched a human being *down there,* let alone navigated the Sapphic channels. I glance around her apartment. Considering that she lived here all these years with my grandmother, where would she or they or, um, whoever…have done it?

Did she, at some point, have a wild side?

She offers few clues. Only this: Once, driving past the Fargo Theater, an art deco movie palace on Broadway, built in 1926, Dorothy mentions a date. The date was here, at this marvelously restored theater, where, as the movie begins, an organ lodged beneath the stage emerges dramatically between the twin halves of a trap door, organist flailing at the keys. Think Lon Chaney.

Lunt and Fontaine were on the marquee the night in 1948 that a certain "Jewish salesman" took my aunt there.

"Oh, was Dorothy ever excited about that. You bet she was!"

I gather from her description that the opportunity to see Lunt and Fontaine (projecting "an animal vitality," according to their biographer, "a spirit of gaiety and intense pleasure…") mattered more than the gentleman, he what they used to call a "drummer." Who can say? What he sold, where he came from, whether or not there was dinner, sex, a sequel, about any of this Dorothy's not forthcoming. In those days salesmen traveled from town to town by train. Did they meet at the rail station? Would they have repaired to his room at the Powers Hotel, up the street? (Picture, only a few years previous, straw-haired songbird Norma Egstrom—Miss Peggy Lee—wowing them, night after night, in the coffee shop.)

Dorothy, animated but vague, dances around the implications of all this. I don't press the point. There're some people you simply can't imagine in lusty mid-romp, let alone frisking their way through an orgy, without the entire edifice of who they are and what they mean crumbling into rubble and rebar. It'd be like walking into the bank and seeing the nun who taught you fourth grade English and math pointing a sawed-off shotgun at a bank teller. Who knew?

Fargo went from being somewhere I knew by hearsay to a place where I not only didn't have to ask for directions but could reliably give them. At some point on the first or second day of October, I'd fly into the Twin Cities airport, rent a car and drive. By Interstate 94, the trip takes about four and a half hours, five with coffee stops. Count on seven if you take the two-lane roads. I always did.

There are three ways to go. The one with the most distance between towns is Route 10, heading north just above St. Cloud, and then, at Detroit Lakes, bearing west in an "as the crow flies" line straight for Fargo. Or, you could drive west on 212, through Hector, Olivia and Renville to Granite Falls, then north on Route 7, straddling the Minnesota River, to 75. I took that route once, and when I stopped to photograph a building of some architectural significance (a 1920 bank in Hector by Prairie School design team Purcell and Elmslie), I found myself being questioned by a local man, who, finally

ascertaining my purpose, invited me to his house for dinner (which they call supper) where, after chicken, salad and roast potatoes, he and his wife retrieved the file they kept on the building's history, including blueprints, and spread it out on the living room floor. And then there's Route 12, to Willmar ("Wilmer"), where you swing north on 9 through Benson. A favorite. (Some relative of a relative had had a business there once, and on that basis Dorothy advised that I might want to "take a tur" of it.)

The towns had the same look, since they were all built around the same time of similar materials, and the same sort of feel, since they were all more or less consecrated to similar purpose, yet were imbued with the solid sense of their difference, one from the next. (High school football mascots expertly painted on water towers.) The towns in Minnesota and the Dakotas were built around the railroads, but now passenger travel by rail had dimmed to insignificance: a single daily route, running from Chicago to Seattle. The rail stations are still there, usually, and they are freight depots, if still in use, gleaming silos towering beside them, though the greater portion of farm products go to market by truck.

The larger towns had their IGA supermarkets and their Hardware Hank stores, their Carnegie libraries and their train stations awkwardly converted to other, more pedestrian, use. You'll see baseball fields in a place of any size, usually on a town's edge, and invariably featuring a clean, well-maintained and unlocked restroom, a mercy for travelers and something you'd never see in the East.

The drive became its own kind of destination, a run-up to the visit, a mental briefing for it, and the trip back—less hurried, pausing from time to time to eat in some small town cafe, or just get out and walk the streets—an opportunity to reflect. These were towns that the young left as soon as they could. "If you watched your Dad milking cows twice a day, every day, his whole life, you'd leave too," a man once explained, when I asked why he had moved to Minneapolis.

So the towns were full of old people, or people of high school age or younger. The young went to college and seldom returned. The

movie theaters were long closed, the Mom and Pop stores hung on, sometimes, but the opening of a nearby Wal-Mart usually signaled their doom. A year later you might drive through and see the two or three blocks of the shopping district pocked with empty storefronts, the stores that remained—curio shops, furniture stores, photographers—more or less relics of another age, time machines whose owners had long since paid for their inventory, never imagining they would stock on their shelves products by manufacturers already out of business. If they went out, the only type of retailer available to take their place was the sort of bottom-feeder that exists because there are little to no start-up costs. A thrift shop, let's say, or a tanning salon.

"You was in Fergus?" my uncle Red said, a little startled, when I told him where I'd stopped for lunch. He seemed to be remembering something about the name. "These small towns're dyin' on the vine," he said.

In the spring of her 87th year, aboard Amtrak's Texas Eagle somewhere between Chicago and St. Louis, Dorothy's back went out. That's how she explained it to my mother. She couldn't walk, let alone sleep, and arrived in Fort Worth, paler than flour. It took an extra month, there, to recuperate. That ended her railroading days.

It was also around that time that people she knew began to die. The first to go was the family's middle sister, Arloene. Cancer. Red, whose hands by this time shook with Parkinson's, followed. Then, months after Dorothy's 90th birthday—which in-flight vertigo prevented her from attending—my mother, 14 years Dorothy's junior, left this world. In November a shoulder bone broke when she went to lift a typewriter. Osteoporosis. Six weeks later she was dead, of everything.

"Just wait," said cousin Bob at the funeral, where, for the first time, I actually met him. "Arne'll be the last one left."

Among the unopened letters strewn across the coffee table beside the sofa that was my mother's final redoubt were two from

Dorothy and three more bearing the return address of a home for veterans in Lisbon, where Arne had landed, stricken with diabetes. The doctors were debating whether or not to amputate all or some of his left leg.

My mother had been dead less than a month when I got a phone call from North Dakota with an unfamiliar caller ID.

"They've got me at Elim," Dorothy said.

Elim, it turned out, was a nursing home on the city's south side.

"Why are you there?"

She'd been walking across the living room, my aunt explained, when her hip simply disintegrated. She crawled to the phone and dialed 911. After the hospital stapled her back together, she was dispatched to Elim for rehab.

"How are they treating you?"

"I've seen better."

She didn't know when she'd be out, but it had to be soon. Medicare coverage expired in days.

Could she walk?

"Oh, I'm trying."

Fargo in late March is hard and pale, a ghost town with traffic. Nothing moves except vehicles. Emptiness amplifies all sound. A closing car door sounds like cymbals crashing. Water trickling from a downspout sounds like a cistern boiling with melted snow.

I checked into the Scandia Hotel, a modest downtown establishment with three attractions: it's cheap, it's close and the coffee's free.

"Bob stayed there the last time he was in town," Dorothy said, on the phone. She'd be packed and ready to go at one the next day.

I pull up 20 minutes early. From a distance the place looks like an elementary school, divided into single-story wings. Once past the double doors, I hear chirping, cheeping.

The receptionist, staring into a computer screen, looks up. So does the mixed breed lab asleep beside the desk.

“Dorothy Brantseg?”

“Room 203.”

An Irish setter totters up, sniffs, lifts its head to my hand. Three or four parakeets appear out of nowhere, whizz down the hall and land in a plastic ficus, where they screech and chirp some more before flying off.

In the common area, just past the desk, seven or eight bodies in wheelchairs sit parked in front of a wall-mounted TV set. On the set a young man who looks like a model argues with a young woman who also looks like a model.

“I know you’ve been seeing Dale,” says the male model.

“I thought you’re the one who was interested in Dale,” says the female model.

A parakeet lands on the shoulder of one of the bodies. Eyes bat, blink.

“Ack!”

An arm rises, swiping without aim. Other bodies, in other chairs, stir. Heads lift.

“Shhhhhh!” A chorus.

Squinting, mouth open, the one who’d motioned the bird away begins to speak, but changes his mind. A string dangling from lip to shirt makes a spreading spot where it pools in the fabric.

“Why didn’t you pick me up yesterday?” someone says. The voice sounds like it’s coming from immediately behind my head. I turn to find a woman in a hospital gown, inches from my face.

“I told you three o’clock, Edward, and you weren’t here!”

“Lillian, settle down,” the receptionist yells. Then, to me: “She thinks every man that walks in here is her son.” She rolls her eyes and re-directs her attention to the screen.

In 203, Dorothy sits parked in her own wheelchair, waiting.

“Oh, Judas Priest!”

Red felt hat with pheasant feathers, matching chiffon scarf, gloved hands resting in her lap. She looks like she’s dressed for a shopping spree in the underworld. Meanwhile, seated on the other

side of the room, a figure. The face, a rictus of chronic irritation, glares. We both look. Dorothy sighs.

"This," she says, in her most neutral tone, "is Dorothy."

"Good afternoon," I say, to Dorothy #2. No answer.

"So," I say, turning to my aunt "there are … *two* Dorothys?"

"Yes," Dorothy says, nodding, no longer looking at her namesake. "Yes," she says, "there are two of us."

A tug. The handle of her suitcase emits its cerulean squeak. A pair of hatboxes, a portmanteau packed with make-up, two bags of shoes and, lastly, a forlorn walker, folded and almost forgotten on the bed. Two trips and it's all in the trunk.

"I'll bet you're glad to be out of there."

"Oh, you got that right."

In the Holiday Inn dining room, a glass of sherry and a chicken salad sandwich dispel the grim mood. We linger till they close. She is quiet. I can see her mentally turning the situation over and over. How to fend for herself in that apartment? How to get up and then back down the five steps to the door? How to rearrange the space so it's something other than an obstacle course?

We spend the rest of the afternoon rigging the walker with pockets to stow her wallet, phone, keys and a flashlight in case the power goes out. We—she directs, I push/pull—move the furniture into more convenient, accessible locations.

The next morning she hands me a 4-page single-spaced shopping list. Across the top, in capitals: NO SUBSTITUTES.

There're names. *Seniors. The elderly. Advanced years.* Euphemisms. They don't begin to hint at what it's actually like to be 70, 75, let alone in your 80s. They're terms a marketing department would come up with. Amorphous. Generalized. Polite. To be old is to be sideswiped, daily and hourly, by an ever-accelerating present. It is to suddenly find yourself, on the one hand, stranded by history, and on the other hand an artifact without a history. You were you and now you're not. Everything's changed, and rarely in any good

way. The strange outweighs the familiar. At 83 or 93 getting up and moving the day forward—making breakfast (or simply eating it), combing your hair, getting dressed, anything—is every bit as weird as it was when you were three, except that it's not weird in the sense of wonderful, but weird in the sense of alien. You've become your own other. The discoveries you make are more apt to be painful than pleasant. That's even truer if your memory's intact—Dorothy's never faltered—while the body's unraveling, one limb, organ or digit at a time. When, for instance, I offer to set up a laptop and arrange an Internet connection, so she can send email, communicating without the post office, she doesn't argue or discuss, she just holds up, as an answer, her right hand. It's crabbed and stiff with arthritis. It looks like a piece of driftwood.

Still, she manages to move a pen with this claw. A letter arrives, a month or so later, in which she describes her routines. She "tries to get out every day," to the bank, the drugstore or The Frying Pan. Someone named Bess cleans every other week. From time to time a friend collects her clothes and brings them back, washed and folded.

Money is short, an unspoken concern—out of pocket prescription costs are more than her rent, the usual American racket—but when I return six months later, on her birthday—91—a miracle has occurred.

"Judas Priest! Will you get a load of that?" she says, whistling. She holds a slip of paper to the overhead light and squints at the signature. A nephew.

The check is for $5,000.

Such a completely unpredicted and highly favorable turn of events calls for celebration.

"We'll go for 'spagett,'" she says.

"Where?"

"The Frying Pan."

In minutes she's dressed and ready to go.

"Can you make it up those stairs?" I say, closing her door behind me.

I'm starting to see the world through her eyes, a series of impediments, inconveniences, and embarrassments.

"Oh, you better bet."

She's out the door, with her walker. She folds it with a practiced snap, grasps the rail, drags it five steps to the landing, claps it shut. A moment later she's out the door and leans on the car, waiting.

But once seated in her favorite booth, Dorothy hardly touches her food.

"You know," I say, "you're looking a little thin."

"Jim, that place"—Elim—"just took my appetite away."

A note from Dorothy, wanting to know if I'm coming for her 93rd birthday. She's reserved a private room at the Holiday Inn in Fargo. I have reason to defer—home repairs underway on a house I just bought—so I call to say that maybe we should plan a major event for her 95th.

"Oh no," she says. "Better come for this one."

There are two dozen people in the dining room. Dorothy talking voluminously. From a journal, Oct. 5, 2003:

Holiday Inn, Fargo, and D.'s night to shine. She held forth on many subjects, including some of her favorites—her career ("What did you do before you retired, Aunt Dorothy?" a great-niece asks. "I was a stenographer, dear." "Oh, what's that?" "It's a job that doesn't exist anymore."), her mother's piano lessons (gave her first recital at 75), etc. She is—or seems—indefatigable. Wearing dark green corduroy pantsuit & brown beret with patriotic pins attached. Thinner now. Squints as she talks, for emphasis. You get the sense from the way people address her that she is regarded as the village eccentric, a role she is aware of & clearly relishes…

When the dessert plates are cleared, Dorothy digs through her purse for the newly issued MasterCard in her wallet.

I drive her back to her apartment and tell her I'll be over the next day to take her for a ride. She wanted, she'd said, to drive to Detroit Lakes, have lunch at the Holiday Inn on the water there, and

see “the color.”

Driving east, into Minnesota, the trees grow in clumps and clusters or are planted in lines separating swaths of farmland, much of it, that day, freshly turned, to root out sugar beets. Corn harvesters spit bits of stalk, split and ribbony leaves across the fields. It drifts.

From the journal, Oct. 6, 2003:

Neilsen symphonies on the CD player en route to Detroit Lakes but Dorothy couldn’t actually sit back & listen, instead keeping up a steady stream of chatter.

Suddenly she’s not hungry.

“Let’s just look at the color,” she says.

We go on this way for 15 minutes. The wind kicks up. It’s gusting, blowing tricycles and loose lawn chairs across the road. A plastic bag, someone’s ghost, lifts, jerks, rises, whips across the sky and disappears. A half hour passes. She stares out the window, quiet.

“You remember that time we went out looking at the leaves, when you lived in Connecticut?”

“Umhmmm,” I said. I had hoped she’d forgotten that. But here she is, bringing it up, 40 years later.

“And you kept saying, ‘Gorgeous,’” she said.

“What? Me?”

“Yes, you. You thought everything was gorgeous.” She paused. “You were what, nine years old?”

She stares at the trees, the fields, the barns, a tractor, kids in a yard.

It’s the middle of the afternoon. We stop for gas. We stop for Cokes. Dorothy would like a chocolate-covered donut, so we stop at an IGA and buy a bag. She eats half of one.

At some point we hit something. Not an animal, but an object, though from the sound it seems like something large. A hubcap?

“Did you hear that?” Dorothy says. She draws a deep breath. “I thought we might break down.”

We’re circling the lake now and the lake’s not small. The farms are gone and the roads have no names. My aunt is looking at the

road, not the trees or the fields. The sky is as blue as I've ever seen it.

"Is this a good car?" she says suddenly.

"I think it's okay." I am hesitating, because I don't know and also because I hear fear in her voice.

"It won't break down will it?"

She pauses, considering.

"We came out here years ago," she says, "Mom and I. We were going to have dinner at the cottage of my boss. Mom drove Arne's car. On the way home, we got lost."

She stares out the window.

"Maybe we should be heading back," she says.

I left the next day. A week later I get a call from Bob. She has fallen, fractured her vertebrae in three places. She's back at Elim. He says she will not be returning to the apartment.

"What do you do all day?"

"Oh, I sleep a lot," she says, from the phone by her bed there.

I call after that but the phone rings and rings. Someone tells me she's had it disconnected. "She won't eat and she hardly ever wakes up," a cousin says. It's like a nap that lasts for months. They attribute it to medication.

The second floor of St. Mark's Lutheran, in Fargo, filled early. There was the problem of getting Arne and his wheelchair up a narrow flight of stairs. Five of us, nephews and cousins, discuss possible solutions. Someone suggests that we lift the chair and its occupant up the stairs. Arne glares into some unfocused distance. I wonder if he even hears the conversation. We crouch and grapple and start to lift but the stairs aren't wide enough.

"Arne, can you hop?" Bob says. Everyone laughs.

Arne doesn't laugh.

No particle of my memory contains the image of Dorothy in a coffin. Where did it go? I didn't pay a lot of attention to the body. A glance, and it seemed exactly like what it was—a cadaver in a dress—and who can be interested in that? Afterwards, we drive from Fargo

to Sisseton. Arne in a van—for the wheelchair—all others in the caravan that follows. A long drive—an hour and a half—or at least it seems endless. It's May, it's warm, it's sunny and a breeze is blowing. Every now and then the hearse disappears then reappears and when it does all the cars and the van get in line behind it again. At one point the thought: It's a good thing we're not on our way to California, because if we were, all this would be extremely complicated.

The grave, freshly dug, clods piled all around, waits. Right next to it, another plot, marked out.

"Oh, Arne, look at that," says a cousin, pointing toward the hole. "That's where we're going to put you."

With no trace of irony, she pushes Arne and his chair toward the grave so he can get a better view of his future. Arne's not looking. He isn't talking. His face says there is no possible interest left in anything anyone else can do or say.

"Not a goddamned one."

Most of us are unimportant, except to ourselves and a handful of others, if that. Absent wealth or fame—the twin engines of social success—we're anonymous, faceless outside our own circle, however large or small. We disappear before death and stop living well before life is over. At some point we find ourselves receding into the background of everything that came before, until we're indistinguishable from it and no closer to understanding anything, really, since to understand something you have to understand nothing and in a culture that exists to endlessly consume goods and services, there is always a reason for it—nothing—not to be there, never to be understood.

It's our insignificance we can't accept, the fact that our love leaves no record, our sorrows no remorse, our rage no heat. "It's hard to make a dent," a famous artist once told me, explaining the limited impact he had had on the post-war Pop Art scene, a tantalizing minor fame that owed to the accident of a single image, rendered first in paint, then metal. This was what people talked about when you mentioned his name, so that his fame, such as it was, had trans-

formed him into something like one of those nineteenth-century actors who take the stage as the same character in the same play so often—Eugene O'Neill's father in *The Count of Monte Cristo*— that audiences become incapable of seeing them as anyone else. Career over.

Was it fame Dorothy was seeking when, several decades before, she had written a short story and mailed it to the magazine *Redbook?* She was shocked, she related, when the manuscript came back accompanied by "a personal letter" ("Can you beat that?") outlining ways in which her work could be brought up to a publishable level and encouraging her to write and submit more stories. She never did. She lived in the proverbial moment and the moment was speech, sound, syllables, a glance. Her gift was to convert experience into her own kind of verbal music, into the riffs—a word I'm sure she never knew, and one that likely would've mystified her—from which she made conversation.

Maybe she talked to feel good, a low-grade enzymatic rush that just kept pumping as her vocal chords worked, or maybe it was because the world made her nervous, or afraid. With talkers there's often nerves in it. Maybe she was obeying some compulsion to articulate a vision that only she was witness to. Maybe there were elements of all these. I don't know and it doesn't matter. She poured her billions—of words—into the void, and created, at least for some of us, a mode or style, something, that was, at times, strangely fascinating, at times even compelling.

Yet in all that volubility, Dorothy was also among the most guarded people I've known. As if there were secrets and talk kept them safe. She sought no confidences, nor offered any. And if someone were to say that I knew her only in the most superficial way, that we were, for instance, long-distance acquaintances united by the accident of family and circumstance, and that time had performed the trick of simply switching our places as life went on—she being someone who visited occasionally, me taking on that role as she aged—I would concede that that's true.

On the other hand, isn't that the way we know most people? They blunder into our lives or we into theirs and they stay, for however long, then they go. How many of them actually make for good company?

My aunt thought about other people in a way, it seems to me, few ever do, to their loss. She was eager in a world where most hesitate. She had that quality—enthusiasm—that Emerson so often cites as essential and that he so valued.

Years went by and I never returned to Fargo, feeling, I suppose, that I had no reason to. The place, like the person I associate with it, went out of my life as suddenly as it appeared, the connection severed.

One day, on her birthday, I woke, remembered being there, and realized a dozen years had gone by. The sense of scale changes as life lengthens, and so does value, that is, what is meaningful or who is important, and what's not or isn't. I read my aunt not as a small town provincial, treading through the banality of her days, but as someone who made the most and the best possible use of her circumstances; unflappable in the dignity she inhabited and the independence she insisted on, enviable in the energy she brought to all occasion.

A last anecdote. She lived long enough to have seen her favorite item of clothing go completely out of fashion, and because these were no longer even available for sale, she was forced to manufacture her own headgear, a challenge which cluttered her apartment somewhat but one which she rose to with relish. She relayed, on the occasion of one of my visits, in tones that mixed self-satisfaction with annoyance, how she had once called for a cab in the middle of a snowstorm. The taxi sat in the street in front of her apartment, mid-blizzard, and after she'd emerged, tromped through a foot of snow and landed in the back, she looked up to notice the driver's eyes in the rear-view mirror, fixed at a point located somewhere between horror and disbelief.

"Lady," he said, "that's some kinda hat!"

It was on that same visit that one of the cousins told me, lay-

ing it on rather thick, that everyone in Fargo agreed that the way Dorothy was able to coordinate her hat, shoes, dress, blouse, jacket and handbag had resulted in a style all her own, something unique. I repeated this to my aunt, thinking she'd cherish the compliment. She did not.

"They wouldn't know me from a loada hay," she said, and changed the subject.

Trash Duty

Michael Diebert

In the twilight of another dinner party at Derek's
I rose from my place and thought *what a night,*
what a lovely thing, and I was out of my body,
floating up to just below the crown molding,
looking down on Daniel shepherding the china
into the kitchen, Deidre scraping and rinsing,
Darcy stacking the dishwasher, and it was lovely
how easy the laughter, how sublime the fact
I was looking too at myself and for once
not feeling disgusted, so untroubling the dust
bunnies in the corners, the hairline crack
zigzagging along the wall, I didn't mind
when Don said *ice cream* and everyone oohed,
that was my cue, back down, drunk just enough
to double-knot the straps on the first try,
walk down the chipped, crumbling concrete steps
and drop the bag, nearly bursting with bones
and scraps of salad, into the behemoth bin
which tomorrow would be grabbed and emptied
by the long arm on the yellow truck. Tomorrow
I would be back to renting my body. Tonight
was the thing, tonight was *it*. It was cool
and dry for late July, the stars seemed to be
studying me slightly swaying in the driveway.

Test Monkey

Matt Salyer

I watch with the other boys who notice nothing, a clever kid. To hell with being a clever kid. It's enough for most of us that we get to sit on the convent school steps uncorrected and crack wise. We rag on the Sisters as they shrug to matins and on the old-timers, mulling the unbuilt stage, who cough and still swear in the Irish to sound wry. But I see the full men stumble, hauling her long legs up from the basement, until their own catch common rhythm on blacktop and their mill hands smear tempos in bearing grease down the hard, plaster drape of her gown. I think about Mama in white gloves and girlhood, tripping these steps with lost Sisters, millions of years ago. But now it's December 13th, which is the Feast of St. Lucy for penguins and priests and feels like the shortest day in the Year of Our Lord Nineteen-Hundred-and-Sixty-Two. Mama's too sick to come this year, but she says these are bold days now, and Camelot. The president's one of our own, a good boy-o, and someday I will wave down to her from shining metal and stars like an angel saying *rejoice*. It's past dinner, and this is my first year on the steps. I think about change, and the great disappointment it is.

I know enough of the Irish to listen. It's going to snow, *sneachta,* and tonight will mess the wet gilt and careful bouquets on the litter. The men stub their shoes gold as they stand our saint upright in the center and her heavy base grinds odor from the lilies. One of the young Fathers, a real Montgomery Clift type, hurries over from the sacristy with a folded tarp, clutching it tight to his black-buttoned breast with one arm folded over it like the broken wing of a crow. The men watch the skirts of his cassock beat and flutter and I watch the men watch. Things might go easier for this father if he laid off preaching about welfare and war with that hangdog *I Confess* look, letting you off the hook at confession for even the most impure habits. That works on sock-hoppers, who

like hearing themselves talk, and old-timers, for whom it's a great sign to keep a Jesuit among us. But it makes the full men snake the pews on Saturday afternoons to take their absolutions from Old Smallpox who rattles off penance on penance and lets the poor be poor in peace.

I Confess hands the tarp to my uncle Bull, perhaps because he's standing foremost as usual or perhaps because the others still call him *Sar* (which is cop for *sergeant* not *sir*) and because he's got a good dog's knack for barking and heeling commands. What saint's name did they give him, back before the days of Mama's gloves? I haven't heard it. He's been called by whatever he does since I can remember. He is Blackie, Bull, or Bad-Man Bull depending on the neighborhood and what he's done to men there. Now he's a *sar*. He may as well be The Batman.

He hands the father's tarp wordlessly to the others and they drape her. So long, sainthood. Across the lot, the old-timers finish wiring the last lights on game booths and the men peel off from Bull to slack and admire their work, the veiled body lost now against bright backdrops of barrel-chested strongmen in lions' jaws, six-shooter cowboys, Looney Tunes. The shadows of men shimmy in the illumination and me.

Nothing's doing, so the other boys start splitting by twos and threes from the steps, saying *see-you-later-alligator,* and I say *in-a-while-crocodile,* staying. I think through a list in this new hush before I forget fresh paint on her mars and the face without eyes, black basement dust cupped in the holes of her blindness. She was not, Old Smallpox always reminds us, always ours. Neither was the big bru-ha-ha of her Feast nor any of the blocks that will celebrate her constant intercession and death tomorrow when the men carry her past all the porches of the world to downtown. There, managers and mill-office clerks and other Protestants will shake their heads through cool windows at Saint Lucy, virgin-and-martyr, and us, and Old Smallpox will cut his way out of grey incense with the monstrance spokes and halt the gaggle and floats behind him until he has

spat the prayers of minor exorcism downtown through the flattened *q* of his lips.

I think about Smallpox rubbing the brass of dead names on the pews, saying *this was all the dagos's before it was yours,* and she was their saint. The old-timers like to forget that he was a dago long before they were here, so I put this fact on the list for later. To be perfectly straight, though, even I am what Bull calls Black Irish, despite the fact that Mama has a scrubbed look, real secretarial, and is thoroughly lace-curtain about most things. My Black's Bull's side, the poor shipwrecked sailors of Spain's Armada still washi to Cork in our blood. Mama reminds him of this when he comes to check in on us for my old man's ghost, three sheets to the wind. His hands mash my shoulders and he calls us *big spade, little spade* until Ma threatens to hide the Belleek, swirling the dink of a spoon in his coffee against talk of hard knocks, at least until she can bed him down for the night in the hall. But it's more than shipwrecks, Bull tells me. "Your old man and I," he says, "don't be fooled. We were shit stock. All those little *Quiet Man* towns made boys with no fathers, thousands of us, all black marks and shit stock. They dumped us at the Sisters when we died, and the Sisters buried us in cisterns with horses and dogs. Your old man, he was such a sick baby once that they thought he was dead, buried him there for three days before one of the Sisters heard him cry. He dreamed about horses, growing up. That's him. All those ghosts in the shithouse, and he's stuck on a horse." All this Camelot, these china spoons. I imagine china stars and Bull drowned drunk in the blood night between them, Old Smallpox polishing names on the moon, pilots locked in the airless monstrance of a rocket. What is the Irish for all this? I imagine screaming.

The snow picks up. Bull ignores the snow and the men mind Bull. In the morning, they will be back to shovel the lot and sweep the canvas coat from the saint. Bull will stand in her lilies, barking and swinging his weight in all directions until all things are right. It'll be warm enough to have a procession, he says. *I Confess* isn't so

sure, so Bull has to say it again. Flakes hiss and sizzle to death on the booths' bright filaments before they return to sky, trailing a wake of hot cloud from the bright lights that kill them. A real ballet of resurrection. It's my knack, this stuff.

I Confess gets wise, lets Bull be Bull. He shakes his holy head at the men as his cassock sweeps a footless trail in white toward the convent. I stare down at my Converse, the rubber toecaps shedding melt like the hoods of old Chevrolets, and design my rocket as a coupe. I hope that he's forgotten me, but no dice. *I Confess* throws the tarp of his shadow over me until I look up, wondering why he's ditched his usual Fordham getup, the sack suit and collar bib. His biretta's worn wrong, cocked to one side like the hat of a matinee thug.

"Still here," he says, not a question.

"Yes, Father."

"It's exciting, isn't it?"

"It is."

"What's the best part?"

"The procession."

"Not the dancing," he winks, not a question.

"Maybe the dancing."

"All the girls."

"Yes, Father."

He drops his gaze and starts pushing snow from the steps with black patent. I lean some to make my shadow blur his work.

"I saw your mother's name on the Ladies Guild list."

"Every year."

"Is she coming tomorrow?"

"Too sick."

"It's that time of year."

"It is."

"Shouldn't you be taking care of her?"

"The Sisters are."

"Our Sisters?"

"Mother Superior."

He stops pushing snow.

"Nothing serious," he hopes.

"No, Father."

"What does Mother Superior say?"

"Private sickness."

He pushes snow again and we switch to talking about Bandstand as I watch Bull watching me from over near the generators. When the bulbs cut out, I Confess hands me a card and I promise to give it to Mama, but I'm careful to say *mother*. It is a grievous mortal sin to lie to priests, even the ones who don't believe in Hell. I slide the card into my hip pocket, and my thumb rubs the grooved letters after a doctor's name. They'll burn a hole till Mother Superior sees them.

I start looking for that nice two-seater when I hit our block. Maybe a handful of times I've caught it pulling up to the porch and gotten a load of how swank Mama can be, filling its side mirror with the jolt of her *Roman Holiday* look. And you've always got to love a hard idle, no lie. I have that much in common with her friend from the Bank & Trust. He used to let that rod growl with Mama shaking her head in the sweetheart seat and take his sweet time getting the stack top up before hopping around the slick hood to open her door. Then they'd peck cheeks in their good threads until he'd finally get around to killing the engine and locking the doors. What a spaz. One time, I ran smack into Mama pecking as I took the corner by Cassidy's Arms and of course we both turned red as leather. That night I got the rundown on Bank & Trust and she looked at my fresh *Life* clippings about a baby-faced Red named Yuri Gagarin, the first *cosmonaut,* which means *sailor of the universe*. I made a mistake explaining this to her, though. Now I have to hear about how my old man is a cosmonaut somewhere, which is not the case. I love him but he is dead, a suicide, and nothing the Reds can ever find in space will let her hope him out of Hell. That said, I love Mama like my own child and it isn't my place to hurt her. So I show her my model

rockets and she makes them her prayers for nothing.

But Bank & Trust, he was my business. I don't mind that the office clerks and Protestants downtown eyeball Mama, the buttoned-up types who call me slugger when they pick her up for dinner, grinning their square, clean grins like that goofy dad from *My Three Sons*. But I should have sniffed out Bank & Trust for what he is. Like Bull says, a man don't lock his doors when he's anywhere he has a right to be. I make a list of useful things in the house and come up with black pipe, a hammer. No sight of the two-seater, thank God. I remember to breathe, feeling the cold die an inch from my lips.

I thump to the second-floor landing and jiggle the knob before stepping foot in our place and hear the kitchen murmur stop to decide what I am. You know the way that all life seems to stop for you in the backstreets? You interrupt grudges or make the big strays stop banging dumpsters as they hold your breath with their teeth. Thank God if you smell right to dogs or men. The kitchen murmur decides me and resumes. I am home but the backstreets are in my home. Poor all of us, but I can swing it. Maybe poor God.

When I peek in Mama's room a crack, she stirs and folds back to sleep, limb on limb like one of those paper birds that my old man learned to make in the war. I need to look for those. They go on my list. Tiptoeing, I spread the blanket on Ma, take note of knees and elbows, new tape on an index-finger splint, and the progress of scabs. That big shiner on the left eye settles red. I make a good pile of her dishes and head out to the incandescence of the night kitchen.

The other boys would be on cloud nine laughing if they saw, but I can get used to penguins doing housework. I can get used to anything. Mother Superior sits at the kitchen table folding Mama's sick dress, the flower one, into neat thirds against the Formica. Millions of years wring her face to a wrinkled glove over its work and I watch big spider veins dance on spider fingers with each crease pressed in the dress. There is so much blood in this woman, and she has brought a blur of Sisters to sweep crannies and fold linens and wrap sandwiches in brown butcher paper. I eyeball a novice pulling habit

sleeves over her shoulders to wash dishes. She sees me, startles. Sleeves fall and she starts turning the faucet until Mother Superior holds up two benediction fingers and the novice gets back to scrubbing. Mother says sit and I sit. I have not heard my full Christian name in a month of Sundays.

"Stop turning the thermostat up after I leave it set," she says.

"Yes, Sister."

I flub it up bad like a so-and-so.

"I am a Mother Superior," she says.

"Yes, Mother Superior."

"The expense, and obviously your mother cannot return to work at that bank."

"I hadn't thought about that."

"Now you have."

"Yes, ma'am."

"What can we do if we feel cold, now that we're grown?"

"Wear a jacket, Mother."

"And blankets. The Sisters will bring several."

More Sisters come in off the back stoop. When they see me, they stop talking and stare at Mother Superior. Their hatchling mouths hang open and I entertain impure thoughts about what their necks look like under starched white swan collars. Mother Superior taps the Formica and I get contrite.

"Ah, oui?" she asks.

All at once, the Sisters stammer singsong French, so fine. I know *maman* and *la robe* and more the more they speak, another *argot*. At last, Mother Superior starts to boil over and taps her finger on the table, then does the benediction hand.

"Laissez-moi," she rasps.

"Oui, ma Mère," the novice says.

"Oui, Révérende Mère," Sister says.

Others echo.

"Oui, alors," Mother says, "just go."

They scatter to other chores in other rooms while Mother rubs

that crease to threads, waiting for me to split. I don't. I think about the past and tomorrow, secrets in argot. I know now for nothing. I know the uselessness of witness.

"Did my ma know before he knocked her around?"

"Hush that. You sound crass."

"Ma'am."

"Did she know what?"

"What you said, that she was expecting."

No more rubbing on Formica now, lips taut, creases taut. I study the hem and mends for a sign of blood rust, drowned in bleach.

"I spoke in the French. No one teaches French to a boy."

"Mère Supérieure, but I listen."

"But do you understand?"

"Oui, Révérende Mère."

"Then that is unfortunate."

"Did she know?"

"She wasn't certain. Even now, it is a matter of doubt and supposition. But this can make what happened seem better or worse in time, the doubt."

"But you're certain."

"Yes."

"How?"

"Signs."

"I don't understand."

"You shouldn't. Boys shouldn't hear in the French anyway or let on if they can."

"Ma'am."

"Can we think why?"

We bide time.

"Sins," I say, sounds good.

"No, mon fils à moi."

"Then no."

"It is because we must leave others a language for pain. We must let others have that."

Her mouth is a burrow, a hole that you touch in the weeds. When it opens, I trip in her talk, falling through rows and rows of little animal teeth, millions of years deep. I catch my fall in my pockets, uproot the mashed card, and slide it across the table, saying "Father Quinlan gave me this." Her rag face wrings itself over the black grooved name before pushing it back under my fingers.

"This was to be expected from *that* one, I suppose."

"Ma'am?"

"The card belongs to a psychologist."

"My ma's not crazy."

"No, she just suffers."

"Then why does he want Mama to have this?"

"Father Quinlan is new to his vocation, and he is still very much taken with ideas. He wants your mother to talk to this man. That is what psychologists do. They listen to embarrassing stories, sometimes very terrible ones, and grave confessions. It's sordid work. They are like priests that can't absolve you."

"Then why do they listen?"

"Why do you?"

"Because I want to bury it."

"It."

"The baby, the body."

"There isn't a body."

"Where did you take it?"

"No one took it. It was too early, too small, if it was even there to begin with."

"Ma'am."

She explains a womb in the French, then says "just the blood, everything always in blood," in English, and "the rest has gone back to heaven or the elements, invisible." I connect this to cosmonauts. She smiles. After a few minutes, she calls the Sisters in to hear about Yuri and the satellites and I hold this strange court, thinking through death and doubt in my own scientific argot. I turn a glass upside down and then lift it over my head, whoosh, to show how

rockets work. I spell out what cosmonaut means, nice and clear, again.

"Yes," Révérende Mère says, "but that is all of us."

"All," I doubt.

"Oui, alors."

Before she goes, Révérende Mère blesses me and makes the sick dress vanish, presto change, into the heavy deep of her habit. So many bad parts of life work like magic tricks or carnival games. I picture God huckstering, barking at saps, poor us, outside a peepshow, a quarter, a quarter, talking big. But the long and short of tricks is that there's always something alive in them, something too hard to hold. God guards us with our racket, maybe from himself.

"What should I do with the card?" I ask.

"Render unto Caesar," she sneers, "Caesar's things."

"I shouldn't give it to Ma," I figure.

"Do what you think is best. But tonight, when you take your mother's cigarettes to light on the stove, you may burn it there if you wish."

I'm glad when she finally goes, Sisters in tow. In the night kitchen, the dishes are cold and the sink porcelain is cold and cold cracks the linoleum as I clack across its pattern of checkers. I turn the oven dials and open the door and soon I ripple in heat. I grab a Coke and one of the butcher-paper sandwiches from the refrigerator and push my chair in front of the open oven door. I throw my heels up on the stovetop, king of the castle. My cuffs singe but I keep the heat cranked on principle.

When I finish eating, I hoof my chair into the pantry and prop it against the bleached stink of shelves. Bleach is a cure-all, an apocalypse. Révérende Mère, when your penguins inherit this earth, they will scrub its dirty past clean with bleach, down to the first second. I climb on the chair and reach around the deep end of the top shelf and when I climb down, I'm holding one of my thick pulps wrapped around a box of stick matches and Mama's cigs. I leave the cigs and matches on the table and drag the chair back to my oven roost. I

can't find the page where I left off but it doesn't matter. I know how the stories end, all rip-offs.

I'm not picky, though. The detectives, cowboys, barbarians, and space pirates are all the same, all look like Bull, and stories about Bull are stories about me. What I like about pulps isn't the crazy radiation monsters or airships of Mars, it's their realism. No one talks too much or acts like a head case. Unlike all the important chumps in my reading homework, the crime-story detectives respect themselves. The space pirates man up and do the dirt of living and dying. I remember last spring, when the sophomores caught those joyriders from North Side and I tagged along with my slugger bat. When we were done, Bull came around to fix the trouble and I cried. "But it was easier to do, wasn't it," he asked, "than you ever would have guessed?" I owned up. "Then lay off and go home," he said and I did, justified. That's when I started reading the pulps.

When I finish a story about Atlantis and the old gods, I take the magazine and the matches and Mama's cigs and go out to the back stoop. I burn the pulp in a flowerpot, no trace of my lurid thoughts left for penguins. When I smoke, I see myself in the window glass dangling my elbows over the bright city of dogs and men. It falls to the black river from a ring of hillcrests and little lights, as though someone's pouring stars into a bowl. Along the riverbanks, smut from the tall, striped chimneys of foundries and mills masks and unmasks the stars with such speed that they seem to blink. I know the song of phantom ambulances and carburetors and footsteps on the stoop above my head. It's a song about stars, a city in stars.

I fall asleep listening on the white metal porch couch, floating in punctures of sky. For once, I dream: I dream that the world dies, broken by comets, midnight at noon, and all across the city, the sock-hoppers hide under their desks, waiting to burn. But I'm a test monkey, lucky cosmonaut me. G-Men watch funny Red doctors in lab coats turn dials and check my vitals and strap me into the cockpit for blastoff. The lab-coats shave my body manlike. Then the chief G-Man gives one of those *Profiles in Courage* speeches and I'm off,

punching a hole in heaven. Night is a throat, millions of miles deep, but I'm a born navigator. When forever's done, I land on a tropical postcard world, wish-you-were-here. But what a drag. Nothing happens and no one comes. The freshwater makes me sick and the thin air scrapes my throat when I gulp. I sit on a red beach watching my fur grow back singed under twin suns. I draw a map of home in the sand, the rooms I remember, the ones I don't. I drive a stick in the sand to tell time, but the suns confuse each other's shadows. I belong to time, not swinging from trees in paradise. If I could make time, I could die.

I wake at three to high pitches of pain. It is what it is. Next door, the third-floor woman flicks the lights and cracks a window, cursing strays. I hear Mama stir and settle through sweet gas in the kitchen window. When Third-Floor sees what's what, she gets right and kills the light. Men are no dogs. When a dog scraps, it whines a natural whine because it knows its lot. But when you put a man in pain, he screams bloody murder at the whole world. Most of the time, he acts like he's a sock-hop song or a matinee star or the feel of a Saturday night, and then pain gives him back him to his own ugly bones, a real traitor. It's a mess, the work of pain. I look over the warped rail toward the brick bay garage out back, at what was my old man's shop. I expect to see Bull and there he is, clockwork, a black spot in the open shop door. I can't hear it, but I know that his dog heart beats with the stars.

I close the oven and check on Mama before I go downstairs. When I circle around to the back, I hit the lookout halfway down the driveway. "Wrong way, boy-o," he says, and yanks me good. I hate being touched. I bite his hand until I hear bone but he keeps his cool, a full man, no surprise. My tongue sops the hot salt of blood, his and mine, from my gums when he hits me. "The hell with you, then," he says, pushing me toward the shop. "Maybe," I say, "but you first." I stole that snappy jab from Bull, the night he tore up Cassidy's and Mama sent me to bring him home. Picture that, a cop in the clink, just to cool off. It goes both ways, I guess.

I figure three or four others in the shop, no more than black blurs behind milk glass windows. Bull's standing smack in the middle of the first floor's garden patch. In the stoop shadows, he's a gnarled tree, one that's been hacked and cursed by a million years of landlords before being left alone, worked around. I step closer, see what he's up to, and change my mind. He's a barbarian from the pulps, pushing his funny black-patent down on an axe head, trying to pry the handle out. He has nothing to say to me. I listen to steel give way under his weight.

"I know what you're doing," I say.

"Go get on home, you."

"I am home."

"You're all mixed up."

The wood pulls loose from its head at last. Bull holds the handle up and takes swings at nothing, flinging its length through his grip before he chokes it. He swings again, sounding its weight and balance.

"I heard the penguins talking," I say.

"Say Sisters."

"Révérende Mère."

"Cut that out."

"I heard her talking about it, everything."

"You don't know anything about what this is."

"Everything."

"She doesn't know everything."

I hear a scramble start and squash behind the milk glass and bay doors.

"Go get me my tape by the door," Bull decides, "the white roll."

I go, no question. Even before I get to the jamb where Bull's laid out his tools, I can smell the odor of sweat and cigs and bearing grease. I crouch and paw for the boxer tape but I steal my looks through the door. The full men pace inside and wear my old man's ruts deeper through layers of newsprint or else fold on themselves at the waist and brace their hands on their knees, tired and sick and

blind with the urine and blood of their mark. When they finish the work, they will give the body to Bull and unlock the back door at Cassidy's to drink and wash themselves in the green copper sink before heading home to wives waking and piles of daughters dreaming. I study Bank and Trust, strapped to the work chair that my old man caned with me. His legs and feet are broken and his calves bend under the caning like wishbones. He has no face, only a hood of Mama's dress dyeing from bright blood beneath, its sleeves tied neatly around his neck in a pretty kind of bow. Not much to say, it is what it is. I try to get my bearings seeing my old man's things, nail jars, an auger, the drill press and router, bright metal shavings, untouched. I make a list before one of the men wipes his mouth and shuts the door. I don't know much about homes but I know work. I peel back an edge before I bring Bull the tape.

"What do you know now?" he asks.

I watch him press the peeled edge to the handle and wrap a grip.

"I don't think Mama conceived," I lie.

"No, maybe not. But he still got her pretty bad."

"This isn't what she meant for you to do."

"Your mama? I didn't ask her."

"Mother Superior."

"You mean this isn't what she said to do."

"No."

"But couldn't you guess what I'd do if you told me?"

"Yes."

"That counts as asking."

"It's not knowing."

"That old girl," he laughs, "she knew me before I was born."

He gives me the handle, says "swing it," and I do. "Not like a bat," he says, "let the balance do the work," and I do, catching stride, before the third time I hear him say "give it back." I listen to the strays go crazy at the curb, tearing the last bags from metal cans before the red hour of trash men and first shift, human dawn.

"I want to watch," I say.

"You can give that back to me."

"What are you going to do?"

"You should get on home."

"You're going to kill him."

"If he dies."

"What do we do with him?"

"Crawl around in his guts," Bull says, "until I see ghosts."

"Shit stock," I say.

"No," he says, "no such thing."

Streetlamps and faraway skies turn the milk glass door into a cloud. We enter the shop, two hunters in stars.

By the time the procession leaves the lot, the snow has all but vanished in the full day that hops through golden spokes on the old monstrance where Smallpox keeps the Body of Christ suspended under glass. He lugs his metal through a humerial veil that wraps gold and white stitched patterns across his shoulders and down his arms and keeps his dirty hands from pawing God. I think about Mama carrying hot plates from the oven to my old man's place at the table, forever ago. I think about sacraments, how you have to laugh at them, downright obscene. Even so, all our peepshow gawking at the holy fuss seems right. When the priest does the bait-and-switch at the altar, the sacraments hurt. You want to laugh the way you laugh when the Varsity boys get knocked around uptown or someone hears about your old man and gives you their condolence. I stay on the convent steps, millions of miles away. So much is unspeakable. I genuflect as Smallpox hoofs the monstrance past me in a moveable heaven of sweet smoke. I get to keep my head down and not laugh at that little murder in glass.

Bull and the night men follow Christ, carrying the litter over their shoulders on long brass poles. When the saint and litter pass behind the convent wall, the rest of the men shuffle into the street behind. They group like iron shavings pulled by magnetic signs,

the felt banners with tassels and pin-on lettering flapping Knights of Columbus, Ancient Order of Hibernians, Saint Joseph's Society, Holy Name Society, and Local 402. The aldermen keep a dozen paces behind the union guys, straightening their dark sincere suits for the route. Then all that's left of the long parade is the low drone of *Tantum Ergo* and little wires of incense that hold up the sky.

The wind picks up, maybe more snow. When *I Confess* comes out of the sacristy, he's wearing that dumb biretta and a lace surplice that makes patterns of lambs dance flurries on his cassock. The Sisters by the fortune-teller machine eyeball him for the spring formal, I guess. He goes over to them, tight in the collar, a big man. I squint and try to read the secret language stitched under the lambs, the language of fathers, the blood tongue. When I'm contrite, I'll give him the night in an earful, get right. I will teach this Father his work.

He asks the Sisters about the games, the booths, the food, and the parade six ways from Sunday. They ask about grandmas baking in the parish hall and the old-timers who sit on stage each year and play the treble reel until even Mother Superior dances. He cups his face in his biretta and laughs when the youngest sock-hop Sister apes the Révérende reel, hiking her habit skirts up over wobbling calves. "But I'm a better dancer," she winks, brushing the other Sisters off when they hush her. She starts waltzing air and singing *Till the Roses Bloom Again* and *I Confess* slaps time on his thigh.

Throughout the lot, slim patches of snow lose to time in a chessboard of warm asphalt, black and white. *I Confess* makes his small moves, a black king. The penguins scramble to keep him on the board. No king, no game. I watch Mother's diagonal gambit as she crosses the lot. When she gets close enough, the Sisters curtsey and she nods back, picking the feathers off *I Confess* with her eyes. There's no queen like the black queen, my queen.

"They're showing me how to dance," *I Confess* counters.

"Yes, I see."

"I told them it was all right."

"Of course, Father."

He squares up and asks about Mama.

"A woman is not a condition," Ma Mère says.

"No, of course not. I didn't mean that."

"This is best called a situation."

"We can talk about it later."

"Of course, Father."

"There's still so much to do this weekend."

"Yes."

"These parish events."

"Ora et labora."

"So much work."

"And I must let you get back to your dancing."

I watch her curtsey and go while the Sisters reel and dart on the sacristy steps. The penguins say that *I Confess* must have been a swell dancer at Fordham, a real lady-killer, but he isn't listening now. Révérende Mère reaches the convent, sits down beside me on the steps. She hikes up her black sleeves and rests her elbows on her knees, a real washerwoman.

"They will be by after vespers with the blankets and laundry."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Your mother will have to forgive me."

"Ma Mère?"

"I've misplaced her floral dress with the stain."

We watch the dance play out like a couple of wallflowers.

"Cosmonauts," she says.

I tell her about test flights. Few months back, the Reds sent up a zoo in a rocket, two dogs named Belka and Strelka, a gray rabbit, two rats, forty mice and fifteen jars of flies. We sent up three black mice, Sally, Amy, and Moe. I promise to show her my clippings of Able and Baker, the chimps from the Jupiter IRBM.

"That's terrible," she says.

"But they get to see stars."

"But poor creatures, trapped like that in the dark."

"Yes," I say, remembering kitchens, "but that is all of us."

"No, mon fils à moi. No one is ever trapped."

I help her stand and feel the blood pump out of the hands in mine. When she goes inside, I head off to badger the old-timers at the game booths until I win Mama a prize. I imagine clean lines crisscrossing the lot and spreading out in all directions across the whole universe. The black queen takes me.

Three Poems

Elisabeth Lewis Corley

That Moment When You Want the Radio

The point at the apex of the figure—
a pulley or pivot, something to hoist
some general's canard or encircle
the encircled. The figure's not the point.
The father, the mother, the niece, the sad
daughter, whoever bears witness, who judges.
What does it take to stand here with the boys
in their shell holes, with what's left of what tried
to blow them up their shelter now? They are
not the same, the saving graces. It could
not happen here. The smells of the body
when the body stops. Pivot to what? Pull
what from where? How do we stand here? How did
they bear it? The radio to sing to you.

Full Military Honors

The backward boot in the swaying stirrup
a mutable signal to the old mount's side.
He moves on anyway, a slave to history,
along for the ride.

The boot upside down
in the tree lacks polish and I don't
want to know what's in it.

Inside the concertina wire the world shrinks
like flesh from the bone—how fast
the body goes to nothing in the jungle heat.
Nothing left of feet but multitudinous bones.

Before the siege the barefoot boy might flap
his heels against the water buffalo and he
would go.
Where is the buffalo when
there is no more water? Where is
the barefoot boy when the town runs out of rice?
Or lime. What does the cortege tell?
The brave foot rails at the bootless journey.
The students of history fall under its spell.

New Eumenides

Explain it to the horses—the fields
gone and the lines gone deeper.
They have followed us this far.
We have found food and water before.
The smells are wrong. The grass is gone.
There is rarely any water. We can't
explain it. The names keep changing.
The blood soaks the ground beneath our feet.
We sink deeper in the mind¬¬.
The upended backside of the blooming
girl in the Café Can Can can what?

Explain it to the boy in the helmet,
his glasses askew. His lines
will never meet. The errors mount.
The horses are frightened. The boy
sees wings at their withers, sees them
fly from the trench, sees them rise
over the land we spoil
sees the girl in the café upright
and blushing, sees the blood in
her cheeks fill the trenches, fill
his boots, still his feet. Without

what makes the line, where
are we? The furies will find us,
our scent unmistakable. They take
what they came for. We can't
call them Eumenides. We can't
call them off. We can't name
the hill but the horse flies over and over.

Dragonfly Tea

Laurence Raphael Brothers

“This is a dream,” I said.

I was pretty sure it was, anyway. The dimly lit tavern had that kind of feel, like if I turned my head too fast I’d see something that shouldn’t be there.

“Kind of but not exactly,” said the fox-headed man. He was sitting across from me in the booth. The benches were high-backed with red leather cushions and the table was old dark wood, coated with varnish, scored with gouges. He flicked his index finger against his beer stein, his manicured fingernail making a faint clicking noise on the thick glass.

I looked at him. He seemed harmless enough, an ordinary man with a fox’s head. He was wearing a dark pinstriped suit, a white shirt, and a tie the same red color as his fur. For a moment I thought I was naked and then I realized I was wearing a rose-colored dress but nothing else. Oh well; if I didn’t get up no one would see I didn’t have any shoes on.

“You know how it works?” he asked.

“What?”

“Dreaming,” he said. He let his red fox-tongue briefly out of his mouth and then drew it back over sharp fanged teeth. “Ouch, goddamn,” he said thickly. “I keep doing that.”

“Dreaming?”

“Biting my tongue.” He took a quick sip of beer. It left a line of foam around his muzzle. I wanted him to lick it away but he didn’t. I saw I had no beer or drink of my own and wished I had one too.

“When you’re awake,” he said, “your consciousness emerges from the workings of an assemblage of sub-minds. It’s not like pieces of a machine, though, nothing that neat. It’s more like … patches of flowers in a meadow. The bluebells overlap with the dragonflies, right? There are no clean boundaries.”

Something he said was wrong, I knew. I was imagining the long stalks of the dragonfly plants with their columns of little flowers and that was okay. Bluebells? That sounded odd. How could flowers be bells? Oh well, not important. He was still talking. I liked the animal sound of his voice.

"Anyway," he said, "when you go to sleep, it's like some of those patches get cut off from your mind-meadow. If enough patches fall away, you lose yourself entirely. When that happens you experience dreaming as a collage of sensory fragments that you don't remember because the person who would remember them doesn't exist anymore. So one minute you're in a tavern, and the next, who knows, you're flying a plane or something."

"I exist now," I said. "I'm aware now."

He smiled, which was scary at first because he showed his teeth, but then he opened his mouth and gave a chirping little bark of laughter.

"Me too," he said. "Which is another reason this isn't a dream."

"But it's close."

"Well, yeah," he said. "If you get tired of me, this could *become* a dream, so focus, okay? You have the power here. All this beautiful tavern detail is being made up by one of your half-asleep mind-patches. Everything can change if you don't pay attention. If you forget me, we'll be separated, maybe lost forever. And I want to keep talking to you."

"Okay, but you're making too much sense," I said. I pointed a finger at him, tapped him on the chest with it, felt his soft fur under the pad of my index finger and pressed my whole hand against the bloom of white fur in the middle of his chest because the sensation was so pleasant.

"What?" The fox blinked and put his hand over my own. His hand and arm were covered in red fur, with yellow claws curving over the tops of his fingertips. He was naked, or at least the top half of his body that I could see had no clothes on, and his body was

entirely covered with fur. I wanted to ask him to stand up so I could see the rest of him and take a look at his tail, but felt that would be too forward at this stage in our acquaintance.

The fox opened his jaws and his tongue lolled in his mouth for a moment before he spoke. “Oh, I get it. You mean in your dreams the people you talk to don’t make sense?”

“Yeah,” I said. “They start out okay, but when I ask a question or say something, whoever it is doesn’t respond right. It makes me really angry when that happens, and that usually wakes me up.”

I picked up my stein and took a sip of dark stout with a thick white head. Bitter and rich, with an aroma like black earth after the rain. I licked my lips to get rid of the foam.

“I see,” he said, and he reached out his hand to lift my chin so I was looking into his black fox eyes. “That’s too bad. I promise to make sense from now on.”

I closed my own eyes, hoping to be kissed.

“Wait,” I think he said, though it was like a distant whisper. “Don’t do that….”

But I was wondering what it would be like to be kissed by a fox, with that narrow lipless muzzle and those sharp teeth. And wondering I fell asleep from within my dream.

I woke in a dark, quiet, forest, knowing I was dreaming. I’d forgotten something, something I wanted maybe, or something I needed to do, and it was making me upset. But then I saw there were two paths I could take here. One path was overgrown with thousands of little ferns with tiny curling leaves, and that looked like a nice way to go. Another was thorny, and I didn’t want to go that way, so I turned back, and where was the fern path? I couldn’t find it. But then I saw another break in the trees, a path bordered with countless red and yellow dragonfly flowers. So I went that way.

The path led me to a dense circular hedge of tall dragonfly flowers. I knew there was something inside. I had to work my way through the flowers to get to the center, but the petals felt soft

against my naked skin so it was a pleasure to wade through them.

The fox-man was there in the center of all the flowers, and seeing him I realized all at once that I'd forgotten him and our conversation in the tavern. It was such a relief to recover what I'd lost that I nearly cried out. But I saw there was something wrong, too. He was sitting there on a patch of lawn amid the flowers, his business suit rumpled and covered with bits of grass. His fox-head was bowed, he was clutching his knees to his chest, and I thought he might be crying though he wasn't making a sound.

Seeing him like that I was overcome with pity, and I reached out to touch his shoulder from behind. He turned his head, and the joy on his foxy face was such that I wanted to hug him to celebrate it.

"Oh," he said, "you've come back! I thought I lost you!"

I squeezed his shoulder. "I did lose you. But now I've found you again."

"Listen," he said, "this is important. We need to be together to—to find the way. While we're apart, we're just dreaming our own dreams. And my dream is just—"

"Shh," I said.

"What? What?" He looked up at me and I saw he was afraid so I decided to comfort him.

What I wanted was to sit down in his lap so we could embrace and so I could at last find out what a fox kiss felt like. But he was still sitting with his knees up, and there was a clumsy awkwardness to the maneuver that embarrassed me. My skirt got in the way and I got turned around somehow, and for a moment I didn't see him at all and I panicked, thinking he might already be gone. I decided that no matter what I would concentrate on remembering the fox-man, that I wouldn't lose him or forget him again, and my focus on that was so complete that I closed my eyes.

My eyes were still closed, but I was awake now, or thought I was. I didn't say anything, though. I just wanted to lie nestled up against him there on the grassy patch surrounded by dragonflies, deep in the forest. The fox-man and I were spooning together, both

of us naked. My back was up against his furry chest, his groin pressing on my bottom, and his arm was over my shoulder while his hand cupped my left breast. Had we just made love? Were we going to? It didn't matter, because all I wanted was to feel like I felt now forever.

He bit my earlobe gently, just a nip, and I shivered as I felt his breath on my cheek.

"A dream is the converse of reality," he said softly. "But this is the opposite."

"What?" I was annoyed at him for making me think, when all I wanted to do was rest there in his arms. "What does that mean?"

"In a dream the blinkered infinity of your waking mind collapses into finitude," he said, "like the collapse of the wave function in quantum mechanics. But here, between the two of us, it expands into a larger infinity. There's a new world for us, if we can only find the path."

That made sense to me and I turned to face him to say so, but when I opened my eyes I saw we weren't in the forest anymore. I was sitting in a comfortable seat on an airplane—it must have been business class, or first, because I had plenty of room. We were flying over the ocean at night, with all the lights in the cabin turned off, but there was faint silvery glow coming in from the window at my side. A stewardess was leaning over me to lever my tray into position.

"Dragonfly tea," she said, and offered me a glazed ceramic cup with a red-and-yellow dragonfly flower sprig stuck into it like a stalk of celery in a Bloody Mary. A lovely scent arose from it: not jasmine, not rose, but something delicate and warm I'd never smelled before.

I looked around and it was with an intense feeling of relief that I saw the fox-headed man was sitting next to me in the adjacent seat. For a moment I was terribly angry with myself because I felt like I'd been really close to losing him again, but then I realized that after all I hadn't and that made me happy, like I'd accomplished something.

The fox-man had unbuttoned the top of his shirt and loosened his tie, and his head was turned toward me, his eyes closed. His sleeping expression was boyish and very sweet. I wanted to touch

noses with him but in our airplane seats it was too awkward. What was a boy fox called, anyway? I couldn't think of the word for a moment, but then I remembered: *oh yes, a foxen*. His hand was on the armrest, so I put my hand on his, determined not to let go. Then I remembered the dragonfly tea, and I didn't want it to go cold without a taste so I turned back and took a sip. It tasted like—it was wonderful, sweet, light, and refreshing, but I'd never tasted anything like it before. And I heard a whirring sound coming from the cup.

All at once I was sure if turned my head to look back at the fox-man again something terrible would happen, so I looked at the cup instead and I saw a big insect perched on the flower stalk, a green needle of a thing with big red eyes like rubies. It looked wet, like it had just emerged from the tea, and its wings were moving so fast they were only a blur. I knew the insect was friendly so I closed my eyes to hear the pleasant humming sound, still feeling the fox-man's hand beneath my own.

We were walking hand in hand down the airplane's steps onto the tarmac. I saw palm trees in the darkness off to the side of the airstrip faintly illuminated by a silvery crescent moon overhead and I smelled the rich black earth and the scent of tropical flowers in the air. There were dragonflies, I was sure of it, because I could hear the humming. For a moment I thought I was naked and then I realized I was wearing a rose-colored sarong. Only a sarong, with no top or anything, but that was fine because it was a tropical island and that was what you wore there. The fox-man let go of his wheeled suitcase and took me in his arms. We kissed and his teeth didn't get in the way at all and even though it was a warm night the feel of his fur on my skin was very nice so I relaxed into his embrace, never wanting it to end.

"I think we've done it," he said, after a timeless infinity.

"Yes. I can feel it too."

"We won't be separated again."

"No. And there's a path to follow."

I pointed, and through the palm grove the moonlight picked out

a path bordered with tall plants bursting with red and yellow blossoms.

"What are those flowers?" he asked.

"Snapdragons," I said.

"Funny," he said, "I could have sworn—"

But I kissed him again before he could say anything more.

Possum & Glue

Douglas W. Milliken

My deployment to Florida was a charade and a romance and a score, and all three of them were a bust. It was also the gradual realization that I was a minor character in someone else's dream, and that struck me as bad news, too.

My guess is some places aren't meant for humans. One could argue that none of them are.

I arrived in Siqua Park on a Thursday in September while a hurricane turned viciously over some island nations to the south. I can't remember the hurricane's name. Clint or Biff or something. It was nowhere near us yet. The coastal highway dumped me into a dinky downtown where everyone had nailed plywood over the windows or maybe never bothered taking it down from the last storm, but the hotel I found on the beachy outskirts didn't seem too concerned with all that. The windows were still windows and the sprinklers still sprang. Somewhere, a maid laid mints on pillows. The message was clear: a resort and its guests couldn't care about weather systems. Hurricanes were a poor-people problem. I checked in at the pink granite reception desk flanked by potted palms and was led by a politely anonymous young man to a room near the top of the hotel. I did not get the feeling that anyone roamed the countless floors below me. For now, this place was mine. Everything in my room was the color of sand, even the flowers in the vase by the TV. There was a sliding glass door that led to a balcony, and from there I could see the blue-green slap of ocean (or maybe it was the Gulf: if you gave me a map, I could look all day and still never find Siqua Park) but there was no obvious way down to the beach. I ordered room service and napped with the TV murmuring some sleepy daytime drama and after dark sat down at the outdoor cabana bar with a stupid fruity drink and a mess of newspapers spilling off the table. It must have looked like I was really devouring the local news. But

I was only reading the Dispatch sections. An Amber Alert for four brothers—quadruplets, though not identical—after their mother's body was found stuffed into the trunk of an Oldsmobile half submerged in a bog. A retired high school Spanish teacher charged with indecent exposure after getting caught naked at a U-Clean-It carwash. A preacher indicted for making nearly $200,000 in fraudulent disability claims. Good reading. But none of that was what I was looking for.

The only other guest drinking at the cabana bar was a big man in a blue Hawaiian shirt and Bermuda shorts and cheap flip-flops that slouched limply off his feet. For whatever reason, this guy's presence had me transfixed. You know how you sometimes get a hangnail that's so bad it cuts into your nail bed, and it hurts but you can't leave it alone, you pick and pick and make it even worse? This guy was my hangnail. I couldn't read knowing that he existed. The big guy sat at a table on the other end of the cabana with the surf crashing at his back, and not once did he lose the idiot grin plastered across his fleshy face. He looked like he'd once been the captain of his high school football team and it's never quite sunk in through the decades that those glory days are long gone. No more captain. No more team. Hometown hero, I wanted to shout, you look like a fucking pud. After two rum drinks served in hairy coconuts and a single bottle of frothy beer, he tipped his waitress generously (I noticed, his server was a woman though mine was a man, both inoffensive and young and cute) and headed—I'm assuming—back to his room. He walked like he owned everything he saw. He walked like he'd just received an inheritance. He walked like a target. The target swiveled his white face around and smiled effusively at me as he exited the cabana bar. Pud.

My Friday was not significantly different from my Thursday. Just longer. The hurricane was still too far away so everything was static and paradisiacal. I watched lots of TV in bed and napped and stood around kind of dumb-feeling outside trying to figure out how

to get down to the beach. I lingered in the hotel gift shop. I hung out by the pool but didn't go in. I was killing time and being obvious about it and I knew it. Somewhere amid all that, it occurred to me that targets existed to be hit. That's their point. I guess that's when I made up my mind about it. When night fell, I took my dinner at the cabana bar and worked through a fresh stack of newspapers. There were a few more guests tonight, sucking on straws and slurping margarita mix, but when the Pud walked in—this time in a bright red shirt with imaginary white flowers printed in a waterfall tumbling down his chest—it seemed he spotted me immediately. Like he'd walked in with me on his mind. His smile got real wide. It moved the flesh of his face in a way that was almost gross. It exaggerated how he'd once been handsome. I smiled back and it didn't feel good but it did feel important that I play along. He crossed the cabana bar and sat opposite me at my table. It felt like the hardest part was done. He never stopped smiling.

"Big news day?" he asked. His first words to me. A question. His last words to me would be a mistake.

"The biggest." I scooped my papers into a sloppy pile. I folded my hands over my papers and leveled my gaze at him. Neither of us looked away from the other until the waiter came to take the Pud's order and mercifully interrupt the moment.

The Pud waited until his bottle of Pacifico arrived before he introduced himself. He ate his lime slice and drank most of the beer in a single gulp, carefully set the bottle on the table's face next to the half-wheel of rind, rose partway out of his seat, and extended his meaty hand.

"Joe Milliken," he said, and immediately in the invisible ledger of my brain, I saw lettered in neon pink against the opaque Florida night: Joey the Pud.

I took Pud Milliken's hand and shook it. I introduced myself as Beth. I told him I'd been to the Keys for a brief writing residency and was taking a few days to decompress before returning home to Toledo. I told him I taught American folklore and played the ukulele and

had a Janus cat named Belle. Everything I told him was a lie. Then I told him about walking on the beach today and this part was not a lie. I'd finally figured out how to get down to the water—you had to jump down a steep embankment crowded with sharp, stiff vegetation, though I guess there was a path I couldn't find—and then, after screwing around for a little while, discovered I'd somehow gotten lost on the beach, which struck me as unforgivably dumb. I couldn't really see a whole lot past that embankment. I ended up walking away from the hotel instead of toward it. It was pretty but it didn't matter because my confusion had ruined it. It's hard to enjoy anything when you feel like a stooge. I walked all up and down getting tired in the sand and the only other people I saw out there were a group of kids who turned out to be adults acting like children. They were hooting flatly like distressed baboons and falling down a lot in the sand. They were not dressed for the beach.

"They were drunk." The Pud seemed pretty sure of himself.

"No. They were high. They'd filled a sock with glue and were passing it around."

"At the beach?"

"Yep."

"That sounds like basement behavior. That sounds like something teenagers would get up to in a parking lot behind a Mighty Taco."

"Grown men at the beach. Huffing fumes from a sweat sock."

"What's a Janus cat?"

This is something I'd soon grow used to: Pud's abrupt shifts in conversational gears.

"It's a cat with two faces. They don't often live long. But Belle does fine."

"A two-headed cat?"

"No. Two faces. One head." I blinked. "They share an eye."

"A three-eyed cat." The Pud drained what was left of his beer. He needed a second to process all this new information. I wasn't wild about doing so much of the talking, but I knew it was necessary. I'd presented myself as something interesting to behold. Something

strange to possess. In ten minutes, I was sure, I wouldn't have to say another word. He set his empty bottle on the table and the waiter came and replaced it with a fresh one. Joey rolled the bottle between his palms but didn't drink. He was staring at my newspapers.

"You were reading a stack of those last night, too, right?"

"Sure was."

"Keeping up on the world?"

And once again, I surprised myself by telling him the truth. Or anyway, half of the truth. "I like to read the Dispatch sections. You know, the crime reports? It's the best reading."

"Really?"

God, I hate these kinds of questions. Why ask me to confirm that I believe what I just said?

"Yeah, sure. I mean, sometimes you just get deadbeats doing thirty days for being delinquent on their child support. But most times, things are much more strange."

"How do you mean, 'more strange'?"

"You're from New York, aren't you?"

"Yeah."

"Not the city but the state."

"Yeah, that's right."

"It's 'cause you talk funny is how I know. You shape your vowels weird."

"Tell me something strange from the paper."

So I told him about the brother and sister who crashed head-on into each other along the coastal highway. It was just before dawn and a thick fog was piling in off the Gulf (the way the paper described it—and they didn't use these words, mind you, this was a detail my own brain supplied—made me picture a slow-moving mass of melty white cheese, the sort of cheap goop that never solidifies, only congeals). The brother was coming home from his nightshift at some factory or other and the sister was heading in for her morning shift at the hospital. Instead of passing each other in the fog, they mashed their cars into a metal knot. It took a while for either party

to figure out the inane serendipity of the accident.

"What's serendipity?" the Pud asked. His eyes were half-closed and seemed focused on something faraway. He looked stoned.

"It's like a coincidence."

"You're saying there's such a thing then as a smart coincidence?"

He had me. I shrugged.

"That's a ridiculous story," he breathed.

"Yet it's news."

"Amazing."

"But hey, I'm feeling awfully self-conscious being the one doing all the talking here, Joe. Maybe you ought to talk a turn."

It was embarrassing being so forward—I like to think I've got more professional finesse than that—but sometimes obvious tacks are the most effective. He told me about the town he lived in up north, or anyway, where he lived up until a few days ago, a bastion of old money embedded in the dairy country stretching above the Pennsylvania border. He ran a new and used lawn care equipment shop he'd inherited from his dad. He had an ex-wife and two sons he never saw. He liked to duff around the VFW whenever he had the chance.

But more importantly, he had an uncle who'd owned a string of carwashes up and down the Gulf Coast but now that uncle was dead and Joey the Pud all at once found himself the proud owner of an empire. Which accounted, at least in part, for that perpetually dazed look on his face. He was still reeling from his sudden and pointless good fortune. It hadn't yet occurred to him that his luck might not have, in fact, improved in any way at all.

Yet I did not reach this station in life believing every scent I breathed. I did not doubt one thing Joey said. But I also had no doubt he was a liar.

We didn't talk for much longer after that. Before the Pud retired for the evening, he stood and quite formally took my hand in his. I thought his plan might be to kiss me or to even try to dance. His eyes were glassy in the tiki torchlight. He was liable to risk anything. The

Pud thanked me for the conversation and thanked me for the friendship, then said, in a world of wrinkled prunes, I was a fresh apricot. I pretended to be bashful and thanked him for the compliment. But I happened to know for a fact: he'd used the same line on his waitress the night before.

Saturday was the day I finally spurred myself into making an effort. Being a tourist is hateful work. Being a fake tourist is worse. After breakfast, I walked the shoreline road from the resort to the dinky town. There was still plywood nailed to everything but folks seemed to be moving about their business in a regular sort of way. The hurricane had parked itself out in the Gulf and didn't seem too eager to make the push for landfall, and while the surfs were meaner than usual as a result, the eminence of its threat was gone.

As I walked up and down the town's few streets, it became clear to me that, while the guests and staff of the resort were uniformly white, the people in town were almost exclusively Cuban or black. I wondered how deliberate this segregation was. My guess was "very." Because all the storefronts were boarded up in hopeless anticipation for the storm, I had to go inside each shop to see what sort of doodads were being peddled. I bought a few postcards and a coconut monkey that I immediately threw in the trash. I filled out the postcards at a counter at the post office. No one came in or out while I wrote.

Dear Belle,

I hope your little faces are treating each other kindly. Mama misses you but not excessively. It'd be indecent to lose my head. You are the single most pointless creature I've ever imagined, but love is love so count your blessings.

Everything here is dirtier than it strictly needs to be.

Much love,

Your mother.

And so on. One postcard featured a pelican in flight. Another was of a pelican at rest. I made up likely addresses and bought stamps from the tired woman running the counter, dumped everything in a blue box and left.

Because it seemed like something a solo female tourist would do, I found myself a little lunch at a Cuban café. There were deep green walls and gold stuff everywhere and not a single other customer, just a warm, savory smell. The menu was some MENSA entry exam that I was doomed to fail, so I just pointed at some words and was served an anonymous cut of roast meat and black beans and plantains. The teenage waitress also brought me some kind of rum drink I'm pretty sure I did not order. It didn't seem like anything worth arguing about. While I ate, I read the paper. A dispute over a barking dog ends in a trailer park fire. A cop shoots an unarmed teen. Another cop shoots another teen. Car accidents on I-95. Car accidents on Route 1.

Walking back to the resort, I passed an alleyway where a group of men staggered and slouched near a dumpster. The dumpster had a real big dent in it. The smell of paint thinner was strong. One of the men wore a Hawaiian shirt. I couldn't be certain, but— Who am I kidding? I can be certain. You're damn right I can.

We sat side by side that night down at the cabana bar, our backs to the hotel and the beach view ahead of us with all the other drinkers in between. The resort had filled up a little for the weekend. The Pud and I sipped our drinks and watched the people and sometimes we spoke and sometimes we didn't. But mostly it was Pud who did the talking. At one table near us was a man and a woman and the woman was tiny and held the distinction of being the only brown person on the premises, while the man's face was zigzagged in scars. They both had the dazed look of refugees who'd finally found asylum. They were saved. At another table hunkered two men who were obviously brothers and looked to have been in a fight—both looked black-eyed and fat-lipped and one's hair and eyebrow was singed—and

though neither spoke, it seemed they were reaching some kind of accord with each beer they drank. They were healing. These were the sort of folks we were looking out for. These were our kind of people.

The Pud's commentary now and then had to do with his life before Florida, his life until just a week or so ago. The town where he had lived—named, simply, Hal, like it was a person and not a village—and some of the people he knew there, mostly buddies from the VFW or regulars at his lawn care supply shop. He played in a darts league and a bowling league and excelled at neither. He lived in the same house where his father had grown up. He said the streets of Hal were lined with these trees that everyone called oranges but weren't oranges at all, the fruit was green and bumpy as a toad and the size of a softball and just as hard. Why would anyone, he asked, ever imagine that was an orange? He said a river ran through Hal and the river was beautiful and had a beautiful name, the Chetkana, but no one paid the river any mind. In fact, the town was built so that no one ever even saw the river. All the buildings had their backs turned to the water. The Pud kept one had on my thigh while he talked, and that was fine. Really. I have no feeling down there. It makes a lot of things easier. People lived their whole lives coming and going, he said, and never once gave a thought to that lovely river.

"Do your wife and kids still live in Hal?"

"Who?"

"Uh…."

The Pud made a whistling sound, then something like a bomb exploding.

"Joey, I wonder—"

"You said before that you're a folklore professor, right?"

"American folklore, yep."

"Tell me some lore about this place."

"About Siqua Park?"

"About Florida. About the southeast. Whatever you've got."

"Well." I cleared my throat. "So there are tricksters, right? Most

native tribes have trickster stories. The Seminole in Florida are no different. Their main trickster is Rabbit, whose tail got chewed off by a bear. So naturally he's jealous of anyone with a long, pretty tail."

"Naturally."

"Naturally. So one night, Rabbit shares a fire with Possum, and in those days Possum has a long fluffy white tail, which Rabbit comments on, saying how lovely and fluffy it is but man, what a shame it's white instead of brown. Because of course, Rabbit says, everyone knows that a brown tail is so much nicer than a white tail. Deer have white tails and they're always getting killed. White tails are a target. But brown tails! Brown tails are divine. Rabbit's commentary, of course, at first has Possum feeling pretty proud—after all, Rabbit isn't known for handing out compliments—but now with all this talk of dead deer…Possum's feeling a little worried. All at once, he doesn't want a white tail anymore. Rabbit tells him if he's that concerned about it, why not try browning his tail by the fire. If it works for other things like bread or wood or cloth, why wouldn't it work for a tail? So Possum tries it, he lays his tail down close to the fire, and just like that"—and I snapped—"his whole tail goes up in flames. All his lovely white hairs burn down to nothing. That's how come Possum's tail is now so pink and bald."

Pud was grinning hard. He had that far off look on his face again. Like he was watching the scene unfold somewhere else, could see the rabbit and possum and the fire. He was mesmerized.

"That's a hell of a story," he finally breathed. "Hell of a story, professor."

"Hey thanks, pal," I said. But you don't need to be a professor to know that kind of thing. You just got to read a book.

In a little while, I suggested that maybe he'd like to come up to my room, but I got the impression he didn't understand. He said he had to meet someone in town in a bit. "These associates of my uncle's like to do their business at night." He made a face like they were crazy, like everyone and everything was crazy. I walked him to the lobby and we had a long, sweet embrace that startled me more

than I cared then to admit, and I remember, he had a smell on his clothes that was chemical and mean. I couldn't place it. But I knew that smell. With my ear to his chest, I could hear his lungs valiantly inflate. Then we let go of each other and walked away to our separate nights.

I went up to my room and drank a glass of water. I turned on the TV but muted the sound. I stood by the bed, staring at the sand-colored blankets, then opened the sliding door to the balcony. I went out and felt the night air on my skin. There was a fraction of moon hanging low in the sky and its warped twin trembling all over the water, and in the road outside the hotel stood Pud Milliken, larger than life in his stupid shirt. He kept looking both ways up and down the road, like he was waiting for a break in traffic so he could cross. But there was no traffic. He did this for a while. Then Joey crossed only so far as the yellow line and started walking north, away from town. I watched until all I could see was the faint glowing of his shirt. I couldn't tell whether or not he ever jumped down to the beach.

The next day, Sunday, I really didn't see Joey much at all. I'd missed my first cue and now had to play catch-up. It was while eating my meat and plantains at the Cuban restaurant that I figured out my mistake. There was a follow-up article on the embezzling preacher—he was drawing massive disability checks under his own name and his dead wife's while also gobbling up the lion's share of his congregation's donations—and in the article, they mentioned the name of his church. The paragraph naming the church also contained a made-up word, and the paragraph matched the code that I'd arrived here seeking. Later, I checked the original article I'd seen my very first day. That one matched the code as well. I felt foolish and a detriment and had only myself to blame. I felt like a fucking pud. In the morning, I checked out of the resort and dumped all my stuff in the back of my rental car and headed north up the coast.

It took a couple hours to get where I was going. The sun was

warm and the sky was clear and a make-believe blue and made me mad like the first time I ever saw Pud. Where was this hurricane we were promised? As I moved further along up the coast, the white beaches dissolved into densely forested swamp. The air smelled different. There were bugs. It was like the land was giving up and melting into the water. I'm not sure I really blamed it. But it could have been less gross about it.

I was mostly on unnamed county roads now, webbed in cracks and deeply rutted and shaded by overhanging, sickly trees. I turned down a packed-clay road twisting up a little hill that was obviously man-made, and at the top of the hill stood what six days a week was likely an abandoned barn but today was the embezzling preacher's church. There were cars parked all around it in a haphazard mess. It appeared there was a morning service going on, a new preacher I guess having arrived in town. I parked the rental in the tall lank grass off the road's murky shoulder. I didn't want to get parked in by any late-arrivals. The door of the church was open or maybe there was no door. Something like music was pouring out into the humid air. Singing or chanting. There wasn't anyone outside as far as I could tell, so I allowed myself inside.

Whatever I was expecting, this was not it. There were no pews and no pulpit either. Just a whole lot of bodies all pressing in toward the center where there seemed to be some kind of open space, a circle or an arena. For a second, I wondered if there was a cockfight going on. A huge Jesus suffered on a cross hung suspended above us all. The cross was horizontal. Jesus faced down. I worked my way through the people, who I guess were singing but not with each other. Everyone was making their own personal noise. It was nonsense. When I reached the edge of the inner circle, I immediately tried to step back. But I'd already gone too far. At the middle of the circle, a middle-aged white guy in a cheap button-up shirt was holding a rattlesnake in his arms. He was cradling it like a baby and raising it up for the crucified Jesus to see. At the man's feet was a box, and that was full of snakes, too. I tried to back up but the people

behind me babbled and held their ground. I was trapped. A woman stepped into the circle, then another man, and they each took up a snake as well. It seemed to me they were acting way too casual about this. Above all that chanting, you could hear the rattles shushing like wild. Then a young fellow stepped up and grabbed two snakes, one in each hand, and as he hopped around in a circle dancing, first one snake bit him, then the other snake bit him. He actually kept dancing much longer than I expected before falling to the floor in foamy convulsions. Then the woman got bit and the church turned into a zoo. Most of the congregants stampeded for the open door. A couple folks hung back to make sure the wounded two were okay (they weren't). The new preacher, face red and apoplectic, gathered the loose snakes off the floor like so much dirty laundry and tossed them into the box. Then he stomped them to death. I'm still amazed he didn't get bit, putting his foot in there like that. Maybe he just had good boots.

The church was mostly empty now. The preacher and the remaining worshippers knelt and lifted the young man and the woman, who it was clear now were dying, and ushered them out the door and into someone's car. There was the cough of engines, then tires tearing at clay. So now everyone was gone.

I looked around the empty church. Aside from the Jesus, there really wasn't much here to differentiate this place from a barn. It smelled like hay and rope in here with all the people gone, and faintly like cucumbers but that was the snakes. You could see outside through the gaps in the clapboards. In one corner of the barn was an overturned wooden box and on the box sat a well-dressed Cuban man. He was older and held a fancy cane between his knees, but I doubted it was for real. He was staring at me and smiling.

"Some show, ah?" His voice sounded like the history of cigars. "Pentecostals." I loved it.

"A real carnival," I said. I was smiling back at him despite myself. "Real charismatic."

"I missed you at Friday's prayer meeting," he said.

"I made a mistake. I own that. I hope that doesn't put us at odds."

The old man shook his head and made a sound in his chest that might have been a laugh. "The dancing and shouting went long into the night. I waited."

I shrugged. "Sorry."

From the box in the middle of the room, a single snake slithered out. It moved across the floor like black water in a dream. It spilled out the open door and was gone. I watched the snake go, then turned back to the old man. "I'm assuming—"

"Si, si." The Cuban nodded and closed his eyes and slowly rose to his feet. He was barely as tall as my shoulders. "Come," he said. "Let's you and me go for a ride."

We took the old man's Buick down the hill. This was after we made our exchange. There were two laptops in the trunk of my rental and the Cuban took one and left another bag there in its place. That was that. There was no one around and I could have checked the bag the old man left me, and probably should have. He probably should have checked his, too. But trust is a coin flip. Sometimes you win and sometimes you lose. But the coin still insists it gets flipped. As we raced beneath the shading trees, I slid in close to the old man and undid his pants and his skin was the color of old rosewood and he took the corners fast. Two days late is inexcusable. I really had no excuse. I could have done more for him. But it seemed we both thought that was enough.

Where we ended up was little more than a wooden kiosk with a thatch awning—another goddamn cabana, though I guess at least more authentic this time—with a couple cane-backed chairs set out on the packed black clay. We had to park the car by the edge of the road and follow a short path through the woods to get there. A young man ran the cabana and even though we were in a swamp, he was dressed in clean black slacks and a pressed white shirt buttoned all the way to his throat. His black hair was oiled and combed. There was a dock nearby in the murky swamp water but no boat, just

crippled trees and alien cedar knees. We sat and ordered coffees and the old man lit a stubby brown cigarette.

But that isn't quite how it went. The young man came and took our order and when he looked at me, I saw he was cross-eyed. When he was gone to make our drinks, the old man placed a finger on either side of his mouth, like a V with his lips in between. Then he spit. He did not look at the waiter when the boy returned with our coffees. That's when he lit his cigarette. He lit a cigarette to avoid looking at the cross-eyed boy.

We sat for a while watching the silvery ripples move slowly across the water. It was quiet out here. When the old man spoke, it really didn't seem to matter if I listened.

"Religious practice is always very fun for me to see. All the people so worked up over an idea, you know, a feeling. I remember, when I was a boy, I see people put on that exact show. Though…not so much with the snakes. Chickens. Men and women sweating and singing and in a fever, you know, an ecstasy. All while dancing with a chicken." He said something in Spanish that I didn't understand, then sighed and waved his hand in the air. "Sorry, sorry. Please excuse an old joe miller."

"Joe who?"

All at once, I was on edge, sweating cold in alarm. I didn't understand what he meant, and that freaked me out. But again, he moved his hand dismissively through the blue smoke. "Forget me. I'm just having fun playing around with all my memories."

The Cuban seemed smaller now, sitting in his cane-backed chair. He looked deflated. I couldn't tell if we were still doing business or if that was behind us now. We were drinking coffee and sitting near calm water. But it all felt out of my hands.

"It reminded me of a rock 'n roll show," I said. "When the band is everyone's favorite band."

The Cuban snapped his fingers. "Ah, and that's exactly it!" Just like that, he was puffed up again. Maybe it was important that I listened after all. "It could be the living spirit of God, or it can be a

cute boy with a guitar. I see people dance with their pet cat or dog, too. They love it. Everyone loves it. It doesn't matter what the it is, the thing. It's an excuse." Near the dock, I spotted a sweat sock, filthy and grey with grease, and I wondered: did it stink of xylene or glue? "Everybody always looking for an excuse to lose their mind in ecstasy." Then he said something else to me in Spanish, something long with the rhythm of a proverb. But I wasn't biting.

"I don't speak Spanish."

And again, he shook his head. All at once, there was noise. A boat was coming toward us in the swamp, its outboard loud and throaty. And too, a jacked-up pickup roared to a stop behind where the Cuban had parked his Buick. A bunch of men spilled out of the truck, shouting playfully and macho to one another as they clomped their boots down to the dock. They were acting like a pack of little boys. But they were dangerous. In the approaching boat sat a man and four boys, and the boys were all about the same age and maybe were brothers or maybe looked similar because they were boys, just boys, anyone's little boys. I turned to the old man and his eyes were wide and wanting and on me. This was the moment everything had been building toward. The idea we could all lose our minds for. The motor roared and the men all shouted and the cross-eyed boy bowed his head at our table with an urn in his hands, kneeling to fill our cups. The old man turned and spit through his fingers. I kissed my lips to his ear and whispered, and in the chaos there was no way to know if he heard me or if I even made a sound. We were a passion and we were an ecstasy. What I whispered in my kiss was "Joe Milliken."

After the Cuban dropped me off back at my car (the church was still deserted), I just drove around for a while. My job, after all, was over. Or anyway, the part of my job involving Florida was done. I did not need to return to Siqua Park. In fact, I probably shouldn't now. But I had nowhere else to go. I drove aimlessly through this swampy territory and eventually stopped in a town whose name I don't remember. It was a dividing place, marking where the swamps

ended and the beaches began again. Somehow, having both made the town more charming than if it'd only been a beach town. But it wasn't the surf or white sand that finally drew me in. On the town's main drag was an internet café, which caught my eye and held it in a way I couldn't explain. I parked the rental and got my laptop from the trunk—the one the old man hadn't taken—and walked inside the café. It was deserted here, too. Where the hell had everyone gone? I ordered a coffee I did not want and found a corner table. I opened my computer and waited. I was in no rush.

I don't think I quite knew it then, but something had made me uneasy. I hadn't done my homework. I tried to remember the name of Joey's inherited carwash chain—I figured, if there was one nearby, I could test its services—but my web search didn't turn up anything that matched my memory. So maybe I'd remembered wrong. I held my coffee cup to my lips but didn't drink. I only felt its heat. I did a search for the town in New York the Pud claimed to be from, but that town didn't exist. There was, however, a chain of lawn care supply outlets serving New York, Pennsylvania, and eastern Ohio. Hal's Lawn & Garden. I did a search for the Chetkana River. I did a search for Joe Milliken of New York.

For a long time after that, I stared out the sheet-glass of the café's big window. No traffic went by. But clouds were coming in. The barista flipped over a few chairs and set them on the tables. He was closing. It was only afternoon, but things were getting dark outside. Chetkana was Seminole for Rabbit. A few splatters of wet on the glass. It wasn't long before I was asked to go home.

I only saw Joe Milliken once more, and only for a second. I'd decided to return to Siqua Park after all, check back into my room at the resort. We met outside the big glass doors of the hotel. I was walking in as he was walking out. He had his blue Hawaiian shirt on again. Or maybe it was a different one. Maybe he had a whole closetful. Joe was all smiles when he saw me, and he hugged me abruptly and cupped my face in his hands. He said I was the loveliest sight

he'd ever lucked into seeing. He said urgent business awaited him in the night. A sudden, unexpected call. An old associate of his uncle's. His breath smelled like a Sherwin Williams. I couldn't get a word in edgewise. A steady wind was tackling in off the water. Pud kissed me wetly above my left eye, then strutted away into the evening's black, and it all would've been sweet except he kept calling me Belle and I couldn't be sure, did he mistake my name for my imaginary cat's or did he think I was someone else?

I sat out on the cabana until it started to rain. I sat by the sliding door to my balcony, watching the surf crash in to eat the shore. Rain whacked dumbly against the glass. I tried Joey's door twice in the night, but if he was there, he didn't answer. I had no reason to believe he was there.

Sometimes Possum is a trickster, too. Like when the doctor catches Possum stealing chickens. Doctor kills Possum and puts him in the oven in place of the chicken he lost. But in the dark of the oven, Possum eats all the vegetables packed around him in the roasting pan. He bathes in and drinks the broth. And when he's done and Doctor opens the oven, Possum escapes between Doctor's legs and is gone.

Because Possum can't die, you see. He can only pretend.

It'd be a full day before the hurricane finally passed. A self- defined moment of darkness and water, followed calmly by a blue dawn. Some buildings were ravaged and pulled out to sea and some buildings were exactly the same. People quietly went about picking up the torn-off shingles and broken palm fronds scattered on the ground. Seagulls circled but made no sound. I wondered: where do birds go in a hurricane? Do they hunker someplace low? Or do they fly like it's a game through the storm? Do they rise above it? Everything I saw—everything—felt clean. I walked one last time along the beach into town, and all the people I saw looked saintly in the light

and all the people I saw were strangers. Pud was gone. I didn't need to read any paper to know where. I went back to the hotel and gathered my things. I checked out one last time. Black water in a dream. I was gone.

So Long, Starman

A listener's tribute

Donald Brown

1. “Who will save Aladdin Sane?”

In November 2015, I drew a picture in pastels of David Bowie for my step-grandson Max. At thirteen, Max was a recent but enthusiastic fan of Alice Cooper, but his best friend had annoyed him by switching allegiance from “the Coop” to David Bowie. In a gesture of friendship, Max wanted to give a drawing of Bowie as a birthday present. “What era of Bowie?” I asked, as there were many to choose from.

The image Max sent me showed Bowie, a painted medallion on his forehead, in the makeup of his *Aladdin Sane* tour, 1973. I often refer to 1972-74 as the era of “rampant Ziggyness.” That’s when Bowie made his mark on the US, with his alter ego Ziggy Stardust, as one of the chief purveyors of “glam rock,” and I went from middle school to high school. Because Max and his friend were the age I was then, it occurred to me that the Bowie of that era might be an eternal teen idol, sort of the way Holden Caulfield never loses his teen appeal. In any case, drawing Bowie in his futuristic androgyny made a bridge between two teen guys in the 21st century and me and my teen friends when the photo was current.

As any Bowie watcher in the day witnessed, not long after the revelation of the full-blown glam artiste in the photo, Bowie shape-shifted to a “white soul” belter, not nearly so outré as a Lad Insane, nor so queer as in his Anthony Newley-on-amphetemine days—which began with his second album, *The Man Who Sold the World* (1970), and persisted throughout the glam period. The zoot suit fashions and the breathy croon of *Young Americans* (1975) were an effort to cease being confused with Ziggy, his extraterrestrial rock hero/martyr, but many of his fans couldn’t fathom how Bowie’s moonage daydream and dystopian trappings could be jettisoned so quickly in favor of a kind of ersatz 1930s cabaret singer for the 1974 tour.

I was well-informed about Bowie's changes because I started reading *Cirkus* magazine in 1972. Eventually it would become a rag devoted to heavy metal, but back then they got as swept as anyone into the hype managed so well by Bowie and his management, Tony DeFries of MainMan (later a villain in the story of how Bowie got eucred out of much of his 1970s earnings). The rock press coverage—with lots of photos—helped one keep up with what is so often referred to as Bowie's chameleonic image. And, in the States, Bowie's personae were somewhat confused right from the start. His only real chart success in the US (until 1975) was the January 1973 re-release of "Space Oddity" which was already four years old. Major Tom, the astronaut who experiences rapture of outer space, was deliberately reminiscent of the famous Dave of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). First released in the summer of the 1969 moon-landing of Apollo 11, the song was a novelty hit in the UK that sank without a trace in the US at the time. When, on his breakthrough LP, *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars,* Bowie sang about a "Starman waiting in the sky," it was easy to suppose that the voice from space was the good ol' Major trying to report back with some news that "he thinks [would] blow our minds."

Many more people bought *Space Oddity,* RCA's 1973 re-release of the first Bowie album, originally called *David Bowie,* than any previous Bowie album, and it was my first Bowie purchase. Bowie's otherworldliness was his dominant characteristic. The photo of fey-looking Bowie and his coruscating perm on the original album cover had been replaced with Mick Rock's close-up of an odd-looking humanoid with spikey red hair. And on the back was Rock's photo from 1972 of our space boy in his extraterrestrial glam complete with what looked like a meterorite around his neck. Later, after Ziggy and Major Tom had been left behind, Bowie starred in *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1976), Nicolas Roeg's spaced-out film about an extraterrestrial who lands on Earth and becomes a kind of Howard Hughes figure, looking in the end very much like Bowie's new self-conception on the *Station to Station* tour, dubbed "the Thin White Duke." Later, Bowie

resuscitated Major Tom in 1980's hit "Ashes to Ashes," which more or less brought me full circle and concluded my rapport with the Bowie I know best.

I thought about the back cover of *Space Oddity* as I drew the photo for Max's friend because Rock's photo of Bowie looking like a space-age Rimbaud exuded enough aura to supply me, at 13, with a heavy dose of fascination. But I was never a total believer in Bowie and tended to be rather haphazard in my acquisition of his albums. In those teenage years, when every record purchased might have to last awhile, one was perforce selective. Thus *Hunky Dory* (1971) went completely unheard by me, back then, and I held off on Ziggy Stardust as too well-known from hearing a copy my best friend's older sister had. It was the one after that I had to get—in part because of the hype in *Cirkus—Aladdin Sane* (1973). Released when I was in ninth grade, it followed *Space Oddity's* success into the US Top Twenty. I recall listening to "Panic in Detroit"—on 8-track!—while lying on the floor in the bedroom I shared with my younger brothers, trying to follow its impressionistic narrative about some apocalyptic moment soon to engulf us all. *Aladdin Sane* remains one of my favorite Bowie albums, in large part because of Mike Garson's insinuating piano-playing and the imagistic qualities of its songs with their affected delivery, alternately hard rock and cabaret-style fantasias.

Clearly, there was enough history for me to draw upon in drawing that picture for Max. I finished it during a visit to my stepson's home at Thanksgiving, aware that Bowie was back in the news with a new album, *Blackstar,* due out on his birthday, January 8. As I drew, I listened to a digital playlist of the first five albums, which had all been re-released on new vinyl pressings in 2015. It was inspiring to touch base with the familiar figures from those songs, songs not only with teen appeal but that have aged well in encapsulating the originary allure that Bowie in his twenties exuded. And then on the morning of January 10th, a Sunday, my wife called from our spare bedroom, "David Bowie died!"—two days after turning 69.

2. "Nothing has changed. Everything has changed."

The first thing I did, after glancing at obits and online comments, was put on the first side of Bowie's 2002 album *Heathen,* which begins with a somber song of taking stock called "Sunday." The line "Everything has changed," delivered in a bemused ruminative tone, gave me the feeling I wanted. While making the drawing, my listening had called up ghosts of the past, those traces of an older time that live on in a later time, but Bowie, born David Jones, was still alive to offset those earlier incarnations. Now Jones was gone and only Bowie remained. I was moved to come to grips with what this master of many personae had created and the part those various figures played in what Bowie liked to call "the zeitgeist"—endorsing the elusive notion that there is a "spirit of the time." Whether or not he defined a collective era to that extent, Bowie was certainly attuned to the possibility of doing so. Speaking for myself, to be struck by the loss of Bowie is to be struck, more dramatically than usual, by one's debt to him. And that means taking stock of how the successive Bowies changed everything, or nothing.

While preparing to write this I went back to records I've always admired, but I also went after Bowie's work that slipped through the cracks while I was otherwise engaged. The best thing about posthumous retrospectives is that they let us revisit what went down and realign our historical sense because the works now exist in a timeless afterlife. Which might just be a way of saying that most of my formal study has been about writers and artists long gone before I existed. Now that Bowie is of the ages and not of our time, we can begin to adjust accordingly.

What I'm finding is that his work, once shed of the timely cavils and enthusiasms that rock journalism thrives on, remains fresh and vital and, surprisingly, of a piece. All the many Bowies are fed by the prodigious talent of David Jones and one of his strengths is the quick study that isn't trying to convert listeners to a life-long investment with this or that style, fashion, or sound. It's as if every new Bowie

album comes with the tag "for your consideration." We don't have to accept any Bowie as definitive, nor do we need to belittle lesser ones as "untrue" or "unfaithful" to his body of work. His body of work, in other words, is the ability to reconceive what he wants his music to communicate and how. There are constants, of course, such as the fact that he generally plays with great rhythm sections, that he has an adventurous sense of what guitar-based rock can do and what it can't do, that he picks people to work with who always add something worthwhile to the mix, and that he can stretch his aural palette through a wide-range of treatments while remaining predominantly lyrical.

And it's as a voice and lyricist that Bowie entertains me most. I well recall, at 16, how raptly I attempted to match vocally what was to me the extreme thrill of his singing on songs like "Wild is the Wind," "Word on a Wing," and "Golden Years" on *Station to Station*. At that point, Bowie emerged as the most histrionic singer in rock and my listening over the last few weeks has made me more aware of what an actor he is, how varied his approach can be, and how even a vocal that grated on me when it appeared—as in his take on John Lennon's "Across the Universe" in 1975—now challenges me with its ferocious repetitions of "Nothing's gonna change my world." Bowie, the serial image-maker, against change? Maybe it's just a way of saying that, no matter how much Bowie changes, each shift is just another facet of Bowie's world.

3. "Gotta make way for the homo superior"

Bowie's otherness wasn't only shown by his tendency to identify with aliens from outer space. He stated early on, in an infamous interview for *New Musical Express* in 1972, that he was gay and always had been. This was an unprecedented confession—not even Little Richard had ever claimed it outright. What's more, the statement was somewhat calculated as simply another instance of Bowie—or maybe even Ziggy (their distinction was beginning to blur)—

being outrageous. Bowie didn't involve himself in the political fight for gay rights, but the gesture still stood. Here was a rock'n'roller allowing that sex in rock was not strictly hetero. Certainly, the notion that pretty boys might get it on with pretty boys was always implicit in rock, but as a slur more than anything, a way for the self-appointed arbiters of all things masculine to belittle rock as effeminate—the old "are you a boy or a girl" asked of every "long hair" at some point. Bowie, against the hordes of macho, long-haired, denim-clad rockers, was letting a different freak flag fly—a fag flag.

But there's no need to give primacy to a perhaps tongue-in-cheek statement in the press. Bowie's lyrics had already expressed his ambiguous sexuality, and he had appeared on the cover to his second album—a cover suppressed in the States—wearing a man's dress. His identification with bisexuality was more than a pose as it informed some of his key lyrical twists. He brought into rock the vocabulary of queens and queers, used "freak" as not simply a drug-user, but as someone who would be at home in a Velvet Underground song, open to fetishes, hard drugs, and omnisexuality. The Velvet Underground was a big influence on Bowie in the late Sixties, but even Lou Reed, their frontman, didn't exploit a gay perspective until his comeback album *Transformer* (1972). Produced by Bowie and his guitarist Mick Ronson, the album featured "Dressing Up," a coy song about transvestism.

Even the way Bowie used the term "bitch" had little to do with the way the Rolling Stones, for instance, used the word in a song with that title (both songs date from 1971). For Jagger/Richards the word suggests the familiar phrase "like a bitch in heat." For Bowie, with his great title "Queen Bitch," the word applied to a queen—a male identifying as female—bitching, or letting a would-be lover have it. The song puts his stuff on the street, literally. The queen speaking in the song has been tossed over for either an actual female or for another queen—either way, the speaker is decidely unimpressed by her rival's charms: "God, I could do better than that!" she insists. She's a queen and a bitch, and the song itself is a queen bitch.

That this sort of thing was largely unprecedented in rock is an understatement. Even as early as the *Space Oddity* album, largely concerned with showing off the influence of Dylan and the kind of lyrical flights that florished with psychedelia, the line "there are children in washrooms holding hands with a queen" strikes a decidely roguish note. For Bowie, it's simply a fact of life, a further extention of the search for kicks that the Beat ethos bequeathed to rock. Any admirer of William Burroughs, as Bowie was, would find a way to make gay sex part of the hedonist's repertoire.

On his second and third albums, the references to sexual experimentation went from a kind of Wildean seduction scenario—"The Width of a Circle"—wherein the hero is "laid by a young bordello" and "sweeps back home in drag," to "Changes" which confesses a confusion that could be both sexual and creative. The fact that *Hunky Dory* also includes "Kooks," a song addressed to Bowie's infant son—Bowie was married in 1970 to Angela Bassett, a model as thin and androgynous as Bowie himself—shows that he felt no need to shy away from normative heterosexuality for the sake of a gay guise.

Indeed, the splintering of Bowie's self-conception is the stuff of his art at this point—songs like "Quicksand" and "The Bewlay Brothers" on *Hunky Dory* pick up where The Man's "The Supermen" and "All the Madmen" left off. Bowie, whose half-brother Terry suffered from schizophrenic spells, accepted "madness" as both a part of his brother's condition and as part of the romantic conception of the artist—fullfilled c. 1968, by one of his musical heroes, Pink Floyd's frontman Syd Barrett. But coupled to these strains—sexual experiment, mental non-conformity and its risks—was an evocation of Nietzsche's concept of Übermenschen, or Supermen. Bowie's philosophy was no doubt rather sketchy, but on the early albums he seemed to be trying to imagine a new phase for humanity beyond homo sapiens, which he called "homo superior." The concept seemed to involve evolving beyond sexual binaries and maybe even being an earthling. That such a concept might find some common ground with the notion of "a master race" as perpetuated by the Nazis did

cross Bowie's mind and eventually his politics would be questioned. His was a fashionable fascism, winked at with the opening chortle of the song "Diamond Dogs": "this ain't rock'n'roll—this is genocide!" Was Bowie the first rocker to see his legions of fans as followers willing to follow him anywhere? Back in 1966, John Lennon caught tons of flak for saying The Beatles were "more popular than Jesus." Bowie, rather evilly, was suggesting he was getting as popular as Hitler.

That dangerous sense of the wages of fame and the threat found in the cult of personality informed Ziggy Stardust, a figure for rock heroes "the kids had killed." Ziggy stood for a fictionalized version of Bowie's own dreams of rock godhood, filtered through someone like Jimi Hendrix, a guitar-hero "who played it left hand but made it too far," martyred by "the life" in 1970. With the follow-ups, *Aladdin Sane* and *Diamond Dogs,* Bowie fulfilled on his view, strengthened by the US tour for Ziggy, that the US was on its way to becoming a sort of Orwellian or Huxleyian world, with entertainment in place of art, and an oddly hedonistic Puritanism as its reigning ethos, eagerly pursuing militarism and technology and thought control. The prospect of "revolution" which fed the late 1960s had been replaced within rock as a tendency to live vicariously through "stars." Bowie, with his songs about Bob Dylan and Andy Warhol, had already shown his tendency to treat pop heroes as oracular figures of the Zeitgeist. His quartet of albums from 1972-74 included *Pin Ups* (1973), an album of glam remakes of British hits of the already classic 1964–67 period, a telling instance of Bowie's recurring ability to look back and forward simultaneously.

In his early to mid-Seventies albums, Bowie's interest in themes of a pop apocalypse fueled his hope to create a stage musical based on Orwell's *1984* (until the rights were refused by Orwell's widow). Without a fuller narrative to be dramatized, Bowie's albums don't quite fulfill "concept album" expectations, not even to the extent achieved by Pete Townshend and The Who's *Quadrophenia* or Roger Waters and Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* (both 1973).

And perhaps for that reason some of the tracks from that period—"Ziggy Stardust," "Moonage Daydream," "Five Years," "Panic in Detroit," "Drive-In Saturday," "Jean Genie," "Rebel Rebel," "When You Rock'n'Roll With Me"—maintain the fascination with what Bowie's glam era added to rock. They're catchy, ballsy, surprising in their images, fierce in their grasp of how to play "visionary." What's more, the aura of androgynous teen survivors living rough on the edge of a wasteland world infused the pose of punk, a style of music and couture that was starting to gear up around the time Bowie switched gears and went slick.

4. "I'm not some piece of teenage wildlife"

Bowie's abandonment of glam—which already had too many camp followers (in both sense of the terms) by 1974—was a striking artistic shift, and, if you were into Bowie at the time, it made you question what it was you were into. The marked change culminated in his first US #1 hit, "Fame"—composed with John Lennon and guitarist Carlos Alomar—the closing track on *Young Americans* (1975), a foray into Philly soul that won many new fans unimpressed by Ziggy. The title track, with its kicking sax lead, was upbeat, impassioned and also sardonic: "Do you remember your President Nixon?" was a great throwaway line not even a year after Nixon's resignation. Pop obsolescence even extends to presidents, apparently, while "ain't there one damn song that can make me break down and cry?" showed us a flamboyantly theatrical Bowie, one whose style of ersatz passion was becoming an industry standard.

The high-water mark of Bowie's career is the influential period that includes what is often called—somewhat pretentiously and inaccurately—his "Berlin trilogy" (*Low, "Heroes"* and *Lodger,* from 1977 to 1979). But the sequence of great albums actually begins to take shape with *Station to Station* (1976) and continues to *Scary Monsters* (1980). For one thing, Carlos Alomar joined Bowie on *Americans,* and remained in the core band through *Monsters* with rhythm

section Dennis Davis (percussion) and George Murray (bass) who both joined on *Station*. The line-up makes for a consistency in the basic sound of these records, with all but *Station* produced by Tony Visconti, who was integral to the sound of Bowie's second album and two albums that represent the pinnacle of glam in Britain: T. Rex's *Electric Warrior* (1971) and *The Slider* (1972).

Though no one calls it a trilogy, the trio of albums from *Americans* through *Low* (1977) is an interesting sequence that takes us through a compressed two year period of major changes from the end of the *Dogs* tour in summer 1974 through the fall of 1976. The trio charts a course from "white soul," with its deliberate debt to African-American music and musicians, through a slickly produced record of a dark period in which Bowie, by his own account, became fascinated with Aryan beliefs, the Kabbalah, and Aleister Crowley, to a decision to leave LA and a coked-up lifestyle to record in France. As a transition that has elements of Americans' soul-style vocals and dance grooves while approaching *Low's* detachment, *Station,* the first LP Bowie recorded in California and the last he would make in the US for four years, holds up as one of the most accessible Bowie albums.

Together, *Americans* and *Station* present aspects of Bowie that would recur throughout his career: first, the hit-maker who aims for radio-friendly sounds that are mostly identifiable by pushing the trademark vibrato in his singing voice, giving the vocals a moody urgency that wins listeners. That aspect of Bowie's music returns to the fore with *Let's Dance* (1983), his runaway hit engineered to be a huge success after Bowie freed himself from contractual obligations to DeVries. The other element is something a bit less tangible, a certain je ne sais quoi that represents Bowie pushing against expectations, moving into new realms even while maintaining allegiance to the mythos he creates. On *Station*, a radio hit like "Golden Years," an irresistible track with layered vocals in a variety of registers, sits alongside more exploratory work like the title track and "Word on a Wing," songs that show Bowie brooding on a state between what he

left behind and where he will arrive. “TVC15,” a catchy song about the erotics and threat of technology, is the clearest path to the pop tracks with odd textures that comprise the first side of *Low*.

The cover images on *Station* and *Low* were furnished by *The Man Who Fell to Earth,* filmed beginning in summer 1975 and released spring of 1976. In Roeg’s film, Bowie plays a very downbeat version of himself-as-alien, not only reprising all the “Starman” associations of Ziggy-period Bowie but taking us into the drugged transition between Bowie’s major creative periods. The film has its admirers, but many of Roeg’s decisions make the film seem a B-movie with arthouse pretensions. Still, at the time, it seemed as if Bowie might be using his role as Thomas Newton, the patent king and extraterrestrial, to signal the deadend of his earlier identity, alluding to his post-glam career in the reclusion of Newton, who ends the film by becoming an earthling. The film’s close is a kind of cinematic meta-commentary wherein the actor simultaneously plays a role in life and on film—Newton is also Bowie and Bowie is Newton, and neither are aliens any longer. *Low,* which includes a track originally intended for the film’s soundtrack, boasts a side of somber instrumentals that feel like the aftermath of Bowie’s dystopian visions or the new “low” of being stuck on earth. Even Side One’s more pop-sounding songs take their tone from Newton/Bowie’s indulged lifestyle, delivered with a kind of shrugging desperation. And this at a time when radio rock in the US—dominated by the Eagles and Fleetwood Mac—was becoming ever more slick, styled to project a post-Sixties hip romanticism gradually “selling out” to disco.

Bowie’s departure from the States for Europe marked a turn to experiment on the “Berlin” albums—a trilogy because all three feature work with Brian Eno, then a fairly esoteric figure known for the sophistication of his sound manipulations and a solo career that began in glam and moved into the kind of atmospheric compositions that briefly became Bowie’s new metier. Eno’s solo output from 1973–77 progress from lyric and guitar based rock songs giving way to tracks that are ideas more than tunes, fragments of what Eno calls

"ambient music." On *Low* and its follow-up, *"Heroes"* (1977), recorded at Hansa Studios in West Berlin near the Wall, Bowie explores the possibility of sonic poems, aimed to encapsulate the mood of Eastern Europe entering its fourth decade since the war, with songs titled "Warzawa" and "Neuköln" (a section of Berlin in the American sector). The sax bleats and cries at the end of the latter song sound very much like the last gasps of some wounded animal caught in a trap.

The highpoint of *"Heroes,"* the title track, wasn't a hit at the time as it seemed not to match with either the perfunctory hedonism of adult rock or the brash slashing of the young punks. The yearning desperation in the vocal calls up a dramatic situation for the song's lovers divided by the Berlin Wall, but by the late 1970s Cold War angst had abated for most listeners. Dramatizing a situation on the edges of the West's complacency, the song, over the years, has come to seem even more colossal in its rising drone and guitar effects that threaten to engulf the singer's insistence on an existential transcendence: "we can be heroes forever and ever / we can be heroes just for one day." The notion of living forever—for all time—in one day or one moment lifts the spirits of struggling lovers in the shadow of the Wall and the Bomb and the scarily soulless bureaucracy of the corporate State.

During his years in Berlin, Bowie, ignoring the brief heyday of British punk, was pioneering the sensibility that became dominant with New Wave. It's also worth noting that Bowie's albums throughout this period generally made Top 5 in the UK, though often not even Top 20 in the US. For the general US rock audience, his profile was indeed "low" after Low, but in the UK, where New Wave thrived, he was still in the game. *Lodger* (1979), which closes the trio of albums with Eno, was recorded in Switzerland a year after *"Heroes,"* and finished in New York where it's follow-up, the more popular *Scary Monsters* was also recorded—more popular in part because of the high quality videos generated from that album for the nascent

MTV station, and also because hit-making acts like Adam Ant and Billy Idol and Duran Duran were so obviously Bowie ephebes. Bowie belittles the "new wave boys" on *Monsters'* "Teenage Wildlife," and that's the album that brought him back to my attention in a big way.

I have to confess that during that post-*Station* period (for me, the end of high school and just after), I was more caught up with newer bands—such as Talking Heads, who also worked with Eno—and gradually discovering the records John Cale, formerly of the Velvet Underground, made for Island in London that also involved the ubiquitous Eno. Bowie's Eno-influenced stuff was running a vague third, as the likes of Kraftwerk and Neu, on Bowie's mind in *Berlin,* just didn't do it for me. I had a brief flurry of interest in the evocative instrumentals of Tangerine Dream with the soundtrack to Sorceror, but I've always been a lyrics man. The agreeably tossed-off quality of the lyrics on *Lodger*—with "Fantastic Voyage," "Yassassin," "Boys Keep Swinging," "Look Back in Anger,"—made for some David Byrne-esque lines—"I'll never say anything nice again, how can I?"—but it wasn't until *Scary Monsters* that Bowie showed he could make a definitive album to end the 1970s. The album feels entirely of its moment, able to hold its own on the radio, with lyrics full of a needling irony that belongs in a period dominated, for me, by the vitriol of Elvis Costello. And Bowie even covers a song by Tom Verlaine, the only post-punk guitar hero, late of Television, the main band of my late teens.

Scary Monsters is imbued with themes that resonated with the rightwing turn the US and UK were both taking, and which Bowie had anticipated during his flirting with fascism phase. "To be insulted by these fascists is so degrading," Bowie deadpans on "It's No Game (Part 2)", and it feels like the reverse of that early "genocide" line. Bowie's Berlin years, we might say, had forged a deeper sense of the Cold War divide and the legacy of that Aryan mythos. Bearing witness musically to the aftermath of the 1940s and the major slump and tensions of the post-hippy dream is kind of a drag, but someone

had to do it. 1976-80 represents the period of Bowie production that continues to exert the most fascination on the musicians that come after.

My own teens ended in 1979, so when Bowie sang "I'm not some piece of teenage wildlife," I could nod. The lingering identifications with what he had meant through the long decade since first "face to face with the man who sold the world" should be passing away with my teens. "I miss you, but he had to go / Well, each to his own / He was another piece of teenage wildlife."

5. "I never waved bye-bye"

The Seventies were so over by 1983. The liberals of the Sixties were reaching that magic age when they transform into conservatives. Business and commercial interests created a mainstream atmosphere that was all about—to use the favored term from movies—box office. Bowie played his hand with another transformation: from his past as—count 'em—bisexual übermensch and alien, druggy "thin white duke," gnomic artiste and appreciated uncle of the New Wave into a platinum blonde hip celebrity, light on his feet and all over the radio. *Let's Dance* (1983) and its "Serious Moonlight" tour marked Bowie's shedding of his old label, RCA, the end of his onerous royalty payments to MainMan, and his biggest money-making incarnation yet, with a #3 LP in the US, now a-buzz with the MTV-inspired music marketplace. It was also the first and only time I saw Bowie perform live.

The "Serious Moonlight" show wasn't the best concert I saw that summer: I give that laurel to Talking Heads' show, filmed by Jonathan Demme for *Stop Making Sense* (1984), but seeing Bowie riding his cannily crafted popularity felt satisfying rather than dismaying. He'd paid his dues in the byways of rock and had influenced the sound and look of younger pop acts; it was time he reaped full benefits of his staying power. Though there are tracks from Bowie's 1980s' output that deserve their place in his canon—"Modern Love,"

"China Girl," "Blue Jean," "Dancing with the Big Boys," "Putting Out Fire," "Absolute Beginners"—the fact is that the 1980s weren't kind to acts who got their start in the Sixties. Bowie, with his eye to what suits his style or to what demand he wants to suit, made decent but not very interesting albums (and I like *Tonight* (1984) more than just about anyone else does). Probably his best track of the era was his team up with Queen for "Under Pressure" (1981), a single that featured Bowie and Freddie Mercury, the two great voices of glam, trading off verses and working themselves up into an impassioned plea "to give love one more chance," creating a big radio hit that resonated in the era of AIDS and the rising outcry against apartheid.

Then, in the late 1980s, Bowie took a hiatus from his solo career—he seemed bored by trying to remain popular—in favor of being a band member in a group called Tin Machine, then terminated the band after its second album bombed in Britain (though he kept working with Machine guitarist Reeves Gabrels through the Nineties). The sales of *Tin Machine II* was probably not helped by the fact that, in 1990, Bowie launched the Sound+Vision tour to support CD re-releases of his back catalog on Rhino, and advertised the shows as the last time he would play all his well-known songs, making the tour a stock-taking of what Bowie was and, ostensibly, a farewell to all that.

Me—I turned 30 and launched into grad school as Bowie toured his golden oldies. Rock music was, in some ways, part of the "childish things" I was putting behind me to undertake something a bit more serious, I suppose. The great thing about hearing Bowie—at 43—reviving bits and pieces of his varied career was the mix of the very familiar radio stuff with the songs that continued to define him: "Life on Mars?," "Sound and Vision," "Station to Station," and, of course, "Ziggy Stardust." Bowie looked at the tour as an opportunity to jettison the past so as not to have to compete with it any longer, showing—as he seemed to be doing by trying to fade into a band like Tin Machine—that he was no longer the Bowie of old. And yet his fan base was largely tied to things that had gone before. The problem came

down to the fact that no one needed a new Bowie, except Bowie. The old versions were still the first stop for those seeking out what mattered in the music of the 1970s, and the lessons had been incorporated into many of the best British bands of my generation.

6. "Where have all papa's heroes gone?"

In the next decade, my own engagement with music was already becoming "second generation" in the sense that, after my daughter's 12th birthday in 1993, I began promoting the music of my youth for her—particularly the mid-60s to the mid-80s. The music that mattered to me had already happened, and I was fairly certain Bowie wouldn't surpass his past, especially after his lackluster attempt to ride out the 1980s. How could anything new possess the importance of what he did when he looked young and uncanny? For better or worse, Bowie had been an image maker as well as a sound creator and the images tied to his major phases lived on despite him.

The factor of "image" was also complicated by the fact that Bowie's ongoing film career got more attention in the 1980s. *The Man Who Fell to Earth* worked for Bowie fans because it played so readily into our take on him. But other roles—notably in *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence* (1983), *The Hunger* (1983), and *Labyrinth* (1986)—made us confront the fact that Bowie was, in fact, an actor, as he proved with his run as David Merrick onstage in *The Elephant Man* in the early 1980s. Not only identifiable with his musical personae, he could morph into character roles. There were many kids of my daughter's age and younger for whom Bowie was, first and foremost, *Labyrinth's* Gareth, *The Goblin King,* a campy take-off on his penchant for outrageous costumes and make up. Whatever such parts might do for his image with a new generation, it could not but make the Bowie of the era seem just an actor, not an artist. One began to distance oneself from the trajectory, as with most former heroes who outlived their usefulness.

And indeed Bowie's projects in the 1990s pointed out the attenuated status of the successful, well-known rock celebrity: past laurels overwhelm current work, even if the artist is more mature than before and more capable—because less driven by hit-making requirements—to burrow into what he really wants to achieve. Now, in hindsight, I find considerable interest in seeing Bowie approach his own past from new angles: using *Let's Dance's* producer Nile Rodgers to work on the polished passion of *Black Tie White Noise* (1993), in some ways a search for a success formula as on *Young Americans* and *Let's Dance,* though with more discordant elements; revamping his take on the 1970s, the setting for Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia,* on his 1993 album inspired by his soundtrack work for the BBC show, incorporating ambient sounds and references to his pre-Ziggy 1970s work; returning to the "art-rock" choices of the *"Heroes"* era with a new collaboration with Eno on *1. Outside* (1995), a performance-art/musical novella that returns to "concept album" territory as it presents fragmented glimpses of detective and alter-ego Nathan Adler investigating "Art Crime" and a story about a missing child and a predatory artist.

All these albums are better than I would've believed at the time. They show how Bowie continued to mine certain currents from his peak period, but always with an ear to what was happening in the moment. Critics suggested he was following trends more than creating them, but he was certainly keeping alive certain key elements of his sound and personae. He closed the decade with *Earthling* (1997), an adaptation of electronica, the booming bass and drum music popular in raves in the 1990s—an effort to be young again for a man turning 50—and *Hours* (1999), a more morose '70s-sound for his aging contemporaries. Currying favor in either direction didn't convince me I needed the end-of-the-'90s Bowie, as I felt too old for the former and too young for the latter.

In some of Bowie's interviews from the period one finds the chattiness of a guy who likes to talk ideas. His son, Wowie, then Joe,

then Duncan Jones studied philosophy in graduate school around this time before moving on to film school, and I sense Bowie trying to appeal to the theoretical side of the 1990s, the era when postmodernism reached critical mass. Indeed, Bowie's self-consciousness about his changes had always been part of his mystique. You tended to trust that he had reasons for each new wrinkle, and that his changes weren't simply market-driven. In his 40s, the very notion of being a simulacra of himself or of his early selves might be irresistable, but wasn't that interesting. Still, Bowie considered the cyber world as the dawn of something new, a new means to knowledge and communication that he embraced fully. For me, the intellectual climate was something of an endgame to offset what the century had achieved in art and culture, a reckoning before the virtual retread of everything once the internet got underway.

7. "I demand a better future"

Rock music had barely survived the entertainment incentive of MTV, then was replaced in the tastes of youth by rap and hip-hop, and, in the new century, became merely "classic rock," a flavor among others in online music formats. Albums, which had been crafted to some extent, at least since the mid-60s, as listening experiences were now just the means to music files to be sorted, shuffled, added to the playlist of your choice. The context for rock and the very means of its dissemination changed, with the ongoing digital "remastering" trying to make old analog recordings competitive. For older ears, it was all a bit trying.

Then again, even without new technologies, one's investment in rock heroes—if it survives one's thirties—tends to diminish with age. In the early 2000s, I was 40-something and my daughter was in college and we stayed in touch through tape trades. If my creations were missives from Dad, the twenty-first century releases from the

heroes of my youth might feel a bit like that too. Some of the offerings, though, still sounded very much apropos. Lou Reed's *Ecstasy* (2000), Bob Dylan's *"Love and Theft"* (2001), Tom Waits' *Real Gone* (2004), John Cale's *Black Acetate* (2005) kept their legends alive. And Bowie, in his 50s, was equal to the challenge with back-to-back albums, *Heathen* (2002) and *Reality* (2003), that made even those who'd lost track of him—like me—pay attention again. *Heathen* felt elegiac, which suited me fine in the 2000s, and *Reality* felt a bit like trying to test the phrase "return to form." I preferred the sweep and sorrow palpable in *Heathen,* and even its charming throwaway "Everyone Says Hi" scored. But, as time goes on, *Reality* has won from me gratitude that it exists, particularly the return of Mike Garson's piano—with its *Aladdin*-era associations—on "Bring Me the Disco King," a title that embarrassed me at the time (oh, how '70s can you get?), but that amazes me with how straight Bowie plays it, like a role from some lost glam-based Sergio Leone classic. "The Loneliest Guy," with its shimmering melancholy about a midlife computer jockey, was the one that grabbed me from the start.

On *Heathen,* Bowie's line "I demand a better future"—sung in oddly robotic tones—addresses the supreme being to insist that "I might just stop needing you" or "loving you" if things don't improve. It sounds tongue-in-cheek, but that doesn't mean it's not suitable as an anthem for the times. Bowie, who became father to a daughter in 2000, seemed more than ever to be looking askance at what the world was coming to. In his youth, like most of us, he seemed beguiled by apocalyptic visions. In the post 9/11 world, the glee was gone. Bowie's grimly subdued version of Paul Simon's "America" at the concert for New York in 2001 set the tone for a song drenched in nostalgia like *Heathen's* "Slip Away." And the title track of *Reality*—"I'm back where I started from"—seemed as if the one-time futuristic Bowie found that "reality," or where we are now, had caught up with him. The cover image of a Bowie avatar said it all, in a way.

"Bowie" could morph into any reality, no matter how virtual, dystopian, or enhanced. But was there any "better future"?

Things took a decidedly real turn when Bowie was injured by a callous fan at a show in Norway in 2004, then later suffered a heart attack while on tour and had an emergency angioplasty. By 2010, Bowie, it seemed, was retired, another Newton removed from the fray, or maybe just a family man in his 60s. Then came 2013 and Bowie, turning 66, released *The Next Day,* an album that incorporated so many aspects of all we think of as Bowie as to seem a kind of musical metacommentary. But it wasn't a navel-gazing album in any sense—even though some saw the first single "Where Are We Now" as a recall of the great "Berlin period." The record, with 14 or 17 tracks depending on whether you got the CD or the LP, was sprawling in its subject matter, with Bowie employing a musical idiom that cribbed from his past, and sounded something of a piece with his most recent albums—the inestimable Tony Visconti was involved in all three—but with a more processed sound, as though already encapsulated and curated. Bowie was becoming a museum piece, as in the traveling exhibit of fashion and art and relics, "David Bowie Is" first exhibited in 2013.

With the way things go for aging listeners like me, I admit that I'm still trying to catch up with *The Next Day,* which seemed it might be Bowie's last hurrah. The album boasts so many mini-stories, so much insouciant angst, so many tasty fills and riffs, and such an abundance of different voices, showcasing how much Bowie's art became a way of devising each shift in persona. My sense is that *The Next Day* is like a distillation of the many Bowies we've lived with since the late 1970s. It isn't a nostalgic album—even when visiting the Greenwich Village of Van Ronk and Baez and Dylan—and its songs include scenes of different wars and the kinds of civilian killing sprees endemic in our era and takes shots at the need for stars (the human kind) while also recalling identities like droogies and punks and even the more upbeat pop of *Tonight* (which, again, no

one but me seems to like). Reading the rock press on the album underscores what a thankless task producing music for critical appreciation can seem. The album sold, but what does that say? An artist of Bowie's calibre and thoughtfulness requires that we live with the music before we say what we think of it. Getting around to the lengthy concert album from the Reality tour released in 2010, I'm impressed more than before by Bowie's consistency, his ongoing, engaging relevance to my listening life. And I've at least got to the point of accepting what *The Next Day* isn't in trying to get a grasp of what it is.

8. "Just remember, duckies, everybody gets got"

In a sense, we had been fearing a final album since that abrupt goodbye to touring. *Blackstar,* the last album, and its haunting video for the song "Lazarus," recalling the biblical story of a man raised from the dead, brought Bowie back to us as an exceptional artist and took him away at the same time. Continuing *The Next Day's* tendency to songs with distinct characters, the musical idiom this time draws from avant-jazz and hip hop to a degree Bowie hasn't entertained before, showing that the old dog could still prove tricky. The moody title track broods lyrically about death and following a "blackstar" who takes over the spirit of a dying man. It was released in November with a very occult video that features a ritual with the bejewelled skull of an astronaut. His remains ascend to heaven and a scary monster emerges from the fields to harass writhing scarecrows. Bowie first appears in the video in a blindfold that recalls a character portrait in the artwork accompanying *Outside,* though this time with dark eye circles. He also plays some kind of visionary religious figure brandishing his book of *Blackstar*.

I didn't get to see the New York stage show of *Lazarus,* directed by Ivo Van Hove, and intended as a sequel to Walter Tervis' novel *The Man Who Fell to Earth*. Besides a theatrical showcase for some

new and old Bowie tunes, the return to that subject matter revisits a central Bowie mythos of alien in a strange land, yearning to get back where he belongs.

The video for "Lazarus" features the same blindfolded Bowie from *Blackstar,* now on his death bed. With its final shot of Bowie climbing into a wardrobe as though into a coffin he might yet emerge from, the video plays masterfully with the ambiguity of death. The question of life after death, settled for some believers, remains as the undetermined mystery that awaits us all. Bowie, in the song and video, embraces the mystery, giving us a glimpse of how a true artist meets the end: with art.

9. "Same old thing in brand new drag"

In New Haven, the Yale School of Drama has been staging a drag show extravaganza every February since 2013. One year, a female performer appeared in Bowie drag from *Labyrinth*. This past February, after Bowie's death, the finale was given over to a Bowie medley as hosts Luke Harlan and Fabian Fidel Aguilar strode the stage in Aladdin-era get-ups, lip synching to "Space Oddity" before the entire dancing cast joined them to gyrate to "Starman," "Under Pressure," "Let's Dance." Not the best of Bowie, perhaps, but all immediately recognizable. It was footstompingly good. Thinking of Bowie's line, from "Teenage Wildlife," "same old thing in brand new drag," I was thrilled to see brand new pretty things in the same old drag—Bowie drag—doing his memory proud.

Earlier this year, while the news of Bowie's death was still sinking in, an acapella rendition of "Starman" in a commedia dell'arte performance at the School of Drama, directed by Christopher Bayes, brought tears to my eyes. The voices were deliberately childlike, creating for a moment a vision of us—anyone born after Bowie—as Bowie's children, raised on some version of his gender-bending fashions, his extraterrestrial aura, his unmistakeable voice, his various

styles, his smirking sensuality, his dark visions laced with humor and keen ironies, his actorly self-possession, his enduring cool. Whether or not we harbor dreams of something or someone "waiting in the sky," the words of the song can't help evoking the satisfying closure of a voyager finally called home.

Working for the Dream

Shaunda Holloway

Bring your lunch
In a portable cooler
Or at least a brown paper bag
Plastic makes you look
Poor (even if you are)
Walk on concrete floors forty-eight hours
Per week
Develop something
Painful at the bottom
Of your feet
Catch the bus at the urine seeped
stop (The one poor people don't complain about)
Is it because we afraid to speak
Or is it because we are weak
Maybe it's a combination
Of the two
A truth
A Psychic
Claimed she knew
Is it in our
Heavy-footed walk
Can it be heard through our
Highly-leaded talk
Try to smile
Keep your fingernails
Clean
Don't let insomnia rob
You of the American Dream

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Edith Rye

Amy Alvey is a freelance fiddle player active in the vibrant folk scene in Boston and Cambridge, having graduated from Berklee College of Music in performance in 2011. Now living on the road, her main gig is touring with musician Mark Kilianski as the duo Hoot and Holler.

Kathleen Balma is a Fulbright Scholar and Pushcart Prize winner from the Ohio River Valley of Illinois. Her poems have appeared in *Atlanta Review, Crab Orchard Review, Fugue, Hotel Amerika, The Journal, Mid-American Review, PMS, Puerto del Sol, Rattle, storySouth,* and other magazines. She lives in New Orleans.

Laurence Raphael Brothers is a technologist turned writer. He's published science fiction and fantasy stories in *The Sockdolager, Daily Science Fiction,* and in the SciFutures *City of the Future* anthology. Laurence has recently completed two novels currently making the rounds with agents and publishers.

Donald Brown is a member of Connecticut Critics Circle for theater criticism, a writing tutor at Yale, an editor at *New Haven Review,* and the author of *Bob Dylan: American Troubadour* (2014). From Delaware, he has lived in Connecticut since 1994, and now has a home in Hamden.

Elisabeth Lewis Corley's poems have appeared in *Southern Poetry Review, Hyperion, Carolina Quarterly, Feminist Studies, BigCityLit,* and other publications. Her short film, "About Time," directed by Joseph Megel and produced by Harland's Creek Productions, made the festival rounds in 2013.

Jim Cory is a poet, essayist, and short story writer interested in history, ornithology and architecture. He has authored nine books or chapbooks of poetry, most recently *25 Short Poems* (2016), established a poetry publishing cooperative (Insight To Riot, 1990s) in Philadelphia, and has been the editor of *Packing Up For Paradise* (1998).

Michael Diebert is the author of *Life Outside the Set* (2013). He is poetry editor for *The Chattahoochee Review* and teaches writing and literature at Perimeter College in Atlanta. Other poems are forthcoming in *The Tusculum Review, Pembroke Magazine,* and *Windhover*.

Alex Greenberg is a 17-year old poet whose work has been published or accepted in *The Florida Review, The Cortland Review, Third Coast, Salt Hill, 2River,* and *Arcadia*. He lives in New York City where he hosts a poetry workshop for patients suffering from dementia at the Augustana Long-Term Health Facility in Brooklyn, NY.

Shaunda Holloway (Sekai) is a painter/printmaker and writer born in New Haven, CT. Her writing has been published in *ESSENCE* magazine, *CT Post, Inner City, Stand Our Ground Poems for Trayvon Martin and Marissa Alexander,* and other publications. Her paintings and prints have appeared throughout the East Coast.

Nick Mamatas is the author of several novels, including the alcoholic zombie thriller *The Last Weekend* and the Lovecraftian murder mystery *I Am Providence*. His short fiction has appeared in *Best American Mystery Stories, Tor.com, Asimov's Science Fiction, Mississippi Review,* and many other venues.

Douglas W. Milliken is the author of the novel *To Sleep as Animals* and several chapbooks, most recently the collection *Cream River*. His stories have been published in *Slice, The Collagist,* and the *Believer,* among others. "Possum & Glue" was written as a gift to the author Elizabeth De Wolfe.

David Leo Rice is a writer from Northampton, MA, currently based in Brooklyn. His stories have appeared in *Black Clock, The Collagist, Birkensnake, Hobart, The Rumpus,* and elsewhere.

Matt Salyer is an assistant professor of English at West Point. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Massachusetts Review, The Florida Review, Hunger Mountain, Beloit Poetry Journal, Narrative, New Madrid, New Orleans Review, The Common,* and others.