

New Haven Review

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The Art of the Literary Fake (with Violin)

On knowing a fake when you see one

Jeff VanderMeer

This sentence is a fake.

This sentence is the original.

This sentence is an animal, not a series of words.

Czech writer Michal Ajvaz's short story "Quintus Erectus"¹

provides an instructional metaphor with regard to literary fakes, a form with which readers and reviewers have a long yet uneasy history. "Quintus Erectus" describes a capybara-like South American mammal that, when it stands on its hindquarters, "presses its hands closely to the body, turns its head to the attacker and remains motionless ... two vertical strips of dark hair ... evoke an impression of human hands with fingers," while coloration on the head "depicts the human face." At a distance of three meters "we can easily mistake the animal for a man; from a distance of five meters the animal is indistinguishable from a man." In the story, this unsettling illusion creates a feeling of wrongness and nausea in many observers. Are they seeing an animal or a human being? Is the text itself really a story or is it a disturbing something other, pretending to be a story?

The story of Quintus Erectus in some ways mimics the reaction in certain quarters to the literary fake—a piece of fiction that pretends in some way to be true. Is it fact or fiction? Is it good fun or something more disturbing? By operating under the auspices of traditionally nonfictional modes to tell its story, the literary fake chooses to bring the reader to suspension of disbelief through means that include extreme guile—and, in cases where the reader recognizes the trick, continues to amuse, entertain, and say something interesting about

¹ Michal Ajvaz, "Quintus Erectus," Weirdfictionreview.com, Nov. 15, 2011, available at weirdfictionreview.com/2011/11/quintus-erectus-by-michal-ajvaz/

the human condition regardless. As such, it destabilizes our view of reality, which can be uncomfortable, sometimes unforgivable, especially if we think someone is laughing at us. We don't always appreciate things that look like other things, even if there's a purpose to the mimicry; perhaps this is a vestige of an ancient evolutionary trait that allowed us to discern between the harmless and the harmful.

Nor do some readers, apparently, like to think they are being made to believe something false against their will. Fakes are especially divisive at two essential moments in time: when they slip past the reader's defenses and when the reader discovers the deception. Whether this latter point occurs soon after picking up the book or halfway through it, a literary fake eventually forces the reader to decide whether to be sympathetic or hostile toward the fakery.

Fakes may also be viewed with suspicion as artificial constructs, identified as stories in which the skeleton appears to exist outside of the body, a Quintus Erectus turned inside out. Fiction is meant to be an uninterrupted dream or movie for the reader, we are often told, and those struts and supporting walls should always be inside the house of the narrative; only in nonfiction do we expect to see the architecture.

The irony of this view of fakes as an unnatural form is that most examples are forged by that most liberated state of mind: ecstatic imaginative play, poured into the constraint and thus given shape and structure. However, and here irony piles up upon irony, imaginative play—and, in some cases, results that exist purely as an offering on the altar of Play—creates another issue. Play isn't academically rigorous, can't be easily quantified, and suggests a border that criticism cannot cross. The Quintus Erectus that lies peacefully in the morgue, awaiting dissection, suddenly slips through our fingers when we produce the scalpel, and then reappears, grinning at us mysteriously from a chair across the room. It's as if a mischievous but highly intelligent ghost haunts the text. To speak of a ghost directly, and especially an unpredictable ghost, is to be seen as childish or superstitious, even though we are all childish and superstitious.

The challenge that fakes pose to critics as well as readers is that they're both formally rigorous *and* Quintus Erectus *piñatas*, filled with the amorphously absurd. At the intersection of these contradictions, you often find a reviewer who decides that a literary fake is both too obvious and too unfocused. Such an analysis may see only the Quintus Erectus's mimicry, rather than its essential nature when not standing on its hind legs. Yet as K.K. Ruthven writes in *Faking Literature*,² fakes are worth studying "because they display even more clearly than the counterfactual assemblages that we call literary works that 'disruptive and capricious power' of the imagination which Edgar Wind calls 'anarchic'" (3, 4). Further, "they display a carnivalesque irreverence toward the sanctity of various conventions designed to limit what is permissible in literary production" (4). Forgeries and fakes are at odds with "people and institutions devoted to the idea of order, of certainty, of canon, [who] are seeking a kind of analogue of scientific fact about books that we can categorize, catalogue, analyze" (2). Fakes, then, can be a form of guerilla warfare against the establishment, acting out against the artificiality and sheer bureaucratic impulse that animates much of modern book culture. Naturally, then, a fake can "disturb the guardians of literary studies, book-reviewing, and the literary awards system" (2).

Fakes may mimic order, but they don't support it.

I first became aware of the idea of fakes and forgeries through the works of Jorge Luis Borges and Vladimir Nabokov, among others, before moving on to the artificial constructs of Mark Danielewski's *House of Leaves* much later. Another interesting hybrid is *Magic Prague* by Angelo Maria Ripellino, which attempts to reach a greater psychological understanding of that city by incorporating half-scenes with Kafka and literary characters created by Czech writers; in the book, history and fiction are in some ways indistinguishable and yet

² K.K. Ruthven, *Faking Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

support each other beautifully. These texts represent Quintus Erectus merely sitting or half-standing. My first encounter with a full-fledged fake was in reading the now out-of-print *Birds of the Central Plateau*, by biologist E.B. Morton,³ which purports to be a jovial guidebook to the birds one might find in Mongolia but is really, by book's end, a devastating analysis of the collapse of both a marriage and an expedition, inspired by the author's career-ending adventures a decade earlier. "There is nothing more inspirational and yet depressing to a person in turmoil than the croaking call of the Eurasian black vulture," (225) Morton writes, and she might be right, but it's hardly ornithologically appropriate.

Such works have inspired my own fakes, including the scientific monograph "King Squid" (from *City of Saints & Madmen*) and *Dr. Thackery T. Lamshead's Pocket Guide to Eccentric and Discredited Diseases*. My most infamous fake is the "The Florida Freshwater Squid,"⁴ an article posted at Fantastic Metropolis that detailed an imaginary squid and accompanying festival in Sebring, Florida, which led to a BBC wildlife show producer contacting me about "showing us around the lake and seeing the squid."⁵ Such full-on fakes colonize the world in such a way that it may be hard to untangle them from reality.

But even the "half-fakes" of my youth share characteristics with the standing Quintus Erectus. Nabokov's sense of play and engagement with the world led him to create doppelgangers of himself. He had poetry printed in one émigré journal, but sent letters to the editor under the pseudonym of Sirin castigating his own poetry. Sirin then submitted poetry to these same journals, and Nabokov, under

³ E.B. Morton, *Birds of the Central Plateau* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1982).

⁴ Jeff VanderMeer, "The Florida Freshwater Squid," Fantasticmetropolis.com, December 18, 2001, available at www.fantasticmetropolis.com/i/squid/full/.

⁵ Email to Jeff VanderMeer, May 17, 2008.

his own name, responded in kind. Is there any real purpose to such play except to perpetuate a sense of the absurd, and also to point out the pointlessness of the rituals of the literary world? In “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote,” Borges famously posited a copy of Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* that was identical to the original, severely complicating the idea of originality and blurring the line between the literary experiment, or literary flirtation with fakery, and the actual literary fake. W.G. Sebald’s *Vertigo*, like most of his “novels,” mixes dreamlike encounters with elements of real travelogue supported by photographs and other images that provide a nonfictional framework. The photographs help to create and sustain the mood much as they do in a literary fake; imagine, for example, if the photos in *Vertigo* were replaced by images of Mexican wrestlers, LOLcats, and slices of blueberry pie. Sebald doesn’t intend to trick the reader at the macro level; from the back cover, we know that we’re encountering fiction with nonfictional elements. But at the micro level of the paragraph and sentence, there’s a kind of blurring that, if we interrogated it, we would identify as trickery, over and over again—even as it reaches for some deeper truth.

It is within this overall context that I want to examine *An Incomplete History of the Art of Funerary Violin*,⁶ by “Rohan Kriwaczek,” a true literary fake—one, furthermore, that reflects considerable thought about the subject and the form while also demonstrating those aspects of absurdity and high-level imaginative play that must be present for such a work to be successful. It is full-on Quintus Erec-tus. The author clearly knows the order by which one hooks a reader and makes ironclad the case for the reality of the reading. Some readers will identify a fake immediately because their brains are wired in much the same way as the book’s wiring. But *Funerary Violin* will take the majority of readers deep into the interior before the light begins to dawn (unless, of course, you’re reading this essay). The main

⁶ Rohan Kriwaczek, *An Incomplete History of The Art of Funerary Violin* (New York: Overlook Press, 2006).

reason for the book's success, beyond the skill of the execution, is the selection of a subject—the violin—that is very familiar in a general way but also obscure in its details to most people. This provides “Kriwaczek” a creative space within which to work unencumbered by reader knowledge, and helps distinguish the book from lesser attempts, whose much more esoteric subject matter or narrower scope restricts the possible effects. (These lesser efforts are Quintus Erectus turned into a pathetic naked mole rat or a brittle praying mantis.) Examining the evidence by which *Funerary Violin* achieves its effects allows not just for discussion of the book, but also a way to discuss literary fakes in general.

For example, sequencing makes a huge difference in literary fakes, which must not only establish the details of the real world in relation to the context of the fakery, but simultaneously develop two opposite strategies: a defensive posture (sometimes even a siege mentality) that requires it to disguise its fictional nature, and also an offensive position (battle order, lines of attack) that requires it to convince the reader in proactive fashion of its veracity. (Quintus Erectus in most cases must rise to its hind legs by degrees, so that we can see the process of it standing erect, while the puppet master disguises the actual transformation from beast to human being.) Another element related to imaginative play—one that shows how applying a military metaphor eventually breaks down—enters into the plans only when the reader has already been surrounded: that is, to see how many absurdities can be stacked in such an order and with such an emphasis as to seem un-absurd.

It's no coincidence that the reader of *The Art of the Funerary Violin* is first confronted by a list of the illustrations found within the book. This list serves as the vanguard: a series of probing feints encrypted with their own bona fides. History automatically accretes around the central lie in descriptions like “copy of a detail from a 1725 confectioner advertisement,” which provides both cover and context. “Cover of the Erroneous Dirge of George Babcoote, 1697,” “Portrait thought to be of George Babcoote,” and “Gallery of Violin

Paintings, possibly used by Funerary Violinists” (vii–ix) also introduce the kind of teasing uncertainty that reinforces the fake. History is hardly ever certain, so why should a fake be any more perfect? Introducing hesitation is key to a fake’s success. Into that space where the mind pauses to reach a conclusion, the fake rushes in with all available troops, quickly building fortifications so it can hold onto its hard-won territory.

But a story worth telling, one that lifts a fake above its fakery, should have a leader, a general. One popular approach is similar to a device found in nineteenth-century fiction: to include an introductory tale, or frame, that evokes personal investment in the subject matter. *The Art of Funerary Violin* provides just such a story through its foreword, in which “Rohan Kriwaczek” reveals details of his own life. The details must support the lie, but also venture beyond the core context of the lie, while the mere presence of a guide in the form of creator-as-narrator conveys authority.

A compelling entry point into the personal is a tale that includes evidence of life’s usual banal disappointments, because these tales are so common in real life. “Kriwaczek,” conjuring up the Kriwaczek in the foreword—he’s wearing the cured skin of a *Quintus Erectus*—uses this approach masterfully. A promising musician, Kriwaczek’s lofty goals out of college are soon supplanted by more modest ones: “My mind was filled with delusional dreams of becoming a concert soloist ... [but] for a number of years I floundered on the shoreline of popular success” (xi). This recognition of mediocrity comes properly tinged with the equivalent of the bitter inner lining of a walnut shell: “endlessly surprised by the astonishing ignorance (as I saw it then) of the critics and audiences alike” (xi). Like all of us, he must “embrace the actuality” of his existence (xi).

In this setup, the fake reveals just a glimmering hint of itself. Forewords can include personal information, but in reading this particular foreword, I was struck by how little there was to distinguish aspects of it from the fictional tale of a man, down on his luck and adrift, who is overtaken by an odd obsession seen as a rescuing ship.

In those scenarios, such a person might come under an evil influence, or encounter a supernatural presence, or experience existential angst in his search for validation and eventually experience some revelation, external or internal. Our narrator, however, stumbles upon an organization so neglected it has become—by accident rather than conspiracy or effort—secret.

But is such an approach in a foreword that mimics the fictional truly a minor tell, or is it much more common in nonfiction than we might suppose? Just how separate are nonfiction and fiction? In reading *The Art of the Funerary Violin's* foreword, I was reminded of the nonfiction book *Penguins: Their Ways and Their Biology*, by George Cuthbert.⁷ That book's foreword is full of astonishing personal revelations, and its chapters shot through with the author's frustrations and passions. For example: "The average penguin researcher is a drunk or a charlatan, or some mix of both that cannot be found on the chart of human evolution. These people often attach themselves to perfectly functional zoology and ecology departments in the United States like leeches and cannot be dislodged, or dissuaded from their ridiculous assertions ... creating difficulties for those of us doing the real work in the field" (ii). Or: "I was drawn to the South American penguin because of its distinctive attitude reminiscent of the attitude of peoples in Argentina and Chile ... which suggests a kind of cross-cultural pollination over time with the human populations, with which I have lived and worked for almost four decades" (iv). Or statements such as

the evolution among a particular subspecies ... of a specialized foot hook suited to navigating across certain kinds of coastal rock croppings is lazily ascribed by such incompetent researchers as H.M. Smith as solely the result of their isolation. Yet Smith and those he has decided

⁷ George Cuthbert, *Penguins: Their Ways and Biology* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961).

to call his colleagues fail to take into consideration at least three other factors. (54)

In many ways, *Penguins: Their Ways and Their Biology* is more about the author, and the scores he wants to settle, than about penguins. (And what about this author? Isn't he a fake as presented within the book, seeing him only in three-quarters penguin profile and knowing nothing else about him but those eccentricities he allows to spill out seemingly without voluntary intent, but because he has to?)

C.W. Hart Jr.'s infamous *A Dictionary of Non-Scientific Names of Freshwater Crayfishes (Astacoidea and Parastacoidea), Including Other Words and Phrases Incorporating Crayfish Names*⁸ is another example of cross-pollination. The introduction cites Douglas Adams and Macbeth, with the author comparing himself to "a zoologist deep in a swamp inhabited by alien beings such as ethnobiologists, linguists, and no doubt other things" (1). As the introduction progresses, it becomes clear that even though what follows is definitely true, it is nonfiction devoted to the fictions that human beings have created around crayfish and the naming of crayfish. Of course, this applies to any general dictionary to some extent, but it is more nakedly laid bare when one encounters "wonderous words" such as "crawdaddy, crow pappy, koura, mudbug, yabbie, shawgashee, and koongooloo." Even the author admits that "one would be hard-pressed to find such poetic creations in latter day fabrications" (3). In referring to fabricated names, he notes that "to call a word 'common' that has been invented by an individual or committee and published in an obscure journal might charitably be called exaggeration. If taken seriously, it begs for

⁸ C.W. Hart Jr., *A Dictionary of Non-Scientific Names of Freshwater Crayfishes (Astacoidea and Parastacoidea), Including Other Words and Phrases Incorporating Crayfish Names* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994).

a redefinition of the word ‘common.’” One might append a note to this observation that such a dictionary helps elucidate the concept of general versus specialized knowledge as it applies to the literary fake: I, as a layperson, would have no real idea if Hart faked or embellished any of his entries, as the field of crayfish study is about as popular as the study of lichens, which has perhaps 250 to 300 researchers worldwide.

In many cases, then, a nonfiction book is almost as filled with the subjective, as animated and sustained by elements other than facts, as a novel. (And here Quintus Erectus largely passes the baton on to a many-named, somewhat smug crayfish and a metafictional penguin enraged at its misrepresentation but also mesmerized by the author Cuthbert’s eccentricities.) This is probably because, on some level, most interesting texts can be said to enter the world thanks to some repetitive act of obsession, even if the obsession’s details don’t match up perfectly with the subject matter. *Penguins* is rendered a fake, or a kind of incomplete mimic, because its obsession with peripherals makes it turn away from its subject and toward the author’s own life, which at times imposes its own pattern on the text. *A Dictionary of Non-Scientific Names* represents a kind of lesser and greater lunacy. The author isn’t truly eccentric, but the subject matter reveals a talent for the fictional, for storytelling. Perhaps creating fakes comes naturally to us, on some level.

By contrast, fakes meant truly as fakes tend to be more disciplined than real nonfiction because most readers expect rationality from their nonfiction, even if we can’t actually depend on it. The fake thus mimics something fake: an idea of nonfiction that doesn’t always exist on the page, an objectivity that even varying versions of the same period of history tell us is false. Read the historian Gibbons and the Byzantine Empire was a decadent, pathetic shadow of the Roman Empire; read John Julius Norwich and it was a vibrant, canny success—and similar details accrete to different conclusions. A parallel can be made to dialogue in fiction. Novelists don’t generally convey what might be said like transcripts of actual conversation;

they almost always provide a stylized version that approximates reality, and the reader has come to expect this convention.

The narrator's tale in the foreword of *The Art of the Funerary Violin* asks us to partake of the lie by requiring us to identify to some extent with a protagonist, the guide who is about to show us wonders, and in both fiction and nonfiction, we want to be convinced by that guide. So we're made to sympathize with Kriwaczek as he sets his sights lower, specializes, and begins to "market my concerts as the Saddest Music in the World." (xii). The reader may at this point, through the classic magician's misdirection, be much more focused on Kriwaczek's situation than on the art of the funerary violin.

A modicum of success ensues for Kriwaczek—your protagonist should be misunderstood rather than just a loser—and one of his concerts leads to his initiation into the Guild of Funerary Violinists, a key component of this particular fake. While the individual's personal tale is the beckoning finger leading the reader into the text, involvement with Something Greater Than Oneself lends a wider significance. Organizations, societies, groups of any kind are especially useful in this context. They also provide the exquisite raw material of eccentric characters and repositories of knowledge that can then be attributed to said organization—*voilà!*—without requiring further citation. Citations become closed vessels rendered airtight by the authority of the faked organization. They also provide endless opportunities for the absurd, as anyone who has ever visited a long-established group of any kind can attest. In stories about fakes, like Michael Moorcock's "The Society of Unprofessional Beggars"⁹ or Joyce Carol Oates's "The Doppelganger's Doppelganger,"¹⁰ the authors are on record as having fictionalized the stranger experiences from their separate writer groups, Moorcock's being a New Wave writers' meeting in London and Oates's, as described in

⁹ Michael Moorcock, "The Society of Unprofessional Beggars," *The Savoy Book of Indulgence* (Manchester, England: Savoy Press, 1974).

¹⁰ Joyce Carol Oates, "The Doppelganger's Doppelganger," *The Kenyon Review*, new series, vol. 20, no. 1 (Winter 1998).

The Kenyon Review, being “a lesser form of Bloomsbury, in the 1960s, in upstate New York, on a hippy commune” (123).

It’s important that any fake organization be interesting, but not too interesting. Flamboyance, especially near the start, raises suspicion: Quintus Erectus decked out in a cloak of sequins and peacock feathers becomes a traveling burlesque sideshow soon burned to the ground by angry villagers. In the case of *The Art of Funerary Violin*, one would hardly expect flamboyance anyway. The Guild is comprised of a drab, “dreary collection of fellows,” who tend a “disorganized, neglected archive” (xii). The Guild was “never a secret society,” but through a pattern of both persecution and indifference had become “highly secretive” (xiii). Naturally, Kriwaczek becomes the guild’s secretary, and having found his niche, sets about making it his nest—nominating new members while “slowly eliminating members of the old guard” (xiii). Persecution and indifference are two of the more persuasive forces in the real world and in our most paranoid insecurities; they often appear in fakes, and their intertwining here lays the groundwork for multiple opportunities to lie extravagantly later in the book.

Having established the reality of the narrator’s personal story and framed the context around an organization, a fake must also provide a broader context, usually with some perspective that puts down deep roots in the bedrock of existing history. Unless the faker is truly committed and skilled, he or she usually begins to flounder here, and the reader begins to discern the difference between a fake and a joke. If a faker can push through successfully in this area of detail, he will have created the foundation upon which to build ever more interesting effects.

Rohan Kriwaczek, clearly no novice, has a firm sense of his responsibility as a faker. Thus, the reader learns that the guild was founded in 1586 and popularized both by the royal courts and its presence among commoners in villages. A series of additional “facts” follow, creating a seemingly unbroken chain of evidence. Some of these facts are not just inspired but also hilarious. In the 1770s, as

the idea of funerary violin becomes ever more codified, Herr Hieronymus Gratchenfleiss makes it a “composed form of music,” “evolving pieces to depict the panic of death, the seductive qualities of death, the dizzy confusion of death, and so forth” (3). The 1810s bring with them the “appearance of popular funerary duels amongst Funerary Violinists”:

the soon to be deceased would leave a fragment of melody with his will, and two Funerary Violinists would improvise in turn ... each trying to draw more tragedy from it ... the winner being the artist who drew the most tears from the assembled crowd. (3)

Here, Kriwaczek has decided to preface plunging into the waters of the absurd by first testing them with a perilous dipped toe. The best creators of this kind of literature, fully invested in pulling off a fake, must by definition see how close to the edge they can push the conceit before the whole *tromp l'oeil* warps and disintegrates, falling from the cliff into the seas below while the eccentric penguin researcher watches, laughing. Without this tension, eliciting a sense of risk from those members of the audience who understand the high-wire act on display, a fake can seem lethargic, low-stakes, and even boring or dry.

More to the point, however, the world we live in is filled with such absurdities as dueling death musicians, and if the fake is to mirror the real world convincingly, then it must reflect the complexity and irrationality of reality ... while trying to pull back at just the point when the reader’s disbelief in real life begins.

Just how absurd is the real world? Here are some “facts.”

- The Visigoths created cloaks out of field mouse pelts, with the most important chiefs having the cloaks woven out of the most pelts.
- The term “going to hell in a hand basket” comes from Charlemagne’s efforts to subjugate pagan German chieftains

amid suspicions that his lieutenants weren't being forceful enough. He therefore demanded that he be brought the right hands of those who refused to submit, and his lieutenants brought these pagan hands to him in baskets.

- After the withdrawal of foreign powers from Venice, Venetians replaced the portraits of their real leaders from the occupation with faked portraits of imaginary leaders, complete with faked histories, to render invisible the fact that they had once been conquered.
- In ancient Byzantium, a dispute between two rival theater groups over esoteric matters of stage business once sparked a civil war.

Which of these facts are actually true? Which are lies? Perhaps they are all true, perhaps they are all lies, but on the face of it, without referring to a search engine, can you tell the difference? Probably not, because the operational reality of fact is, in fact, permeated with the seemingly ridiculous. A fact is not on its face something rational or scientific that can be pinned down like a butterfly (although it can be pinned down like a Nabokovian butterfly). A fact often reflects all the teeming irrationality and insanity and, yes, imaginative play the world has to offer because the human mind is an odd and truly various organ. That scientists have recently determined that they can't precisely differentiate centers of logic and emotion in the brain comes as no surprise. How else to explain this entry in the crayfish dictionary, for one of the simplest terms, "shrimp"?

Shrimp "(A) crevice, first a spron frey, then a shrimp, then a sprawn, and when it is large then called a crevice." ASTACIDAE [U.K.] Randle Holme (ca. 1688), quoted by Phipson, 1883:435. [I was unable to find this quotation in Holme.]

"One of the courses was whole crevisses in a rich sauce.... The guest of honor ... muttered ... 'What do I do now?' ... [B]ecause I had struggled

before with the same somewhat overrated delicacy ... I winked at him and said, 'Watch me.' I picked up a shrimp between my left thumb and forefinger." [France: Dijon] Fisher, 1943 (1954): 430 (*Noble and Enough*); and:

"The season for shrimps is short, and Madame Mossu paid well for all the boys and old men could find in their hundred icy streams." [Switzerland: Chatel St Denis] Fisher, 1943 (1954):506 (*I Remember Three Restaurants*); and

"A light curry of shrimps or crayfish tails." [Unspecified locality] Fisher, 1943 (1954):708 (*W is for Wanton*).

Fisher's apparent lack of attention to her crayfish/shrimp food-stuffs is puzzling, considering she is (was) an important figure in gastronomy. In the first reference she speaks of *ecrevisses* and shrimps as if they are the same animal; in the second she is undoubtedly speaking of crayfishes that live in the streams of Switzerland; in the third she paradoxically distinguishes between shrimps and crayfishes. I suppose, like so many people, she just didn't care. See also *crawfish*, *crayfish*, and *ecrevisse*. (69–70)

If ever one needed evidence that story exists all around us, everywhere, and is inhibited only by the limitations of the imaginations that must give it expression, this entry provides that evidence. It contains all the elements needed to inspire and create fiction: possible settings, characters, historical context, subject matter, theme; even an authorial voice slightly contemptuous of the main character.

This real entry also exhibits one of the best characteristics of a good fake: As it keeps pushing out to the edge and receding back into the more banal, a good fake also keeps "cooking," creating its own mythology as a constant byproduct of its churning engines of invention. Such mythology usually requires personalities like heroes and villains. In *Funerary Violin*, Kriwaczek chronicles the Great Funerary Purges (1833), originating in orders from the papacy in Rome and carried out by European governments. Conveniently, and yet

also in line with real historical accounts of papal doings, “books went missing from libraries” (4) as a result of “apparently unconnected burglaries” (4). Anonymous pamphlets are circulated that condemn Funerary Violin as “the music of the devil,” and, the author asserts, as a result, the Funerary Violin tradition suffers “wholesale destruction,” along with “subsequent removal of any references to it” (4). A once important thing with a long history is rendered obscure and irrelevant, wiped out by conspiracy. Later, in a section entitled “The Subtle Art of the Funeral March,” Kriwaczek elaborates on these general references in relating the fates of two visionaries named Sudbury and Dubuisson, in the process engaging in rhetorical flourishes that, had they appeared earlier, would have seemed forced and overwrought:

It is society’s eternal tragedy that those who aspire to greatness and reach their goal must necessarily be brought down by those they stand above. How many times have the grandest achievements of man been destroyed by a jealous and aggressive multitude? How many temples have been torn to the ground by hordes of unbelieving soldiers in search of plunder? How many visionaries were cast into the blackness of obscurity in the interest of politics and power?... How much has been lost again and again?... It is the very nature of man to build too high and be destroyed! It is the very nature of man to see a thing of beauty and leave it broken and dead, that none thereafter might possess that which seems unattainable. (16)

The fragility illuminated by these words strikes me hardest, and resonates the most; there’s precious little archness to the passage, precious little winking. We like to think of institutions and traditions as exactly what those words connote: unending lineage, dependability, anchors of the world, mental landmarks that help create order out of chaos. But in truth, the world is in much greater flux than we would like to admit. Further, when a tradition is snuffed out in such a way as the art of the funerary violin, it evokes a sense of unfairness.

This is a natural emotion if we possess empathy for other people, but, also, few of us truly enjoy change. We don't want to have to embrace what change tells us about our reality in general, and thus, when we feel an emotion of regret and agitation upon reading about the fake extinguishing of a fake tradition, we are also expressing our selfish belief in the comfort of inertia. We don't want our signposts, our landmarks, changed, because then we suffer mental turmoil and have to redraw our maps.

And yet, I have a whole book full of crayfish names that ultimately supports the idea of a somewhat illogical world that is constantly shifting and changing and killing off that which exists, not out of any impulse of malice or evolution, but purely through chance, fate, and perhaps a typographical error in a scientist's notebook. This name that is unsubstantiated in origin and yet supplants that name; this name gone because so is the language that birthed it; this other name that was not meant at first to describe a crayfish, but came to it through a series of obscure and mistake-riddled events.

But once a fake has set out the history of the focus of its fakery, what is left? The thing itself: Music and Death. It is here that *The Art of the Funerary Violin* outdoes itself, because a fake can often get away with offering the full context but bypass The Thing Entire. A fake can, by nibbling away at the edges and offering secondary accounts, and *alluding to*, dispense with the central subject entirely, so that the reader sees that subject through its absence, the outline created by the building up of all around it. This technique, also seen in more conventional fictional structures (see the work of Karen Joy Fowler), can work for a fake, but usually provides less satisfaction because it is less truthful about the lie.

The introduction to *The Art of the Funerary Violin* at a certain point pulls free of historical detail, from the potential disbelief of purges and duels, to focus on the emotive core of the music itself. In doing so, it offers a descriptive reality for the music as detailed as any character study found in a novel. In addition to noting "two

strains of Funerary Violin music,” ceremonial and cathartic or spiritual, the book puts forward a strong case for the importance of music in making sense of death—in reaching for an understanding that cannot be put into words. As Kriwaczek relates, “at times of Catholic suppression Funerary Violinists would slip in musical references to the banned liturgy to highlight the spiritual essence of their performance” (5). Surviving accounts convey “the intense directness of their playing: how it seems to reach into the very hearts of those who are present” (5).

This observation leads to an examination of the Funerary Violinist’s role “not from a practical but from an emotional perspective, for though manners and ideologies may have changed considerably over the years, emotions are unchanging, death remains death, and man’s concern with it is unerring” (5). From there, we are told of the deep grief the violinist must convey and transform into a thing of beauty, to console the family and friends of the deceased in their “heightened emotional state”: “This moment is crucial, and if misjudged can lead to disaster” (5). The goal is a “deep and plaintive calm,” achieved by simplicity. “Any hint of flashiness, even the slightest breath of ego, will destroy the spell” (5). The same could be said about a fake, to be honest. The quote leads us back to a prior observation about narrow versus broad subject matter, and how this affects the quality of a literary fake. The truth is that almost any examination of violin music and the theme of death would affect us emotionally, whether eliciting pathos or bathos. The artificial construct is irrelevant at that point in the narrative of the fake; all that matters is whether the analysis and conclusions read as true outside of the world of the fake.

The barb of snark in these sections of *Funerary Violin* is maintained only as a tiny sliver, aimed at all that is not funerary music, reflecting the viewpoint of the penguin researcher or the man hiding in an underground bunker full of concertos, for whom the sky above is an abomination filled with the sounds of less disciplined music:

“Had [funerary violin music] survived until today, who knows how it would have reflected our current disowning of death?... But then perhaps a spiritless age deserves a spiritless death. It is not for me to judge” (5).

That last line is crucial. Kriwaczek is just the observer who may have his own tale to tell, but only so much as it pertains to the subject. His long nights blowing off steam at raves, dancing to techno music in rebellion against his funerary music obsession, are irrelevant. His long addiction to morphine, which lends the music further context while he lies in bed listening to the few recordings—also unimportant. His romance with his assistant in the guild archives is alluded to only in a handful of near-prurient sentences and a dying fall of corresponding subtext. Just enough to give us the edges of a life beyond the music—to give us that hazy glimpse of sky—but not enough for us to, say, call into question the objectivity of a penguin researcher. (The truth, too, is that I have extended to Kriwaczek certain dignities and respect that another essayist might have withheld. I have treated Kriwaczek as if in some guise he were a real person, the true author of *The Art of the Funerary Violin*, when it is doubtful that the true author and the construct share the same name. “K” may be the conduit for an army, a chorus, an oligarchy of voices. The narcissism of authorship is unimportant to a literary fake; the obliteration of self is part of the point.)

All of the above has spooled out, for the most part, within a few short pages of foreword and introduction, emphasizing the other quality of a good fake: compression, even when the narrative does not seem particularly concise (a ramble may in fact be a rescue expedition or an undercover mission). In the attention to detail, and the ability to pick out the interesting facts and present them to the reader in compelling prose, the creator of a fake expresses in its purest form the goal of most nonfiction writers. In working with fiction to create fact, there is an infinite amount of material at one’s disposal, bounded only by the imagination. Reality for the faker is a

false constraint. How many nonfiction writers, in reaching the core of their books, no matter how much eccentricity surrounds that core, have wished that they could just make something up?

Perhaps there is some alternate literary reality in which *The Art of the Funerary Violin* exists as a true and poignant history of a forgotten musical form.

How, then, do we read a fake like *The Art of the Funerary Violin*?

The question is relevant because while mired in the guts of such a book the reader may come to a better appreciation of the value of compartments usually taken for granted—like chapters. As a fake proceeds, there is always tension between fidelity to the concept and readability. In lesser fakes, the author gives in to the impulse to pander, breaks formation, abandons the game, and provides more conventional fictional elements. But in the best fakes, the formation is never broken, and the tell never completely appears; it hovers somewhere just beyond the reader’s grasp. Most fakes of any length thus are meant to be sampled, then sampled again. They contain the lesson of how to read them by the form they take. Would you read a crazy penguin researcher like you would an upright animal mimic or a “short lobster” dictionary? Would you react to them in exactly the same way?

A fake glossary is not telling you to read it like a magazine article. A fake medical guide is not telling you to read it like a mystery novel. Material never meant to stand up to prolonged reading *will not stand up to prolonged reading* (Quintus Erectus grows tired) or, rather, the reader cannot stand up to it because the natural byproduct of certain aspects of a fake is boredom. A precise fake might even require the generation of a certain amount of boredom, the same kind that creeps over a reader while reading too much of a medical textbook—although it is true that the reader ultimately produces the boredom, not the book, and levels will vary from person to person.

Without the lubricant of some amount of boredom, which satisfies our expectation of extended exposure to particular forms of writing, can literary fakes fully convince?

Along with an enervating and ironic understanding of the uses of boredom, the creator of a good fake realizes that, for some, the fake will never be good enough or it always will be too good. The writer who engages in such a task must therefore understand that the task is, to some extent, impossible: the perfect fake is also the most imperfect. If a faker loses his or her nerve and loses fidelity—trumps allegiance to form and deception and, in a sense, discards the disguise—the reader (or reviewer) may cry foul, recognizing the structural deviation, even though if the book had maintained fidelity, stayed undercover, that, too, would have been a cause for criticism.

Of course, trying to do the impossible is extremely liberating. You cannot succeed, so in a perverse way, you cannot truly fail.

After the introduction, *The Art of the Funerary Violin* opens up onto ingenious chapters focused on individuals, early traditions, and conspiracies. Everything is presented in its place and by degrees, so that acclimation in this case—like a deep-sea diver not getting the bends or a frog in a hot pot boiling slowly so it doesn't think to jump out—manifests as the continuation of belief. Even those who at some point stop believing may keep reading, fascinated with the high-wire act, and with the individual acts of humor, inspiration, and insight that populate each sentence, each paragraph, each set piece. Where will it fail? Who will fall?

This is where the fake becomes a majestic, full-on folly, and we recognize that the author is committed, and possibly just a little bit insane, because the same obsession and single-minded commitment detailed in Kriwaczek's foreword appears throughout the book. (The author of *Penguins* would approve.) Someone might, on a whim, giddy with the heady high of imaginative play, write a foreword to a

fake history, but who in their right mind would devote a portion of their lives to writing, at length, a forgery encompassing, for example, “Paganini, the Vatican, and Rumors of Demonic Associations” (115)? Unless, of course, there were something working behind the scenes of the fake, some impulse, some attempt at communication that mimicked the machinations of a haunted house—a place that provides shelter, but in its unexpected sounds, slamming doors, and apparitions, becomes a repository of something greater than the functional.

To secure the foundations, “A Brief Summary of Early Funeral Music” further deepens the historical context while providing a reason for the funerary violin not becoming common knowledge, feeding our own paranoia and certainty that much more exists in the world than we can possibly know, like mouse pelts used for the cloaks of Visigoths.

Funerary Violinists were, by their very nature, solitary musicians and, traditionally, were kept secret from the circus of court and church musicians whose more plebeian role was to entertain the wealthy and inspire fault ... [this led to] Funerary Violinists being generally ostracized by other professional musicians of the day, seen as a separate culture unto themselves and, ultimately, becoming victims of the same historical snobbery that left folk music unacknowledged as of any social or artistic relevance. (11)

Later chapters also place the nonreal beside the real, but with a different emphasis. Some, like “Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart,” which suggests that the famous composer moonlighted as a funerary violinist to pay the bills, serve as grace notes or bon mots. Others flesh out ideas from the introduction, like a chapter entitled “Pierre Dubuisson: Grand Master of the Funerary Duel” (77). But in others, under the pretense of nonfiction, Kriwaczek uses a variety of devices and techniques more common to fiction to create portraits of people or

situations that support his central thesis. Devotion to this enterprise also distinguishes the true fake from the mere joke.

The most notable fiction tradition touched upon is, perhaps unsurprisingly, the Gothic. The chapter “Herr Hieronymous Gratchenfleiss” invokes full moons, demonic pacts, and unholy unions in its depiction of possibly the greatest funerary violinist. In a true work of fiction the discovery of the Hildesheim Trunk at the chapter’s end would put some implied or explicit supernatural twist on the story. In the context of *The Art of the Funerary Violin*, however, this very traditional Gothic plot device simply sheds new light on the violinist’s compositions. Another chapter, “Charles Sudbury,” references William Beckford, who built at least two Gothic monstrosities: Font-hill Abbey and the novel *Vathek* (81). Sudbury, portrayed as the dark genius of funerary violin, even carries on a correspondence with Beckford. The model for this chapter appears to be Poe, including “The House of Usher,” because Sudbury is clearly disturbed. A Baptist minister writes in 1811 that “there is something cold and evil in his eyes, like the look of a man who has walked with Death and now, no longer sees the beauty of life.... Woe betide any who get in his way, for at them he hisses like a Devil” (79). The reader is also treated to enthusiastic accounts of Sudbury’s continued mental decline and morbid fascination with the accoutrements of death. Kriwaczek even includes poetry from Sudbury, with such lines as “Where no light shines, no single spark / Remains: where flesh is doomed to rot to nought / And worms feast upon his sensuous limbs?” (89).

The nod to Gothic literature reaches its crescendo in the chapter “Father Elias Passmore Jarvis,” which includes excerpts from the priest’s testament that we are invited to read only “with great caution, if not scepticism” (120). In the account, Father Jarvis describes being ordered to confiscate funerary violin artifacts as part of a purge and, in the process, encountering “a red mist” (123) and then “a mysterious figure” with “pointed ears, large glowing eyes, and a large pointed nose” (124). The further discovery of the score to

a funerary violin composition, written in blood on the wall of a foggy alleyway, is presented as a lie added by the priest to justify his initial mission.

Supporting these stories is a vital additional element running through the book: visuals, which are the greatest friend and the greatest enemy of the faker. Text can tell whatever lie it likes and be granted the luxurious illusion of authority for at least some period of time, whether it lasts a paragraph or a hundred pages. Images, however, are immediately judged, and although a skillful caption may lead a reader to the conclusion the faker desires, a mistake in execution can ruin the effect forever.

The Art of the Funerary Violin is exceedingly clever in its use of visuals. In the macabre yet hilarious painting entitled “A Dutch Funeral,” Kriwaczek presents the absence of visual evidence—there’s no violinist in the picture—as evidence of marginalization; in the process, every relevant image from the period lacking evidence becomes an accomplice to Kriwaczek’s argument (6). The absurdity of the approach reaches almost Monty Python heights, but it is deadly serious, because in the real world, people and groups are rendered invisible all the time. It is also brilliant because it requires no doctoring at all, nothing that might destroy the illusion of authenticity.

Similarly, a faked eighteenth-century advertisement (18) looks naked compared to what you could conjure up from that period, but the plainness works in the advertisement’s favor. Documents supposedly from the real world that support the fake lend gravitas, though perhaps not as much as they once did, given the popularity of fiction-fictions like *Griffin & Sabine* and the ease with which one can create them on a computer these days. The key in our image-insane world seems to be not to overemphasize, not to go overboard, so that the image becomes a glint, and not a wink, from the past.

Portraits of relevant personages also appear in *The Art of the Funerary Violin*. In all of them, that communal, universal look of seriousness stamps “authentic” on the book’s pages. That ridiculous

yet sly story about a violin player and his favorite cat? The over-involved imbroglia of a four-way love affair involving a funerary violinist, the patron who would not die, a maid, and a young lord? The portraits give them an official stamp of approval. “Found violin” pictures serve the same purpose; these are portraits of the main subject, after all, and within reason, the more of them can be included, the better. (The ease of finding such images online convinces one that a fake about funerary violins is much easier to support this way than a fake about, say, funerary refrigerators.)

The Dutch Funeral and the portraits in a sense merge on page 76, wherein the author has included a photograph of a funeral procession for violinist Jacques Dubaïsson (1937) followed by a photograph of Dubaïsson in an open coffin (!). The corpse has the same serious expression as the living people depicted in the portraits, perhaps in part because, as the text notes, “no violinist was present, nor was any music played” (75). The progression from general funeral to specific coffin presages a later visual that will build on the idea of “specific coffin.” Indeed the author eventually doubles down, providing a photograph of important funerary violinist Charles Sudbury’s vine-be-deviled catafalque from two different angles—showing neither words nor other clues as to whether someone named Sudbury is indeed entombed within.

The portraits also double, freed from the subjectivity of paint only to be imprisoned in pixels, culminating on page 112 in the extraordinarily serious photograph of two heavily bearded official mourners, called “Mutes,” dressed in what appear to be suit-ropes with long sashes wound across one shoulder and hats the shape of the sharp nibs of calligraphy pens on their heads, each carrying a standard of some sort that has been shrouded in a thick cloth. The effect, if flipped to upon first buying the book, is as if someone had photographed two Greek Orthodox monks about to go on holiday. The caption on this particular photograph reads: “Matthew Connisten (on the right) photographed in 1885 in his official capacity as 1st Mute. The

strain of his eighteen years as President of the Guild is clearly evident in his shrunken frame. Meticulous and secretive by nature, he found here at least, one cannot help but think, his ideal profession.” Had we been presented with these two outlandish characters on page one, we might have looked askance. But here, on page 112, they engage our sympathies.

Seriousness serving at the behest of the unserious eventually gives up and tilts toward the hilarious. One Quintus Erectus is disturbing, two even more so, but a hundred staring at you solemnly moves toward mirth. Ten crayfish names are interesting; ten thousand are a testament to human ingenuity and folly. There is insanity in numbers, as anyone conscripted into a mob knows. It is the corollary to Gabriel García Márquez’s famous dictum about magical realism: One hummingbird flying from a person’s mouth might be questioned, but one hundred? The objection becomes irrelevant in the face of legion. By the time the reader flips to “A Brief Tribute to the Many Silent Heroes” (145), a full gallery of funerary violin luminaries, the effect may indeed be a troubled silence—confronted with the sheer amount of history destroyed by purge or indifference, the number of people excised from the public record. Or it may be the point at which the reader begins to laugh, too. One can never tell with a fake. I found myself oddly moved, and perhaps this emotion came from knowing that although the fakes might be obscure, the real people in those photographs are just as invisible and unknown to me. Using real images for fake purposes can create this effect—they carry an emotional context, a whisper of real lives, and a mystery lives in that idea that could spark an entire other essay.

Not long after the appearance of the gallery, following the appendices, Kriwaczek ends with the most audacious of all his tactics and strategies, the narrative devices and wormholing stories: The Book of Scores, “being a selection of the surviving scores so far discovered” (163). These scores—I mean actual sheet music—correspond to many of the creators referenced in the book, and range

from “The Long Uncertainty of Death” to “The Dizzy Flight of Death,” from Gratchenfleiss to a funerary suite from Charles Sudbury. The suite is ingenious, including sections entitled “Dream,” “Panic,” and “Flight.” The descriptions have a somber and genuine quality that tells the reader that this is a joke, this is not a joke: “Now that all is done and as it should be, we may weep without reserve” (165). The scores go on for pages and pages, daring the reader to refute them, and most readers won’t want to; they will want those scores to be real, and the sentiment behind them to be real as well. As in Nabokov’s short story “The Leonardo,”¹¹ about both an artist and a counterfeiter, and written when Nabokov was faking himself out in literary journals, “the objects that are being summoned assemble, draw near ... overcome not only the distance of space but that of time” (354).

A coffin is about to be placed in the ground near a church. It is raining. A funerary violinist plays beside the gravesite, next to the priest. We mourners stand around the gravesite in our Sunday best—the reader, Quintus Erectus, the penguin scientist and his rock penguin friend, the crayfish researcher, Borges, Cervantes, and the creators of *The Art of Funerary Violin*. Slowly, fact and fiction join hands as we all listen to the funerary violinist’s music and remember not just the dead, but the power of music.

Who is in the coffin, you ask? Who can say?

* * *

¹¹ Vladimir Nabokov, *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov* (New York: Knopf, 1995).

Throughout this essay, I have engaged in my own forgeries, as well as my own fakes. Did you notice? Did that knowledge or lack of knowledge make any difference, really, in appreciating the book discussed, or my arguments? The fact is, we're always being fooled. We're always being lied to in ways both benign and sinister. Everything is, on some level, a fake. I'm a fake. You're a fake, too. Quintus Erectus is a fake. The penguin researcher is a fake, a persona worn like clothes for a particular narrative. A book that sets out to be a fake may just be a little more honest about our essential situation. Of course, the question then becomes: Is there even a book entitled *An Incomplete History of the Art of the Funerary Violin*?

Alas, the objects I had assembled wander away.... The house draws in its little balconies one by one, then turns, and floats away. Everything floats away. Harmony and meaning vanish. The world irks me again with its variegated void.

—Vladimir Nabokov, “The Leonardo”

I Remember the Miracle

Toby Jensen Perkins

In summer 1946 I helped Jed, our mill foreman, save our town.

I was only seventeen. The war had passed over me, but I knew that a man will be called, and he must step forward, and he may receive pain. Not every man can endure the pain that may come to him, but I can endure mine, because God sent me a miracle that whirls continually in my memory. I see it, I hear lamentation, I hear a thrumming string. It soothes me. It reminds me that I did right.

I looked on Jed as a father. He had given Mama a job in the mill's office to sustain us in her widowhood, and he had taken an interest in me, teaching me things that a boy must learn from his father in order to become a man. I looked up to Jed's natural son, Tony, too, like a kind of older brother, though Tony, a veteran of the war, was so much older than me that he and I had rarely ever conversed during our childhoods.

A lot of younger boys in town looked up to Tony. Female hearts broke when Tony went off to war, but the war changed him. When he came home, Tony ripped the patches off his uniform jacket and wore it ruined wherever he went. He hung his head and did not seem to hear our greetings when he passed us in the streets. His mind seemed occupied.

One Sunday that summer in the center of our town Tony walked past Lila, a small, middle-aged colored woman, who stood on the curb every Sunday evening with her Bible and her pamphlets testifying to the love of Jesus Christ.

Tony and most all of us in town, white and colored, were saved Christians. Tony was saved. Jed, our most important citizen but now and then drunk, had been saved many times. Lila was saved and a little crazed by her love of the Lord, almost too bold in her religion for a colored woman. We Christians had felt the frenzy of the Lord's touch, so we tolerated Lila's preaching.

We saw Lila step out of her place at the edge of the sidewalk into Tony's path. She apologized to him but asked would he accept

Jesus Christ his Lord and Savior into his heart that instant.

When Lila affronted Tony, he looked as if she had shaken him awake from the thing that had occupied his mind ever since he had come home. He looked as if he had never before in his life seen Lila or heard of the Lord Jesus Christ. Tony opened his mouth as if he would answer Lila, but he did not speak.

Lila told Tony that Jesus's arms were open, Jesus would take his troubles unto His breast and ease his vexed spirit. Would Tony get down on his knees to God now?

So they knelt on the sidewalk. Lila held her Bible in her left hand and raised her right hand over Tony's head. He put his hands together and closed his eyes to receive Jesus's mercy. Lila prayed aloud, and when she came to the end of her prayer she praised Jesus and hugged Tony. Tears ran down his face.

We who saw their prayer that day believed that Jesus had healed Tony of wounds he had received in war. I did not know that Sunday, when I saw Tony and Lila pray, that wounds received may be less painful than wounds given.

The following Tuesday evening Jed came over to our house for his coffee after dinner, which on weeknights he often did. Jed was faithful to his wife from their teenage years to his death, but he visited my mother most nights of her widowhood, and some folks said that they sinned. I know that they did not, because I was there to overhear them every night that Jed came. My mother and Jed always comported themselves decently. I only ever saw Mama touch Jed once, to console him in his mourning, but that was on a later evening.

Jed told Mama that Mr. Henderson, the mill owner, had called him up to the big house Monday. Mr. Henderson had told Jed he was going to move his family south to Georgia because Lila's son was stirring up the colored folks. The town wasn't safe any more, not safe for decent white women. In the street the other day, Jed said, one boy had given Mr. Henderson's youngest girl a look that had chilled Mr. Henderson's blood. Mr. Henderson told Jed that he planned to

move his family and his mill down South out of the way, before such troubles got worse. The costs in the mill would be cheaper there, and Mr. Henderson figured the mill would do better in Georgia, with Georgia workers.

Lila's son had been 4-F in the war because of his eyes, which he ruined at a young age reading more than was good for him. The boy always seemed outwardly respectful, but when we watched him we could see that he was measuring folks, both black and white, through the little eyeglasses that his mother had scrimped to buy. He was never cheerful in the way of other colored children generally. When he turned fifteen his mama had sent him away to a live-in school, paid for partly by her church, then to a fancy white college in Ohio that took in one or two smart colored boys every year on scholarships. Now he was back, grown, and a highly educated troublemaker.

Oh, the Bible tells us, in much wisdom there is much grief, and he that increases his knowledge increases his sorrow.

Jed called me into the kitchen and asked did I want to go down with him and Tony next day to reason with Lila's son. Of course I said yes, because it was an honor, a lesson, and a duty. Without that mill our town would have fallen through. Jed needed to save our mill, and the men of our town who were mindful of their duty to their homes and their people would need to help him. I was nearly a man and must learn what Jed would teach me the next day by his example.

Mama was flustered, but Jed patted her hand and told her it would be all right, she needn't worry, I'd be safe enough. Tony and I were strong, young men, and the colored folk in our town were good ones, if confused momentarily by a troublemaker. The colored people would see the right of it soon enough and stand clear. We just had to give Lila's son a stern warning, get him to stop, maybe run him off, back to Ohio.

Next afternoon Jed picked me up in his grey Plymouth. Tony rode in the back seat looking away from us out the side window.

A long-barreled .38 in a waist holster, strung on a belt like a cowboy's gun, hung over the front seat between Jed and me. When Jed stopped the car on Fredonia Avenue and got out, he strapped on the pistol. Tony stayed in the car.

Jed leaned in the window and swore at Tony to get out. Hearing Jed curse his son that way shocked me.

Tony got out, but he didn't close his door. He stood in the road, put his hands on his waist, raised himself onto his tiptoes and bent left and right to ease his back, huffing and looking over at the nearest shack, which hung a gold star in the window.

Jed called Tony to come on.

Tony shut the door and fell in a ways behind Jed and me. We strolled down the middle of the empty street. Now and then Jed stopped and turned, as if to show his gun, left and right. There were no colored folks in sight, no dogs, no cats, no sounds, not a curtain twitching.

When we came up in front of Lila's shack, Jed spread his legs and braced himself in the middle of the dirt road facing her front door. He hung his arm down on his right side by his pistol. He called to Lila to send out her son.

There were voices inside, hushed and arguing. Tony stood aside with his back to his father. He combed the back of his head with his fingers and blew out his cheeks.

Jed hollered to Lila a second time, cursing and saying that he had no intention of hurting anybody but wanted only to give her boy counsel, but Lila shouted back to him, denying that her son was in her house.

We could all hear that there was a man inside with her, so Jed called Lila a damned liar and warned her not to make him have to come into her house and drag him out.

To answer him Lila pushed open her screen door and walked out onto her porch alone. She wore an apron over a long brown shift. She held her hands up to us, and they trembled. If our intentions were Christian ones, she wanted to know, why had Jed come to her

house with a gun?

She wanted to know why Tony had come, and she pointed to me and called me a child and asked why Tony had brought a child with him. Was Tony leading me down a sorrowful path? Was that the work of a soul so recently saved?

Tony stepped over in front of Jed's pistol, not quite between Jed and Lila. He looked into his father's eyes, and told Jed that he had done enough and should quit now.

Jed barely turned his eyes to his son. He told Tony to get back in his place beside him.

Tony plucked at Jed's sleeve.

Jed smacked Tony's shoulder back and told him to stand up. He cursed him and told his son to remember that he had been a United States Marine and should act like one now.

Then Jed raised his voice to the colored boy in the shack. He called the boy a yellow coward, hiding behind his mama's skirts, too yellow to own up to the trouble he had been causing. He said it would be worse for the boy if he didn't come out, because he would have more to be afraid of if Jed was forced to come through that door after him.

The screen door banged open behind Lila, and her boy stormed out, empty-handed, blinking at Jed through his spectacles. He had grown during the last seven years and put on muscle, a fine figure of a full-grown colored man now. He presumably would have rushed down off that porch if his mother hadn't screamed and wrapped her arms around him to hold him back. She was small and skinny, so with little trouble he dragged her along behind him as far as the edge of the porch, where he started to step down.

Tony turned his face to the heavens and cursed.

Jed took the gun out slowly and pointed it at the colored boy's chest. A strong gust swirled dust into our faces. I recollected a passage from the Book, about a man who has no profit of his labor because he labors for the wind.

Jed called to Lila to release her son so that he could come down

into the road to meet his death. Jed hadn't intended to kill the boy today, but if that was what the boy wanted, then Lila should release him and let him come. Jed said Lila was a decent colored woman, he owed it to her—born and raised in Jed's town and a good citizen all her life—to give her son a plain warning, and that was all he was trying to do, but on the other hand he wasn't afraid to kill him today, either. It suited Jed's purpose either way. Die, or take himself and his troubles out of Jed's town. Her boy could choose.

The wind increased, blowing Jed's hair and rippling Lila's dress. Then Lila's son let go a little and slumped in his mother's arms. She pulled him back from the edge.

Tony stepped over and whispered to his father, plucking at his sleeve again and urging him to leave.

The colored boy spoke up insolently, calling Jed by his first name, calling him a working man, and saying that our town's working men had nothing to fear from him.

Jed told the boy that his mother was respectable, but he was not, and Jed owed him nothing. Jed cocked his gun, but Tony jumped forward and grasped the revolver, holding its hammer back and stopping Jed's shot. Tony twisted the gun out of Jed's hand, broke it open, and used the rod to shuck the bullets. He worked fast, click-click-click, until the chamber emptied. Then he put the gun into one of his trousers pockets and the bullets into another.

The town police car drew up behind us. The chief got out. He put his cap on his head and hitched up his belt.

The police chief looked at Jed's empty holster and asked him if he was armed, and where his weapon was, but Tony told the chief that his father didn't have a weapon.

The chief turned and spat a brown stream toward Lila's porch, asking Lila and her son what the hell they were looking at, that this was white folks' business and they should get the hell back inside their shack.

Lila's boy stepped forward and started to answer him, but the police chief hitched his belt, swung around, and took two steps to-

ward him. Lila grabbed her son by the upper arms with both hands, whispering to him and turning him away.

The chief warned the colored boy that he had better get back inside his damn shack before the count of three, and he counted to two, and Lila helped the boy back inside, and her screen door snapped closed behind them.

Jed's hands were shaking and his mouth curled. His gaze flashed to his son, then to the blackness behind Lila's screen door, back to Tony, and back again to the blank doorway.

The policeman put his hand on Jed's shoulder and said he had made his point and had better go home now.

Tony tried to put his arm around his father, but Jed twisted away from him with a shrug and strode to the car alone, ahead of Tony and me. We came along behind him, like brothers, side by side.

The police car drove off in the other direction.

That evening when Jed drank his coffee in our kitchen he shook his head in sorrow. He said he thought probably Tony had got into the war too late. Jed said that he had asked Tony about his service, but Tony wouldn't tell him much. Tony had admitted to Jed that he had never been in a battle and that no one had ever shot at him. Tony had manned a small gun on the deck of a ship his whole tour. So there it was, plain proof of how little Tony had experienced. Jed thought that little bit had weakened him. Jed wasn't complaining that Tony was safe, he wanted him safe, but Tony had been a tough kid before the war, and now he was backing down from a fight.

Mama said maybe Tony just wanted peace.

Yes, Jed said, that was it exactly. Tony missed out, not landing on the beaches with the other Marines. And Tony missed a big sea battle, too. Jed read about it in the paper. Tony's admiral had sailed away from the fight, and by the time Tony's task group sailed back, the battle was finished. Tony must have seen some wreckage, fires, and bodies floating on the sea, the leavings of war, which would discourage him, but not the fight itself, which would have strengthened his heart.

In the early morning toward three o'clock my bedroom door creaked open. The shadow of a tall man, rolling like a sailor used to the motion of the sea, crossed to my bedroom window, where he looked out. The moon lit Tony's face. He spoke to me in the darkness.

Tony needed me to write some things down for him, some things he needed to tell, and that people needed to hear. Mostly, Tony said, I needed to hear them, because people lied, and I would need to remember what he told me when people came to me and told me that everything was going to be all right. He raised a bottle and took a swallow. Would I do this for him?

I turned on the lamp on the table that served as my school desk, and I took out my pencils and my school notebook from the year before. There were blank pages still in the back of it. I opened to the first blank page and waited for Tony to speak.

Tony said to title it "I Remember the War."

I wrote that on the top line, in capital letters.

Then Tony said, "When a man is swimming in the ocean and you chop him up with a machine gun, so much blood will come out of him that the water will turn red for a minute, and his guts will blow out of him in long tangled ropes."

Tony took another drink.

"Or his head will explode," Tony said, "if you hit him there, and his brains will spray into the sea like rain."

It took me a time to get all that down on the paper.

Tony read over my shoulder and shook his head. He waved his bottle, shaking his head all the time, and said it was the wrong place. He would need to start at the beginning, and that wasn't it.

I drew one large X through what I had written.

Tony cleared his throat. I could tell he was heavy with woe.

Tony said, "At Pendleton I shot so good I nearly qualified as a sniper. But they sent me to sea, and they assigned me to guard the ship's brig, which was easy duty."

He leaned over and watched me write it. Then he told me to

scratch that out, too, because it wasn't the start of it, either.

Tony went back to the window and took a breath of night air, as well as another long pull from his bottle.

"A warship in my task group depth-charged a Jap sub to the surface. It came up near us, and a half dozen Jap sailors jumped out of it, and they swam over toward us. Now, that was a problem, because we had no space for them, and we sure didn't want the Jap Navy to come and rescue them, either, and put them back to work shooting at us, so the captain called for a volunteer. I knew I was the best shot of anyone on board, so I stood forward."

He watched me write it, then picked it up and read it. He put it back down on the table and tapped it with his finger. Yes, that was it, he said.

"Then after that there were more Japs in the water. No one else wanted the work. I got let off all my other duties. The worst day was after the big battle. So many Jap ships sunk or burned, so many Japs swimming, and our ship turning among them all day to make sure I got them all, leaving not one alive, me at the rail with my weapon, chopping them up."

I wrote it down carefully.

As the Eastern sky took light, Tony stopped speaking and fell backward onto my bed. He started to snore.

I changed out of my pajamas and took a walk outside to leave Tony to his rest.

When I came back he was gone and the pages I had written for him were ripped out of my notebook.

Two days later Jed called a Citizen's Committee meeting in his garage. He said I was old enough to come, along with Tony, Harold, Harold's brother William, and of course Jed himself. Harold and William drove up in their pickup, which had a cross-tee mounted in the bed. They backed into Jed's driveway all the way up to the garage door. They let down the truck's gate and sat on the bed. In the bed was a roll of rope, some barbed wire, two old baseball bats, and a can of gasoline. We passed around a pint of sipping whiskey.

Jed had a report for us, based on news which he got from several white men who worked at the mill, each confirming the others' story. Lila's son had not run off. He was still going down to the mill at the end of each day to pluck at the sleeves of the colored men coming out. Most of them stopped their grinning and chattering and walked right past him, cold, without a glance, but not all of them did. Some stopped. The boy talked to those who stopped and gave them a Communist pamphlet, which some folded up and stuck into the pockets of their jeans.

The pulsing of my blood through my brain was louder than Jed's voice, for I knew clearly what must be done now. We all knew, but then Tony stepped forward and spoke against it.

Tony said that none of us, not his father, nor Harold, nor William, nor I had ever murdered, and that what we were talking about was murder. Murder changed you, Tony said, murder ruined you, you could never forget or forgive it, you couldn't stand it, and he wouldn't have his father become a murderer for any reason. No, nor any of us.

Jed told Tony that there came a time when a man must kill, and that is what he hoped Tony would learn, that a man must become a cold killer whenever his home and his people are threatened, and that that kind of killing is never murder.

Tony said that Jed was always after him to learn what he had done in the war, well now he would tell him, and he looked at me when he said that, and I could see the tears starting in his eyes. Tony said that in the war he had broken God's commandment against murder, just as Jed was planning to do that day. He had murdered helpless men, Tony said, dozens, maybe a hundred, maybe more, anyway more than he could count, and he knew what murder was. He couldn't stand to see us murder Lila's son. He would die first, he said, and he walked back to the house.

We all took a pull from the bottle, except Jed, who watched after his son.

When it was getting near dark Harold and William drove back

with sheets for us to wear, but Jed threw them down in the dirt, saying we were not afraid to show our faces. We were doing our duty, saving our families and our neighbors, both black and white, if truth were told. Twice Jed went back into the house to call Tony out, but Tony had locked himself in his bedroom and wouldn't speak. His mother was still calling softly to him through the door when Tony blew his brains out with Jed's long-barreled .38.

Jed broke down Tony's door. His mother screamed and fell on her knees. Harold and William drove off to find the police chief, and I found the pages from my notebook on Tony's nightstand. Tony had scratched out the title he had given me and written in its place, "My Confession." I folded the pages and took them away in my pocket secretly, so that they would not add to Jed's grief.

Nearly every white person in town was in church for Tony's service. Wisdom giveth life, the preacher read, and who can make that straight, that God has made crooked? Mrs. Henderson played a thundering hymn on the organ. When I grasped a handle of Tony's casket, a man in uniform, a stranger, stepped out of the crowd and took hold of the handle on the other side from me to help us five local boys carry Tony to his grave.

Over the grave the preacher read, Woe to him that is alone when he falleth, for he has no one to help him up. Then they lowered Tony into his grave, and his mother and his father threw dirt on Tony's coffin.

Behind them, where Jed was forced to see them as he turned away, many of the town's colored stood to pay their respects to Tony from a distance. Lila and her boy stood in front.

Jed screamed such a high yowling note that you would not think a man's voice could utter it. He cursed Lila and her son. He raised his fist and made to run at them, but the preacher held him back. Lila and her boy walked away quickly. Jed wept.

On the appointed day, in the early evening, Harold and William came to Jed's house drunk for our task. They drank even more after they got there, I suppose to raise their courage higher and higher.

With all their delays we did not start till near two hours before sunrise. Harold and William wore white hoods despite what Jed had said. They yelled, fired off their pistols, and swayed unsteadily on their feet as they stood in the bed of the truck on either side of the cross-tee as we lurched along the rutted roads through the colored section, with torches burning on either side of the truck's cab to show the colored folks the example we had made. Jed, stone sober, drove, and I rode beside him in the truck's cab.

Jed drove to the bank of the creek and parked under a big cottonwood, its sturdiest limb. I got out. Harold and William wore leather gloves to unwrap the barbed wire that held Lila's son to the cross-tee. He had been stripped for his night ride, and Jed's beating had swollen his eyes and mouth shut. To end his life, Harold put a noose around his neck, William threw the rope's end over the tree limb, Harold and William jumped down from the bed to wind the other end of the rope around the trunk and tie it off, and Jed turned on the truck's engine.

Until that moment, I had performed no duties.

Then God tested me, as He had tested Tony.

Above the bank of the creek, backlit by the morning sun, I thought I saw Jesus Christ Himself rise into the sky. Jesus came floating over the bank and His feet alighted. The Lord ran down to us over the mud, suffused by the dawn behind Him. As He ran, He commanded us to spare the boy's life, His child. The shadows of Jesus's heavenly robe swirled around His ankles, His pierced hands rose to beg our mercy, and His thorned crown, surmounting His curly hair, threw out a golden halo that lit the sky. Then Jesus ran down farther, the light improved, and I saw that it was Lila.

She jumped into the truck bed and threw the noose off her boy, crying to Jed to spare his life as she had tried to spare Tony's. She caught her boy and held him across her lap, weeping for divine mercy.

But Jed and I were not divine. Jed turned to me, his face set.

I don't believe he knew me at that moment, but he ordered me to hang her.

It was my turn to step forward, as Tony did, as men before Tony had done, as men after me would do. All of us would remember our pain. Some, like me, would endure it, and some, like Tony, would not, and they would disappoint their fathers.

Lila's boy tried to interfere as we struggled with his mother, but the boy had been beaten feeble. Harold easily held him back while William held Lila, and I fitted the noose around her tiny neck.

As Jed drove the truck forward, Lila grasped at the noose, and as the truck went out from under her she began to whirl and kick. The rope thrummed as she danced, and her son screamed his lamentation, his blood and spittle pouring in a string from his mouth as he watched his mother hang. I looked into her twisting face, and God flooded me with a holy awe that drove me down onto my knees into the mud.

"God bless you," I said to her, above me.

God showed me her death that day, the agony of a purely innocent soul, a martyr to His Majesty, the image of His own Son's pain, the holiest and rarest of His miracles. God blessed me and soothed me with that sign on the bank of the creek that flows west of here, past our mill, where Lila whirls eternally in my memory.

For she took a long time to die, and so did her son.

Bamiyan

Elizabeth T. Gray Jr.

Afghanistan's ruling Taliban said Saturday it has blown up most of the massive, ancient Buddhas at Bamiyan, despite worldwide pleas to spare them.... Taliban Information Minister Quadratullah Jamal ["Power-of-Allah, Handsome"] said Saturday that the fundamentalist movement's troops used rockets and mortars to destroy the head and legs of the sandstone statues, which are carved into the side of a cliff in central Afghanistan. "Our soldiers are working hard to demolish their remaining parts. They will come down soon," said Information Minister Quadratullah Jamal.... "They were easy to break apart and did not take much time."

—CNN, March 3, 2001

Light of Asia

We still have him, in the plains, on an early lintel,
as an absence at the center of each story:
a flower, footprints, a wheel between kneeling deer.

But his words grew difficult to see.
It was hard to hear his hands. And so they began

to define and carve the balanced postures
and proportions of his princely torso:

the head with its raised crown, the long-lobed ears,
soft half-lidded eyes, half-smile, the dexterous
gestures of compassion,

blessing, protection, absence.

Al Hafiz (The All-Preserver)

March 2001

Long ago
their legs were bludgeoned,
arms broken to stumps, hands
shattered and mortared into walls,
their faces hacked off by some avid brief commander
named "Sword of Faith" or "Servant of the Avenger"
who lacked not zeal but ordnance.

But now it's done.
The idols are broken and cast down.
In the name of Allah, the Merciful, The Compassionate,
the All-Preserver, His servants
have put out of his misery
each amputee in his niche.
Each torso blasted to dustlight.
The faithful may pass undistracted.
And suddenly the vanished trunks and limbs
fill every screen, and the world
turns its great light on the valley.

Their image falls across me like a blade, and there lies
everything your hands said.

**From the Niche of the Great Buddha,
Overlooking the Valley**

January 1972

Fields bare of wheat and barley,
of melon, apricot, almonds.
Snow, glint of river, lines
of poplar, the sound of one boy's hand
tapping a wheel-rim.

The Expression on the Cliff's Face

First incandescence,
then a wish, and distance.

A light that time cannot displace:
his hands, then a blush and incense.

When you have lost what God cannot replace
lay waste, in your wake only ash and vengeance.

A niche. That light. His kiss.
Everything since has been cash and nonsense.

To see, dissolve his face.
Bring despair to the task, and ordnance.

Tora Bora (Black Dust)

December 2001

From where I sit now it is hard to see.
There are the years like a veil,
like snow across a television screen.

Like this journalist on my television screen
speaking, in snow, from a valley, you still
block my view of our valley, a torso
between the light and me, a colossus.

In fact there is no longer that view of our valley.
Only a blank niche, and elsewhere,
in another province and a different valley,
a camera trained on armed men
moving uphill, in snow.

On Growing Up Between Genders

An essay in propositions

Stephen Burt

1 I don't want to be one person; I don't want to be one thing.

2 “What is the use of being a boy,” Gertrude Stein asked, “if you are going to grow up to be a man?”

3 In second grade I wanted A. to be my best friend, or to marry me, or to play with me, or to let me stay in her bedroom, with its white Legos and lacy hearts, but she was a girl and I was a boy: I was not permitted to spend the night.

4 I wanted to be a princess and a prince; but I would never have said so, then.

5 In third grade the popular friends of E. came to me on the blacktop and asked very seriously what it meant that she now had her period; I was delighted to learn that my reputation as a child scientist trumped my status as an uncool boy. I think I offered useful, calm advice. (The whole thing may have been a deadpan prank.)

6 In sixth grade I was often sad because boys had started to go out with girls and none of the girls whom I wanted as my friends, whose handwriting I wanted to copy, would go out with me.

7 What did “going out with” mean?

8 I wanted the girls' companionship, their approval; I would not have said that I wanted to be one of them, but I was sure that I did not like being a boy.

9 I learned that I could befriend some girls by playing the piano, accompanying the songs they liked to sing, an especially useful talent when auditions for the musical came around. I was not a boy but a

semi-professional accompanist, neither boy nor girl but head, arms, hands.

10 I wore striped cotton short-sleeved shirts with button-down collars, blue jeans or corduroys, and sneakers that fell apart.

11 Other boys all had crushes on girls they said they had pursued; I admitted, when asked, to my crush on M., who wore striped cotton short-sleeved shirts with button-down collars, blue jeans or corduroys, and sneakers that fell apart. (She would take no interest in me.)

12 In summer camp, after eighth grade, I dated J. She did take an interest in me; she wore striped cotton short-sleeved shirts with button-down collars, blue jeans or corduroys, and sneakers that fell apart. (What did “dating” mean?)

13 “Androgyny is sexy,” writes Marjorie Garber, “when it is the vehicle (the physical form of performance)”—so that there seems to be something else “underneath”—“and not sexy when it is the tenor,” i.e. when a boy might as well be a girl “all the way down.”

14 It should not matter how other people see me if I can dress to suit myself.

15 It should not matter how I see myself if I can dress for other people; but for whom?

16 Children today who say that they are transgender may take hormone-blocking drugs to put off puberty until they have decided how they want their bodies to be.

17 How do I want my body to be?

18 For most of my teens I thought I was in love with T., who was

chatty, approachable, kind, and good at math too. T. dressed as if her body had not yet developed very much, even after it had: striped cotton short-sleeved shirts with button-down collars, blue jeans or corduroys ...

19 T.'s younger brother built Lego towns, Lego palaces, Lego airports for Lego planes, backlit with tiny lights like Lego moons. Their Lego people were sometimes marked as women by their trapezoidal skirts, but otherwise they were just people, with king-or-queen crowns or hard hats on round heads, casting their squared-off shadows over the bumpy Lego ground.

20 Desire as light, the body I have as itself, the body I want as a cast shadow.

21 The sexual encounters of my teen and young adult years usually involved a moment when I asked to try on a girl's bra. The answer was always yes. Usually it killed the sexual arc. (Jennifer Finney Boylan, née James Boylan, reports nearly the same experience in her memoir, *She's Not There*.)

22 Sometimes I yearn (present tense) to wear a training bra, since I don't—or don't yet—need a real one.

23 Reading, last year, Boylan's chapters about childhood and youth, I wrote in the margins, repeatedly, "Yes" or "Me too" or "Yes, but not that much"; and, sometimes, "No" or "Not quite," "I wouldn't" or "Not me."

24 On weekends in high school at science fiction conventions my friends and companions included the costumers, who dressed as sorceresses, or dragonriders, or robots, for forty-eight hours at a stretch. (They did not want, much less expect, to become these things.)

25 Looking again at my own journals from college I find a record of a night spent fully clothed in bed with N.; “I would as usual be happier dressed in women’s clothes,” I wrote that morning, “but I would certainly still be sulking.”

26 Much of those journals comprise verbatim quotations, from poets, from critics, from friends, as if I were most myself when dressed up in their words.

27 N. (it says there) had figured out “the girl I’d like to be,” her demeanor, her visual style, her age: perhaps fourteen. She and I dated, after that night, off and on, sometimes seriously, for a year and a half.

28 Were I now a woman I’m sure I would dress inappropriately, too young for my age and station; I would look wrong. (But that’s what I do now.)

29 Recorded in those same journals: a night, back from college, at T.’s house, watching a movie with E. and then falling asleep in her parents’ guest room, in her old wooden bed, feeling safe in her floral nightgown.

30 I don’t want to be one person; I don’t want to be one thing.

31 I thought I could handle such intimate, “warm,” embarrassing material most adeptly in the “cool” space of numbered propositions, as in one kind of modern essay or prose poem.

32 Such essays or poems swipe their form from philosophers such as Ludwig Wittgenstein, who are sometimes accused of neglecting the body, of ignoring material bodies in favor of ideals, those tiny lights.

33 Other minds have other bodies, with breasts or no breasts, round

hips or no hips, broad shoulders or none; some people's bodies may never develop.

34 With long striped socks, with folders of sheet music, with ruffled capped sleeves, with striped cotton short-sleeved shirts, with fine leather shoes, with a bra, with a black cocktail dress ...

35 According to the philosopher Marya Schechtman, our sense of continuous selfhood in time, of agency, of something to call "I," depends on an approximate congruence between the stories I can tell about myself and the stories that other people can tell about me.

36 In other words, I want other people to see me in the way that I see myself.

37 Almost everyone wants that; very few get it.

38 Can it be true that sex takes you out of yourself? Why does it have to bring you back?

39 Sometimes I think that my un-, sub-, or pre-conscious mind divides the world, absurdly, in four parts: girls (the aesthetic, the beautiful); women (the ethical); men (temporal power), and boys (nothing wrong with them but I don't want to be one).

40 Such things we believe, without knowing we believe them, by the time we turn fourteen.

Five Days a Week the Commute Was

Nick Mamas

Five days a week the commute was utterly unbearable for

Emily Anne Holland, genius. That's how she thought of herself, *Emily Anne, genius*, and she wasn't wrong. Nor was she wrong about the BART—the retrofuturistic people mover, now stained and klugey, that brought her from her hovel in Berkeley to her table in the start-up right on the Embarcadero way too early each day and brought her back far too late every evening. Unlike the dot.com cud-chewers—or C.H.U.D. queuers, after both the famed horror film featuring those titular cannibalistic humanoid underground dwellers and the long lines at Downtown Berkeley's BART station, as Emily Anne thought of everyone around her—she couldn't telecommute even one day a week. Her work was rather too hands-on. She had a lab of her own, a lab full of pulsing, growing, fecund things, you know? And the state in all its fierce stupidity wouldn't let her live in the lab, barred her from curling up under her desk for fifteen-minute catnaps, the catnaps of genius. And on the train there could be no sleep; often Emily Anne didn't even get a seat at all. Unbearable, as the BART was and to this day is for most of us, no?

And so the commute. And novels, *recherché* and twee, were no relief, not when smythe-sewn and made for the hand with a clever ribbon bookmark and annotations even on the credits page, purchased at an independent bookstore where the employees still believed that a vote for Nader was a vote for Nader. Not when on her iPad either, though she downloaded them by the torrential gross in seconds. Seconds, I tell you! She would buy and skim, delete and buy—*Space, like time, engenders forgetfulness* one moment click! *an unclean traffic with the forces of reaction* scroll scroll skim skim then onto something new and properly copyright infringed and cracked wide open. Stuff she saw the other girls reading in her peripheral vision. *She wants to end properly, like a good sentence.* Gawd! click click! For a few weeks there was relief when Emily Anne taught herself enough of the old Greek to give *Chaereas and*

Callirhoe a whack in the original. Lots of shipwrecks and titillation without consummation, and then there was nothing else better. So Emily Anne let the language fall out of her head to make room for more data on lichen, mosses, and other epiphytes. Emily, in her Hellenic moment, thought that epiphytes—*upon the plant*—sounded somehow portentous, and it was.

But first there was her tumblr, dipsticksoftheBART. Activism after a fashion. Emily Anne surreptitiously took photos of vegan Burners blocking the doors with a kudzu jumble of smelly-seeming bicycles, children flung across the floor like last night's panties, *surlly Negroids*—as she callously tagged them, as a joke, a *joke* she kept explaining—fuming in aisle seats while elderly Asian women stood nearby in the otherwise packed train car. The emails were relentless—she was racist and privileged besides, Emily Anne was told. Didn't she know that black men take the outer seats only because nobody would sit next to them anyway, because of racism? Emily Anne had not known that, but even when she finally did she didn't feel bad. Then someone new wrote to her: *Mind your own business you fucking dyke bitch ill rape your ass to pieces in an alley. Oh no, not an alley!* Emily Anne thought to herself, for a moment a fool declaring herself safe because she wasn't aware of any alleys near either her workplace or her home, but then she shut down the tumblr anyway.

Fuming in an aisle seat of her own, Emily Anne turned to eavesdropping and reading over the shoulders of others. Go-getters with laptops working on their spreadsheets and very occasionally a snippet of somewhat interesting code. Morons highlighting printed-out emails. Oh yes, very important that stuff about interest rates and the yuan and holistic nursing and Emily Anne's career as a commuter extremely interested in the lives of her fellows didn't last to West Oakland, much less to the night trip back, when the great cranes on the piers of the Port of Oakland ceased their bowing and rose back up to their full heights, tips burning with steady red light.

Then a party, of the sort thrown by non-Google employees for the

sake of Google employees so that the former could get jobs working alongside the latter for ever so much money and bonuses and benefits besides. And a bus to bring them to work in Mountain View, in Google-town USA her own self, each day. Away from the BART. Emily Anne was tapped to attend not because she was interested in a career change, but because she was a genius and cute to boot—long hair with no split ends, a nymph’s body she was too comfortable in to be described as coltish anymore, and seven-hundred-dollar glasses on shiny gray eyes too dim to legally drive. Damn the state, damn the law! Accessible good looks are this year’s out of your league, explained several prominent Craigslist posters, so the millionaire boys kept a respectful, lustful distance. Just barely not close enough.

In an erstwhile warehouse space that in generations past would have been owned by a novelist obscure in his homeland but beloved in France and filled with jugs of Italian wine, instead of all sorts of chocolate-coated whatnot and robot-made sushi from Trader Joe’s, Emily Anne found in the corner an old record player, and balanced on top of the turntable was a large a tin cylinder with a pattern of slivered scales cut into it, and inside the hollow cylinder an old lamp with a bright bulb and no shade, its cord snaking out of the top of the cylinder to reach an outlet. So, the cylinder was supposed to be the lampshade, except that if you turned on the record player the turntable would spin and decorate the room with streaks of light, like an inside-out disco ball? Men lined up to explain it—the dream machine, they said—to Emily Anne, to bid her kneel down right close to it and close her eyes, because the idea is to get the flickering on the inside of the eyelids—we’ll do it with you, it’s cool ... nobody here is prone to *photosensitive epilepsy*, right?—and then one of the fellows started it up.

Not bad, the colors and the patterns, that’s what Emily Anne thought. Then a few moments later she stopped thinking.

The floaters in her childhood eyes after a minute of eager rubbing with her little fists, the first experiment of a junior scientist in Pikachu pajamas.

Heels over head in the back seat of the great sedan, an only child of only children, the moon following her home, fingerboned branches cutting it to ribbons. Then streetlights and a slower pace as the car rounded the curve of the world. A flash filled the interior, then blinked back into darkness, then light again.

That night, most all nights: a cross gliding against the ceiling of her room as the headlamps from oncoming traffic filled the window, then drove past.

Community college at age fourteen—PowerPoint slides and the sweet moment of nothing in between them. She didn't have to take notes, nor raise her hand to ask a question. She could be in the glow of the screen, and then not be in its dark.

Grad school, when all her possessions fit into one room, when all her clothes fit into one little two-wheeled wagon. A mistimed step and she fell. Hands flung wide, too wide for the wagon, waiting in the middle of her room. Emily Anne hit its aluminum handle with the bridge of her nose. She didn't see stars then, but a nova, just one huge blast of nerves, then a pain that filled her head like water swirling into a basin.

A third date to the disused mental hospital. Plaster crunched under their feet, then she swung her Maglite across the room to find that boy and his spooky skulking and for a moment the beam glinted off a spidery mirror.

The ophthalmologist's office. "Number one," the ophthalmologist asked her once a year, "or number two?" That pause between them, that's what she wanted.

The arthouse cinema where the Academy countdown film was shown before the feature. The moment after the numeral 2 when there were no frames reading 1.

Water in her eye in the shower during a rolling brownout at dusk, the towel for some reason not in reach.

That sick dream she had about her now dead cat Stymie reaching up with one swipe of his paw and blotting out the sun.

The second everything she was was stung by a wasp.

Emily Anne could hardly feel the thighs of the men on either side of her, toned and strong from hiking in the Berkeley hills, against her own thighs, and her flesh tingled. She couldn't even smell the party anymore. Finally, Emily Anne realized that there was something larger than herself in the universe, and as evolution, or luck, or the dharma would have it, the door to this Great Big Thing was located just a few millimeters behind her eyelids. As she'd always half-suspected. When the dream machine was turned off and the gathering's alpha male demonstrated his great speaker system by piping through it carefully mixed roars and thuds designed to feed the local constabulary's ShotSpotter Gunshot Location System a false positive, Emily Anne found herself not thinking at all, but instead with her heart and viscera and everything below her neck wishing that the flashing lights of the black and whites winding through the Oakland streets would always be with her. The furious party energy swirling around her, waves of libertarian guffawing at the cops running keystones 'round the hood crashing onto the shores of liberal outrage and worry, was a rough and tinny echo so so far off.

Far away.

There's an app for that. So she downloaded it, and tried to have a dream machine experience during her commute. Oblivious to the gapers around her on Monday Emily held her iPad up to her nose, closed her eyes, and played the dream machine video on the little screen. But the California sun flooded into the car from the great Plexiglas windows, and the dipstickoftheBART next to Emily Anne was playing her MP3 player ever so loudly. *Tchun tchun tchun tchun* went the beat, then the song explained that there is a love and it comes from above.

But genius will out. Where would the BART train not be too bright? While in the Transbay Tube under the Bay, of course. If a screen is too small, where might a larger screen be located? Well, those train windows were pretty big, weren't they? Turning a few

hundred meters of the Transbay Tube into a giant dream machine would certainly alleviate some of the monotony of Emily Anne's commute, and the monotony of her leisure time as well. The rest was simplicity itself for someone with the resources of a San Francisco biotechnology start-up. It took only about a week to biohack a bioluminescent lichen hardy enough to grow in the dank and the heat of the tunnel. The real trick was dispersal. Should it be—

“Mechanical or sexual?” Emily Anne said to herself in the lab the next morning. Her supervisor made a special note of it, as Emily Anne rarely spoke, then lost the note. In the end, it was both in combination. The lichen, mostly a few luciferase genes from bioluminescent foxfire, would flair to life for only a day then recede into torpor given the lack of sun, and the mercurial moisture, in the long train tunnel. But the stuff would spread, saturate a band of the tunnel, and when it saturated the area the columnar isidia would break off and find a new place to cultivate, whipped along the interior surfaces of the Transbay Tube in the wind-wake of the nine-car rush hour trains.

Emily Anne stayed late at work and instead of taking the train all the way back to Berkeley got out at MacArthur Station, a hub for three BART lines. There were a number of platforms, a bunch of levels, and enough confusion that an owly-spectacled white girl with zebra boots and green furry jacket could stumble around looking confused for more than an hour without attracting the attention of station agents, BART police, or other phalanges of the hated, *hated* state. And Emily Anne prepped the exterior surfaces of the cars. A touch here, a squirt of an atomizer of her own design there, and as she shuttled about, the long and awkward contact of her specially treated jacket against the skins of the cars. Emily Anne was happy to be pushed aside by loudmouths and overpopulated families and witless tourists trying to find an airport.

She did it daily for two weeks. Sometimes at the Embarcadero, other times at Powell Street, and occasionally at Ashby, her home stop. Once even daring to get off and loiter at the West Oakland

stop, and once at Fruitvale, where even her far-flung internet friends knew not to tarry, for the rapists were always waiting in the nearby alleys of the imagination. For Emily Anne, the commute became almost bearable; a fortnight of something that she could almost stand to live through without the rat in her brain trying to eat its way out through her lovely elfin ears.

Then Emily Anne received a text from one of the boys she had met at the party—a solid beta-plus—and fell in love. They took City Car Share cars everywhere and fucked on his saggy futon in his roachy Mission District apartment and ate so many burritos Emily Anne dreamed of turning into one, and they drank a lot of vodka at corporate parties and were gifted with many T-shirts with corporate logos on them and then he was hired away by Google and decided to relocate to the South Bay, and Emily's start-up failed to get another injection of venture capital, through no fault of her own—this she knew because one of the VCs had contacted her privately and extralegally about coming to work for another firm, this one in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where she could grow things in the distended udders of black goats and make ever so much money and go cross-country skiing in Vermont every weekend if she wanted to, with him, of course, only if she wanted to—and so Emily Anne drifted back into both consulting and a Facebook status of Single rather than It's Complicated and she was so good that all her business cards needed were her name and the word genius underneath it because if you couldn't logically derive her email address or at least find it with a quick search you weren't worthy to work with her anyway, and if she wanted to date you, guess what, you would already be dating her. Anyway, she rarely took the BART anymore because there were a lot of biotech incubators in the East Bay where appropriate lab space could be had a bit more cheaply than in The City.

So it was a surprise and a coincidence—well, a *conscious* coincidence anyway, as a genius such as Emily Anne could do all sorts of complicated math in her sleep and often did—and not even rush hour when it happened that Emily Anne Holland had a train car to

herself one late and damp Sunday evening. The lichen bloomed in streaks and strips in the Transbay Tube as the train sped through it, and Emily Anne in her window seat clamped her eyes shut, and the colors pulsed before her eyes, and she saw every capillary blaze to life reaching forth chaotically in all directions, and the throbbing of purples and reds and blacks and colors that could not be completely accurately described in either English or the ancient Greek of Chariton of Aphrodisias came not from the universe outside her eyelids, but emerged from the universe on the other side of her eyelids, obeying new anarchies of optics, and something on her face started twitching and her body melted away to nothing, and then the train burst through to the surface again and she opened her eyes and saw the white skeletons of the cranes bowing low on the lip of the Port of Oakland, as it was nearly Christmas and longshoremen were getting overtime pay to get goods to market, the blessed *agora*, sixty tons every ten minutes. And Emily Anne Holland, genius, realized that the world was just a plaything to her in a way that most of the rest of her species could only ever dream about, but that also she was only a tiny columnar isidium of the great green planet on which she lived that had broken free and traveled some few feet to establish another lichen in a new location. Then she realized that the *apokálypsis* she had experienced was as trite and stupid as anything a stupid kid might come up with during a dorm room bull session, but somehow she knew it was still true, and for Emily Anne that was enough, so she decided to keep it all to herself if only to make sure she would never meet another tiny isidium of lichen *like* herself at some party. At Ashby station Emily Anne avoided eye contact with the passengers detraining from the other cars more assiduously than she ever had before—difficult, because they were all now very chatty and touchy with one another—and she looked at her feet the entire half-mile journey back to her apartment.

Senior Reading

Willard Spiegelman

As soon as I encountered Francis Bacon's authoritative proclamation (from the essay "Of Studies"), sometime in high school, I took it as my personal credo: "Reading maketh a full man; conference a ready man; and writing an exact man." But even before I read it, I had unknowingly adopted it. I have spent my life reading, conferring—mostly in classrooms—and writing. Reading came, as it does in most cases, first, as if by nature. The other two followed. Readers begin young, and are blissfully ignorant of why they have started on this obsession.

Reading has a history. Scholars and critics like Sven Birkerts and Alberto Manuel have detailed for us the changes in reading as a cultural practice, from the days when most people had to be read to, to the modern practice of silent, individual reading. But what I am interested in is my own reading practices and preferences, and how they have changed from my earliest days to the most recent.

How does a lifelong reader measure the course of his own history? Like any effort at self-analysis, tracking the changes involves a backward look and a recovery of facets of the person one used to be and still is, if only in part. Our tastes and habits alter as we age, as both body and mind undergo time's often not so subtle deprivations. "Progress" is not the right word; we adjust and adapt, for better or worse, and the reader we were at seven or seventeen is not the reader we are at sixty-seven. The eyes require help—more light, larger print—and the mind may have lost its own *Sitzfleisch*, the simple ability to sit still and concentrate. Even people with strong patience succumb, in the age of the tweet, to modest doses of attention deficit order. Focus, both physical and mental, may become difficult to maintain. We must work more strenuously at what once seemed easy or even effortless.

Of one's plans and aspirations, one begins to eliminate items from the lists one made in youth. Things formerly aspired to are

now erased as the unrealizable dreams of a different person. I won't learn Mandarin; I (probably) won't even get to China; I will never master the Argentine tango; I certainly won't swim the Channel. And I know that there are plenty of books I'm not going to read, things I have scratched off the "to-do" sheet. Schopenhauer, Kant's first and second *Critiques*, all of Pound's *Cantos*, Nabokov's *Ada*, Melville's *Pierre*, or *the Ambiguities*: They all elicit a pretty definitive "No, thank you."

Yeats said, "Bodily decrepitude is wisdom," but he was wrong, in part. The mind declines along with the body. When I was a college senior, I read all of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, albeit with more than an occasional glance at the Scott Moncrieff translation, for an independent study in Proust. Today, the English version alone presents what look like insurmountable challenges. Back in my salad days, right before the Proust course, I took a seminar on Henry James: one novel per week, including the daunting late masterpieces. Anyone who teaches college students will agree that you can't expect a twenty-year-old today to do *The Golden Bowl* in a week and come out understanding anything at all. Perhaps even I got only the skimpiest dose of comprehension, but at least I bullied my way through the novel. Today's students have more on their plates, and in their schedules, than I ever did. A half-century ago, high school and college were places and times for expansive leisureliness, openness, and wandering by the way. You can't read *Middlemarch* or *Moby-Dick* unless you have many unencumbered hours each evening to lose yourself in them.

Today I have the time, but rereading (for example) *The Wings of the Dove* would challenge me as much as it would an undergraduate with a surgically attached mobile phone. I have begun it and put it down five times in the past decade. The reason? The senior mind wanders. Although I shall continue to resist Twitter, the one thing I know about changes in my reading habits is that brevity has a lot to recommend it. Brevity of two kinds: shorter time spans, and shorter books.

Allow me to explain.

When I travel, especially on vacation, I always carry with me one *big* book, a loose and baggy monster, usually a novel that I can tuck into at night or on the plane, or in random moments of leisure, waiting for a companion or a bus. Something I can open and shut, and be pretty assured of finishing within the two or three weeks of my travels. If I have to keep at it for much longer, I risk forgetting the start of the book as I heave towards its end. I don't have the memory required to retain plot details and dialogue, not to mention echoes and repetitions and the kinds of things an English teacher dazzles his students with.

Not having a perfect memory, however, has many wonderful rewards. Namely, you can reread books you read years before with the delicious, double pleasure of coming upon some things as if for the first time ("What a beautiful sentence"; "I didn't think she would say *that*"; "I can't imagine what will happen next") and of experiencing others with the delight of recognition ("Ah, yes, I remember it well").

Rereading books from youth or even a later period has another advantage as well. You know you have guaranteed yourself a good return on your investment. With age, one is more aware of time slipping away as well as accumulating. What does one read? When a friend makes a recommendation, or a review piques your interest and you decide to make an outlay of time or even money, how long do you give yourself to be drawn in, captured, and lost in your indulgence? One chapter? Ten pages? A hundred? Three hours? Ever hopeful, you say to yourself, "This is a slowly developing tale. The author is setting her stage carefully, trying to engage our attention by focusing on those small details that will become larger as she discloses the secrets later on." How much later on?

Reading runs its own risks, and choosing a book is like sitting down at the gambling table. When might you strike it rich? On the next page? If you're smart, you may decide merely to cut your losses at a certain point and shut the book. It's boring. It's not for you. It did not engage you; it has inspired nothing other than irritation,

tedium, even sleep. It's now time to look elsewhere.

In youth I read promiscuously. I don't have that kind of energy today. With an old favorite like (here insert your own choice: Austen, Cather, Dickens, George Eliot, Forster, Twain) you know you won't go wrong. I reread *Pride and Prejudice* or *Emma* every third year. Ditto *Mrs. Dalloway*, which by now I have practically memorized as if it were a lyric poem. I did re-read both *Middlemarch* and *Moby-Dick* within the past decade, but each one took up the better part of a year. I know that *David Copperfield*, which entranced me in seventh grade, will entrance me still. Montaigne: always.

As a habit, reading takes hold early and lasts as long as eyesight does. (Or even beyond: many former readers, now sight-impaired, rely on audio books, and some of them still use the verb "read" to describe what they do while listening.) Readers tend to be dreamy and escapist, imagining other worlds and other selves. Some are skimmers, some are divers. Some stick to the surface, darting from item to item; others like to submerge themselves, reading deeply as well as widely. They often want mastery, meaning that if one work of a writer entices them, they look forward to more of the same. These people tend to be intellectuals, or maybe just obsessives, insofar as they want to learn as much as possible about a subject or an author. The late Guy Davenport (who hated the word "erudite" but had as encyclopedic a mind and a reading history as one might imagine) was the kind of voracious lifetime reader, rare even in the mid-twentieth century, who is an endangered species today. In a recent appreciative essay, Mark Scroggins describes visits to his mentor in Lexington, Kentucky, the two friends facing each other in easy chairs, discussing what they'd been reading. "The canonical went without saying—he knew his Shakespeare, his Dickens, his Shelley and Coleridge. He had worked his way through all thirty-nine volumes of Ruskin's works, and had spent a summer with Sir Walter Scott's twenty-seven Waverley novels. One time he lamented that he might not get around to reading all of Bulwer-Lytton." I dare anyone to find more than a handful of people, even literary academics, most

of whom are now buried in the minutiae of their subspecialties, of whom you might say, “the canonical went without saying.”

Guy Davenport neither drove nor owned a television. Like Larry McMurtry, reputed to know the whereabouts of everything in his sprawling store in Archer City, Texas, he was first and foremost a bookman. Stanley Edgar Hyman and his wife Shirley Jackson inhabited a ramshackle frame house in Bennington, every nook overflowing with books, every room stocked floor-to-ceiling. Both the critic and the novelist could say where anything was: “the bookcase at the top of the stairs, second shelf from the bottom, on the left-hand side,” or words to that effect, according to generations of admiring colleagues and students. A life devoted to and defined by literature, by reading as an all-consuming passion, is harder to imagine in the twenty-first century. C.K. Stead, New Zealand’s preeminent man of letters, entitled a 2008 selection of essays and reviews *Book Self: The Reader as Writer and the Writer as Critic*. Stead is himself a poet, a novelist, an essayist. In other words, not only a man of the book but also a man who considers his “self” to be a book, or to be made of books. Think of other encyclopedic readers: the late Northrop Frye, who could “anatomize” literature as well as criticism because of his wide-ranging expertise; or Stanford professor Franco Moretti, a skimmer rather than a diver, who prefers “distance” reading to close reading in order to take very long views of his specimens; or the anomalous Harold Bloom, whose own prodigious memory makes him a one-man Google. Giants of reading are seldom snobs: rather, they tend to take in everything, traveling in the realms of brass and tin as well those of gold. “Book men” and women: rare birds.

We ordinary or “common”—the term beloved of Dr. Johnson—readers, even academics like me, often lack the stamina or retentive powers to emulate the geniuses of total recall, but we, too, wander at will among literary types, genres, and quality. Virginia Woolf had it only partly right in her 1916 essay “Hours in a Library” with the summary distinction: “Let us begin by clearing up the old confusion between the man who loves learning and the man who loves reading,

and point out that there is no connection whatever between the two.” Many of us love both, although I know what she means.

From the sublime to the mundane, the ennobling to the trashy, a genuine reader will pick up anything in sight, often regardless of style or substance, rather than do something else. Reading inspires, amuses, and instills more than wisdom or even information. In the age of instant reference, when facts (that may turn out to be factoids or falsehoods) are always available with a flick or click of the finger and a trip to Google, we have less need to perform heroic mnemonic acts. Children who catch the reading bug early know all too well the particular combination of pleasure and power that arises from feelings of mastering first one’s letters, then the words, sentences, and finally the meanings that come from the printed page. That combination, rather than information-seeking, keeps them going into adulthood.

To the question of what one reads, and how reading habits change with age, comes a complementary one: what does one think about, and do with, books themselves? Most of us remember beloved books, even the dog-eared copies that were the literary equivalent of the favorite panda, rabbit, teddy bear, or blanket that we carried around until it finally deteriorated after one too many insults or washings. And as we got more serious, we began accumulating, at first unconsciously and then with greater deliberation, our own collections. For people who think of libraries as safe havens, islands of calm in a sea of storms, the easiest way to propitiate the gods of chaos is to build real shelves, which act as metaphorical protective bulwarks, capable of withstanding the assaults of surly siblings, unsympathetic or uninterested parents, and then of other bullies and unpleasant data from the external world. The bedroom or the library or (see the case of Hyman and Jackson) the entire house becomes a literary fortress.

What happens when you have to dismantle the fortress? What happens when you have to move? Everyone over a certain age has had some version of the dreaded experience. You have built graduate

student bookshelves from boards and cinderblocks or purchased cheap bookcases from Ikea. You have filled some rooms with books left over from college courses, which you have never opened again, and other books bought for pleasure, which you have reread and annotated. You now find that it's time to move. You put everything in boxes; you carry the boxes—if you are poor or unlucky—down and then up stairs; you replace them on shelves in your new digs.

How many times can you do this? At least wedding gifts you have never opened can rest comfortably in attic, garage, or basement, and await the moving men when you have to relocate. They are not taking up interior domestic space that might be filled to better purpose.

At the age of forty, I sold a house and put all my worldly goods in storage for a year while I was scheduled to be out of town. I knew that on my return I would be buying, and moving into, a smaller residence. This was my chance to de-accession. How to proceed? I began removing the books from the shelves, individually and lovingly; a gentle patina of dust covered all of them, but each one brought back memories. How can you sell your children? Abstruse philosophy turns out to have a practical value, because it was Hegel who helped me break the ice. I opened my paperback copy of his *Phenomenology*, unregarded for twenty years. The print was small; the pages had yellowed; the spine had lost its glue. I realized I would never read or need this book again and that if by some bizarre chance I had to reread Hegel I could always find a better copy in my university library (you know: the place where you can borrow books, for free). So into a cardboard box it went. Then the floodgates opened. More and more volumes followed Hegel into the bins slated for re-sale. And I never missed a single one.

Several years ago I was talking to the poet Mark Strand about a move he had just made from Chicago to New York. He had taken a position at Columbia and was living in a Manhattan apartment much smaller than his previous one. I asked how he had pared down belongings, especially books. “Willard,” the wise sage replied, “You

really don't need more than a hundred books." A young person, especially a serious reader with a bibliophile's collecting instincts, will probably not recognize the truth of that remark. But now in the digital age, all that recommends the book as material object, unless one is a scholar with very specific and arcane needs, is its aesthetic appeal, its manifestation of cultural capital or, with its marginalia, its reminder of readings past and the reader you once were. In London and elsewhere there used to be and probably still are antique shops that sold books by the meter or yard, often merely fake cardboard boxes with real leather spines turned out, to give the appearance of a gentleman's library. Books used to furnish rooms. Now, the entertainment center has preempted the space for access to the greater world, for knowledge as well as for pleasure.

If you are what you read as well as what you eat, you can

usually take the measure of a person by a quick look at what's on his nightstand. Not the coffee table with its picture books, its ornamental art and travel pornography, and not even the bookshelves, which store things that no one has touched in years. Like the medicine chest and the refrigerator, the nightstand bears witness to daily habits or, more precisely, nocturnal ones. You creep into bed and either stimulate or relax yourself as you escape from more mundane activities into an inner journey that may keep you up and then knock you out.

Here's my latest inventory: Sarah Ruden's impressive, lively verse translation of the *Aeneid*; Jonathan Galassi's new bilingual version of the *Canti* of Leopardi; James Wood's *How Fiction Works*; the correspondence of Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell; art criticism by Jed Perl and music criticism by Alex Ross; Helen Vendler on the poems of Emily Dickinson. All of them have sat piled up there for more than year. I move more slowly at night than by day, dipping in at random.

The observant reader will have noticed several things about this list. For one thing, it lacks long, indeed any, works of fiction. For an-

other, the books are not best-sellers and they are not from this year. Most important, they are all things that can be read, even scanned, and followed non-sequentially. Virgil tells a story, of course, but I have read the *Aeneid* so many times, and in so many versions, that I can open the epic to any page—like those medieval readers who were throwing the *sortes vergilianae*, seeking answers from the man generally regarded as a magus whose wisdom can help with life's questions—and pick up the story and its hero for as long as I wish. And the Bishop-Lowell correspondence makes for a kind of dual biography, best read from front to back, but for someone like me who knows something about the poets and their work, it's perfectly legitimate to open and read anywhere. The poets' letters answer one another, but each one has a life of its own. "Tolle, lege": the words of Saint Augustine come to mind. "Lift. Read." The simplest formula possible.

Aside from my road or air trips, I have put aside long works of fiction in favor of shorter things or work, like the books above, that can be dipped into. The big book still beckons but I must resist its siren call unless I find optimal conditions. Wallace Stevens once said that a long poem "comes to possess the reader and . . . naturalizes him in its own imagination and liberates him there." True enough, and equally true for long works of fiction. Time remains the necessary ally as well as the enemy. You need a lot of it. Virginia Woolf once advised would-be readers to avoid entirely Spenser's *Faerie Queene*: "Put it off as long as possible." Then follows a list of mundane activities to pursue instead, "and then, when the whole being is red and brittle as sandstone in the sun, make a dash for *The Faerie Queene* and give yourself up to it." As with many long books, the best time and place for reading is often when one is laid up in bed with an illness that incapacitates mildly but doesn't impair one's faculties.

We seldom have that kind of time. Brevity becomes the soul of wisdom and passion, as well as wit. My preferences have switched to shorter things. No longer Joyce and James—except for the former's

Dubliners and the latter's novellas—and Proust, but Willa Cather and Peter Taylor among twentieth-century novelists. Among contemporary fiction writers, the short story masters William Trevor and Alice Munro and, several decades younger still, Jhumpa Lahiri always get my attention.

More important than genre or length are tone and style. Clarity trumps difficulty, because I also understand—as my younger self did not—that complexity and depth are not synonymous, nor are apparent simplicity and superficiality. In other words, style makes its own claims on a reader like me. I always tell my students that the best definition of “good writing” is that which makes you interested in something you are not interested in. The quality of language and of syntax points to the quality of the author's mind. I read things in *The New Yorker* and *The New York Review of Books* because the writing is so damn good.

The beauty of the sentence draws me in, and my two favorite living writers of fiction—writers of entirely different sorts—are the octogenarians Shirley Hazzard and James Salter, both of whom insinuate their beauties into a reader's mind and memory. Start with *The Transit of Venus* and *The Great Fire*, her wondrous novels, and *Burning the Days*, his memoir unfolding a genuinely feline heterosexuality, to see what a master can do with single sentences.

Here is the opening paragraph of *The Great Fire*, which both stopped me in my tracks and impelled to keep reading:

Now they were starting. Finality ran through the train, an exhalation. There were thuds, hoots, whistles, and the shrieks of late arrivals. From a megaphone, announcements were incomprehensible in American and Japanese. Before the train had moved at all, the platform faces receded into the expression of those who remain.

What was the appeal? First of all, the verbs, none of which is transitive, and many of which are passive, or mere verbs of being. This is the kind of writing Strunk and White and other master teachers

always caution against. Hazzard is priming us for action, holding back and moving forward simultaneously. Second, instead of “English,” the unexpected “American,” to remind us of the war just ended and the political-military stakes. (The novel begins in Japan; the year is 1947.) Last, and most startling, the single present tense verb at the paragraph’s end: “those who remain” have been transformed into an abstract, allegorical group, no longer just the people on this particular platform but any group being left behind. Hazzard has given us a specific time and place; she has also opened us up to another world of almost mythic dimensions.

Because I am, by instinct and profession, a reader and critic of poetry, I am always looking for new poets or reviewing the work of the masters who inspired me when young. Everyone’s tastes change—in literature, music, art, and food—with age. Some preferences remain while others fade. Those perennial favorites of adolescents—Dylan Thomas and e. e. cummings—no longer exert their claims on me, although anyone who wants to introduce junior high school students to the charms and intricacies of poetic practice could not go wrong with virtually any cummings poem. I never much appreciated Whitman when I was held thrall to the opacities of modernism. Now I understand how and why he is—bloviation and repetition aside—the great American genius, capable of tenderness, sadness, and delicacy as well as bravado and self-promotion.

A great twentieth-century intellectual once confessed: “I read poetry because it saves time.” That was Marilyn Monroe. She got it right. We say that poetry makes its mark and engages its readers in two opposing ways: through condensation and suggestiveness. It packs its meanings, beauties, and effects into the fewest number of words, but it also allows each reader to respond to, and therefore to interpret the evidence individually. A phrase, a figure of speech, a syntactic arrangement, a sonic or musical gesture will affect each reader differently. The activity of reading a poem may take less time than the reading of prose, but with a poem, as with a picture or a relatively short piece of music, you have the advantage of repetition

and expansiveness: the eye and ear can take in the same data more than once. The work seeps into the reader's soul. Even, or especially, in age, poetry retains the power to engage me, even long poems. Dr. Johnson wryly said of *Paradise Lost* that no one ever wished it longer. I can pick it up—as I can the *Aeneid*—and open it at random, begin reading, and stop whenever I wish. It overwhelms and absorbs one's finest energies.

I guess I have been lucky as a reader for many reasons. First of all, I still read. It is the activity to which I am most addicted. Not doing it for even a short time provokes feelings of withdrawal. And next, now that I am reading fewer, and shorter novels, and reading fiction of any sort less frequently than I do non-fictional prose and poetry, I have the good fortune to have matched my tastes to my capacities.

The brevity of poetry is only part of its appeal. If brevity alone were what I sought, I would fit right into the twenty-first century, but of course I do not. I have never written, and only twice read, a tweet. I have never looked at, let alone appeared on, Facebook. I seldom read anyone's blog. Why should I? I have books. I asked a group of high school student last spring how much time they spent doing "free" reading, i.e., reading things unassigned in class. They all raised their hands. Queried further, they also admitted that the bulk of their reading was stuff written by their friends: text messages, tweets, and blogs. Whether this ought to be cause for celebration or regret remains to be learned.

"By their books ye shall know them": a motto to be taken seriously. Last July, on a three-and-a-half hour plane trip, I walked through what the pilot always helpfully refers to as the "aircraft" twice: once, forty minutes after take off, and once forty minutes before landing. I wanted to see how many passengers were reading. One hundred and forty-four people filled the main cabin. Fifteen were reading books, or something on their Kindles. An equal number were reading magazines, and not of the *New Haven Review* or *New York Review of Books* sort. Others were playing video games

or looking at movies on their personal computers, watching the in-flight entertainment, or just sleeping. The percentages seemed to be about right, what I probably would have guessed.

I was certainly the only person on board who was reading Wordsworth's *Prelude*. Perhaps I was the only person ever to read it on an American Airlines flight. Sitting there, I contemplated Wordsworth's memoir of his first year at university. From his college rooms, the young Wordsworth, a mediocre student at Cambridge, saw at Trinity College the statue of Newton "with his prism and his silent face, / The marble index of a mind for ever / Voyaging through strange seas of thought, alone." Flying through the air, I was, like all readers, also moving through my own seas of thought, alone among strangers, and grateful for the solitude.

Another Eight-Hour Day

The daily grind

Frank Bill

8:15 A.M.

The SCP warehouse sits in the west end of Louisville, Kentucky. A working-class area where blacks and whites survive amongst the worn brick and potholed streets. Wearing a scuffed blue hardhat, the SCP warehouse chief tells me, “Don’t know what kinda game he’s playin’ but I’m tired of it.”

I’ll call him Paul, not his real name. Like most of the guys I work with, Paul’s a white dude. He found God two years ago. He has an anger problem. His complexion is similar to raw bratwurst. He’s bulldog-jawed with stubble. He’s fuming at the tanker of Polyethylene glycol (Peg for short), over forty thousand pounds of a raw material for the Associative Thickener plant that’s been sitting across the street next to the north warehouse since 7:30 a.m. in the unloading pit. Because there are three of us in the warehouse, we rotate the responsibility of unloading it. Paul believes it’s the other warehouse operator’s turn, but it’s not. It’s Paul’s turn.

It’s my week to run the warehouse office, a 12 x 12 room constructed of a drop ceiling, cement block walls, big screen TV-sized glass windows and tile floor. The office sits in a corner behind me in the football field-sized south warehouse.

At 8 a.m., Monday thru Friday, whoever runs the office will check the backlog on his computer for add-on shipments. Call truck lines for inner city pick-ups. Get paperwork printed out so the two operators running the warehouse floor can pull shipments for the next day.

It’s Paul’s week to work the floor. Meaning he’ll help the other operator haul finished material from the line-up across the street, load finished product or unload raw materials from tankers for the Associative Thickener plant or from railcars for the clay plant.

“He unloaded one last week, when you were off.”

Talking to Paul when he's aggravated is like talking to a wall—right now.

“I did the last one. I've had a bad week. I don't need this today.”

“We had two Peg trucks last week. The second one came when you were off. I'll unload this one.”

“It's not your turn.” He snaps. Gets on my scratched and beat Toyota fork truck. We only have two in our area, Goose's and mine. Paul revs down the dock ramp, across the rutted street and into the north warehouse. Passing the other operator. They don't acknowledge each other.

The other operator, Goose, drives through the open bay on his fork truck. Across the cracked floor carrying a pallet of plastic wrapped material that's about four feet tall and four feet wide. He's bringing it from the line-up, material being produced by one of the two plants that run twenty-four hours a day. He'll place it in one of the rows that line the right and left sides of the warehouse. There are close to thirty on each side.

Stopping, his back to me, he swivels around on the idling fork truck. He wears a gray hard hat turned backwards, baseball-sized number 3 in its center, union and University of Kentucky stickers on the sides. Shaded safety glasses hide his eyes. He has a neatly trimmed goat-tee. He's a die-hard UK fan, bleeds blue. He asks me, “He not gonna unload that Peg truck?”

Standing outside the office, I step toward him and say, “He thinks it's your turn.”

“Didn't you tell him I unloaded the last one?”

“I did.”

“What'd he say?”

Before I can answer, the warehouse phone rings. Sounds off like a horn. Bouncing from the insulation-padded ceiling that hovers 30 feet or better over ahead, down to the solid nicked floor and tin walls that are lined with webs of gray dust.

Turning around, I walk to the open bay door where a grit-covered phone is mounted. Irritated, I answer. “Warehouse.”

“Hey.” It’s our warehouse manager. I’ll call him Art. “Tell Goose we got a Peg truck that needs to be unloaded.”

Four or five years ago, rumors floated around about getting bought out by our competitor. Fearing pay cuts and higher costing insurance, union cards got passed around. We got bought. The union was voted in. The warehouse manager, and all other managers for that matter, are non-union. Art’s management. Sits in his office, in the north warehouse across the street.

All three of us know the truck is here. It was in the pit when we arrived this morning.

“He knows.” I say. “It’s not—”

Art has already hung up. I wanted to say “rocket science.” Art is the guy who always worries about his job. When his boss wants something done, regardless of how important the job we are doing is, he expects us to drop it. Do what he needs done. This is our daily deck of cards. Miscommunication. Butting heads. Fifteen minute break. Start over till lunch time.

8:45 A.M.

Phoning the Associative Thickeners plant manager, I ask which storage tank George wants the Peg pumped into. George gives me the tank number. It’s not empty. Tells me, it’ll take a bit.

I hang up the phone. We have a two-hour window to unload the Peg before we get charged extra. It’s called “the marriage.” The truck driver has never delivered to us before, needs to be told where to drop his trailer. Hook up his pump to unload the Peg. I grab my safety shield and leather gloves. Walk across the street. Rattle the driver’s maroon door with my palm. He’s a black dude. More than likely from Mississippi or Louisiana as the company that delivers the Peg is located down south.

“Wanna step out,” I say, as I turn, point to the knee-high rock wall that protects the pit in-case of a spill, “you need to get as close to the wall as possible. You’ll need all the room you can get after you

drop your tanker and pull up beside it.”

He tells me. “Ok.”

The pit is wide enough for two semi’s to sit side by side with trailers attached. The driver appears starved, wiry built. Walking alongside his chrome tanker to its rear, our reflections expand like we’re in a funhouse of mirrors.

After showing him how far he needs to back up, he pulls the tanker forward and guides it in. The airbrakes sound. I chalk the rear tires. Check the temperature gauge on the other side of the tanker. Two hundred ten degrees. It’ll start to set up at 160. We’re good. It’s boiling.

At the pit’s rear, I check our feed line. Make sure the line isn’t blocked. Opening the nitrogen valve, I try to blow nitrogen through the feed line to the Associative Thickener plant, which is a good 100 feet away. The pressure gauge doesn’t drop. There’s a plug.

To my left, Paul comes out of the north warehouse’s rusted side door.

I tell him about the plug.

He tells me, “I got it. I misunderstood what you said.”

9:10 A.M.

Resting my arms across a white countertop that separates Art from me I say, “Look, they’re good workers, but I’m tired of being in the middle when they get pissed off at one another.”

“I know. I just had knee surgery. Had to walk all over the place to find Paul. I—”

Art’s about 5’7”. Gray stubble on the sides of his tan head with much less in the center. He had curved legs, bad. Everyone joked about him being bowlegged. Before his surgery, guys would tell him he’d be 6’ tall after the procedure was finished.

Waving a hand he says, “You don’t need to hear this. I’m having a meeting with them.”

9:30 A.M.

I'm talking to Art about a shipment when Paul bursts in behind me. "Peg driver's hose just blew."

It's as if someone just cut the oxygen off in the office. There are no alarms for this. Just reaction.

Fretting, Art stands up and asks, "Where's the spill kit?"

Eyeing Art like he's ten kinds of stupid, Paul says, "You got it back there in one of your cabinets."

Art drags out a box. Carries it from his office to the north dock. Drops it on the flat surface.

These things happen maybe once a year. When they do you gotta be on your toes, remember the protocol. Get the spill contained. Cleaned up. Report it to the safety manager. Make sure nothing goes to the city sewer, especially if it's hazardous. If that happens OSHA gets involved. But Peg isn't a hazardous material.

Paul and I grab several long blue absorbent socks from the box. They're called Pig Socks. They create a wall, will dam the flow of material. Taking them out the side door, to the pit, we form a square barrier beneath the feed line but around the sump that's covered by a stainless metal screen. Peg will hardened quickly. If it gets into the sump, it'll be similar to peanut brittle and make the pump useless.

Looking at the truck driver's hose, it's laying ripped open with Peg rivering out of it. Creating a huge sticky puddle of donut glaze outside of the Pig Socks.

Walking back in the side door, Art's wearing a Dallas Cowboy's hardhat with ear muffs the color of Mountain Dew. He's on his Blackberry reporting the spill to our safety guy. Sounding rushed, he asks me, "Anything get in the sump?"

"Maybe two gallons."

Out in the pit, the driver says, it's not his fault. There must've been a blockage on our end.

In the side door of the north warehouse, we have a touch screen to choose the correct tank to pump the materials too. We monitor

the tanks as they fill up. And Paul tells the driver, “You pumped two thousand pounds into the tank before the line busted. You were running your pump too fast.”

We’re worried about whose fault it is. A report will have to be written, detailing what happened. Art tells me, “Get the camera, we need pictures. Email them to me.”

9:45 A.M.

After grabbing the digital camera from the south warehouse, I snap pictures of the spill from different angles. The sun is working its way up over the city, turning up the heat. My clothes are starting to stick to me.

We’re not even two hours into another eight-hour day. Trucks need to be called for outgoing shipments. Material needs to be brought over and inventoried. Shipments for tomorrow need to be pulled, the Peg truck still needs to be unloaded. Other than the spill, this is a normal workday in the SCP warehouse. Listening to men bicker about their duties like infants over toys, I’m always the ref and the counselor, ready and waiting for my fifteen- or thirty-minute break and another cup of coffee.

Two Poems

Matt Salyer

Med Quarters

Stuck and pinned and braced, the broken soldiers
drowse at SIQ, stiff as the tin
woodsmen in Oz. Grease easy, Joes,
and huff and bluster, you, like the cowardly lion

or a bag of smashed assholes. Chug Monsters
and Red Bull, show somber tats to your boys
of skulls, black ace of spades, and dread
things from a wild America. The eagle's tight as

hell. I want to leave.

There are no doctors at SIQ,
only iodine glass curio cases of iodine
bottles and bottles of tongue

depressors and someone called the provider
who gives us pills. We snort the pills
and wait to use the phone. We use the phone
and wait to leave. It's up to the provider.

At zero dark, they hook us in a dream
and they tug us out by the cheek. We ball rank
linen in lockers, piss, look at the piss color,
and match it to a chart above the shitter.

It's like a game: clear, pastel, amber, red,
dead. The Army is always playing games
with my cock. Sometimes I wish the provider
would play with my cock. Sometimes I wish

she was a real doctor. She'd be good.
I like the way she eats; she peels an orange
like a surgeon, her filed nails driven
in until they've pierced the thick flesh

and pried the innards loose to sprinkle
with confectioner's sugar. Outside, the flaking
trunks of the pines are piled round with needles
like cut hair or stacks of kindling for effigies of

the provider: my little unused ring of fire.

Man Tyger Organ

Mr Downey, Lt Pyefinch and Poor Munro went on shore at Saugur
Island to shoot deer. We saw many tracks of them, as well as of tigers;
at three we sat down to refresh ourselves when we were told a fine deer
was near us. Downey and I jumped up I heard a roar like thunder, and
saw an immense tiger spring on Munro.

—The Gentleman's Magazine, 1793

And they leapt past the brilliant ballad
boy in handsome scarlet
broadcloth and esquire buttons

where the brass lions spread their haunches
on the bright smelt faces of glint
shields. Calcutta's a quiver of light

shot at brass buckles or the spent
casing of sloughed bullets.
On the long island, the lost

white tooth of an island, the long
rifles bend the stride of barking deer until they
crashed like surf; red crabs crack

beneath their hooves and quiver
in rows like scales of a breathing world.
Rider, esquire, asphixiator,

gentleman, you: dismount,
remove jam and biscuits and veal pies
from a white basket and lie

in the day licking flesh
and smears of gelled fruit from your hands
like a cadger

or a brass lion. Calcutta's a quiver
of dreams but better, but real.
Biscuits in India taste realer than biscuits

on crowded beaches at Weymouth.
Bengal is realer in Bengal.
Men are. In the mangroves,

bright minavets screech louder than scarlet
bellies, gaur browse in the leopard's whiff,
and whorls on the she-oak throw nets for the sun.

No "human mind," one hunter recalled,
"could form an idea" of that place. It shook
your heart loose from a tangle of you

and the cookoos hushed. Hush
(where the tiger butters its teeth with its tongue):
tigers are realer in Bengal, and fortunate sons.

Two Poems

Randall Horton

In the Year of Our Lord Circa 1840

The Ion (formerly the Amistad) sets sail from New London, CT

a sight never to see
somebody once saw—

finely pilfered cargo draped
around melanin men crepe
& calico but some nude—

broken branches
 swaying
in the breeze bodies
they were—

how odd the daylight
at half-mast no valid flag flew—
 a nation
above deck pitch dark
anarchy fore & aft

at the riverbank's edge
 overlooking splinted reeds
wooden houses quaint—

seagulls frozen plumb
between morning fog
 no one notices—
allusions thought some
 what audacity what
if—

amistad means friendship
shall we befriend another

human always difficult
to propagate as truth as is—

it's the question curled tight
into a clenched fist

which became a-why-not-
thing of intrigue here—

—menial wakes— almost
river bottom the keel even
& a dreg of sludge

its breadth (**amistad**
not the **ion**) held chattel

(re)sold (re)manacled
(re)shipped (re)landed

to own man is illogical)
what lexicon shall we
speak coherent

untroubled a schooner
slicing-slicing
the *mist*—
brilliant
cane knives
raised
—steady now—
along a lag tide

against dawn's still—
the schooner's hull
but not forgotten

they had been men
once before being

(re)tried (re)imagined
mende (said

of trial cadences of gavel
sound & decisions spoke—
opposite a square stern

hold strong the bowsprit—

canadian geese *cry*—taken
without consent (erasure
in the (re)naming

just above the esplanade) along
the shoreline a u.s. custom
house

in the year of our lord (circa
1840—

today begins in earnest
or paradoxical)
out of memory's throat

angelic but devilish
steering wind by the lee
in the wet well
a saga—one day maybe salt cod

mackerel—
coming down (soft rain
on the river) through the fog
soft rain—

Dear Reader (1)

before the cataclysmic end of the world
whittles down to zero, before

grounding out idiot noise pushes
in all motion skin color, before that

which cannot be defined: our terribleness
calibrated on a triple beam scale .or.

call it residue running to the border.
subjective but it is about subjects

(underneath always underneath) &
language. after the betrayal. .or. a thing

of intrigue: an illusion
caught in a soundraft. the recoil

before that final echo dimming the sun
display(ed) for the (dis)placed

more clearly to see at the end of the world.

Slaughter-
house-Five
Is About
Believing
in Love

James Charbonneau

Oh this so dark a night as to be fingerless.

I enter what I call my home. I spread my overcoat over the wings of a hanger. I make my coat jump up and down, by gripping the hanger's hook—my head—and jerking it from high to low, over and over again. I stop when this begins to make me—me, not coat-hanger me—a little sick like car with closed windows and someone smoking, sick; like chipped red paint Tilt-A-Whirl ride, sick.

I knife-edge my hand down the front of my overcoat to knock off all the bad molecules.

I go through my pants pockets looking for the Post-It. Nothing. I cannot remember what it said, and now it is gone.

I hang my overcoat and I make the empty coat hangers in the closet clang together and I think about sparrows and hunchbacks and suddenly I can see the guy who sits day after day in front of my building with a cardboard sign that just reads HELP, all in caps, no exclamation point, no specific type of help requested, just help. I want that Post-It as badly as that man wants a ham sandwich or some gin or a dick to suck or a game of checkers with a true adversary.

I close the closet door and walk from the hall into the living room.

Olivia sits on the couch facing me. She has seen me do this searching ritual before. Everything from an old magazine with a specific article with a specific quote about a specific subject that didn't really have anything to do with the main subject of the article; to a specific winter cap, black with a white stripe, I remembered having three winters ago, which she told me for a fact had been ruined by the snow blower when the hat blew off my head and into the moving blades, but mostly Post-Its, yellow Post-Its. On them, everything from the practical, a list of American cheese and wheat bread and three-ply toilet paper, to one line, like *Hamlet is about grief*, to one she found crumpled under the sink near the trash barrel that only had numbers

on it in rows, all 7s, seven rows wide and seven rows long, until, in the second to the last row, two 7s in from the right, there was a 6. I had lied to her and told her I didn't remember its meaning. I could tell she was too sick of this trait of mine to be sick of it anymore. Now she was just bored.

"Have a good day?" I say.

I watch her face. The angle her eyes take on arouses me. Her forehead wrinkles. I can see the words fill her mouth. She swallows, washing down whole sentences, entirely formed thoughts, hours of conversation.

Maybe the words are hidden in the wrinkles of her forehead. I look, but alas, the skin is wiped clean. I often use words that nobody else uses anymore from all centuries and eras and cultures, words like *alas*. I say *groovy* at least twice a day.

I think of the Post-It and my stomach churns.

"I went for a good walk this morning—had a good workout," she says. "Then I went grocery shopping."

I smile at her on purpose, like bait. "See anybody?"

"No. Well, just Janine. She told me about her continuing diet and some problems with Jerry. But nothing earth-shattering."

"She's always been a waste of time." I free the words without caution, with intent. I am looking for trouble now. Is the Post-It that important? Is this why I am getting all hostile on her? What did it say? I try to force what is written there, my memory of it, to the forefront of my mind and only see the yellow of a blank Post-It note.

"Right, just my best friend," she says.

"Look, I didn't mean that the way it sounded. It's just that ..."

"You've never tried to get to know her." Her voice peters out. "Not really."

My eyes bounce around the room and land on the cabinet Olivia restored for use as a bar. A doily protects the polished top, and I had lined the bottles up in neat rows long ago. The glasses and coasters and napkins were stored inside. I grab the ice bucket on my way to the kitchen.

One cube in the second ice tray won't come out, and I twist the plastic until I hear it crack.

I run the tray under water and it keeps getting hotter and hotter. I hold it there until the cube is completely gone. Back to its source: solid, liquid, gas, or was it hard, soft, nothing, or was it rock, paper, scissors? Are scissors nothing? The thing they do takes place in the space between the blades, and the paper they cut keeps the blades from touching again until the cut is complete. So what really cuts the paper? Nothing.

"What about Betty?" I call out from the kitchen. "I had a good time talking to her at that barbeque at what's-their-names house last weekend." I come back carrying the ice bucket. "We had a few laughs."

"Until you had to go and start telling your stories," she says.

I put ice in my glass all the while pouring the vodka until it tops the ice. I know the vodka is melting at least a little bit of the ice, stealing its cold, but I can't see it and I want to see transitions today, some change, the bounce of a coat becoming nausea.

I take a long pull off my drink and taste turpentine. I make a face of disgust and hope Olivia will turn and see it and think I'm making a face at her. I look down at the vodka in my glass and expect to see an oil slick. I pick up the bottle and look at it, tipping it this way and that. I take another sip, and now it tastes like chilled vodka again. Everything is A-okay.

"What's wrong with my stories?" I say.

She says, "Did you ever think that not everyone is interested in your work. Some people are bothered by your stories? They're morbid."

"I work in insurance. How can that bother anybody? Actuarial tables don't bother anyone. And they don't lie!"

Olivia turns around and looks at the drink in my hand. The condensation at the base of the glass draws her eye.

"How about me?" she says and turns back.

I put ice in a glass and fill it for her. I look at the back of her head. Her hair is the most beautiful thing I have ever touched. Black

strains of silk connected without connections. All I have to do right now is touch that hair and I will love her and crave her and miss her, everything at once, like the universe.

I think about taking my dick out and putting it in her drink for a second. Fellatio once removed. My second thought has nothing to do with propriety and everything to do with the possibility of an ice cube getting stuck to my flesh and the cartoon it would paint for her when she would turn around to see what all the ruckus was about, seeing me, legs spread, head down, with an ice cube freezing the tip of my dick off and me afraid to knock it away, the thought of skin grafts—skin from my ass to replace the skin from my dick—dogging my mind.

I think of words like *ruckus* and *dogging* that nobody uses anymore.

“Here.” I hand her the drink over the back of the couch and step back to the cabinet.

I listen intently to my wife taking the first sip of her drink. I try to judge just how far down the vodka is in her glass by the pitch of her next sip. Somewhere around C-flat I will pour more for her right from the bottle into her glass without her having to ask or move or even think. Pure service. I down my second drink.

“Think I’ll take a shower,” I say.

“That’ll be good,” she says.

And there it is.

I can hear it in her voice. I am not contagious. I am the contagion. All the numbers and percentages and pieces of the pie charts I rubbed up against all day have worked their way into my skin, filling my pores, through muscle, to the bone, the meat of the marrow and the spaces in between. All those slimebag tornado victims and slut flood victims and airbag sucking lowlifes have penetrated me.

I watched her once. In her car before we had officially met, outside that coffee shop. She had been one of them then. No seat belt.

Now I know I make her feel dirty with my mathematics and I

want to spit mortality tables all over the back of her head, all over that beautiful, beautiful hair.

“I was at Hooper’s the other day” says Olivia, “and George said he was going to be getting in some stuff from an estate sale. He said there were a few pieces I might be interested in. Pretty beat up, so I could get them cheap.”

“That depends on what George means by cheap,” I say.

“He always gives me good deals,” she says.

“I wonder why that is,” I say.

I can see through the back of her head that she makes the effort to close her mouth and say nothing.

Raging Bull *is about jealousy.*

The beginning of the third drink starts a marble of warmth in my belly that turns fluid with my second gulp. It begins to leach out from my stomach and I know it is my own will making it spread throughout my body. Once it gets to my fingertips, I realize that the circle is near completion. The journey from the glass to the stomach to the fingertips that held the glass is almost done. I force the vodka in my body through my fingertips and through the glass and back in among the cubes. I watch the bubbles come up from the bottom of the glass like a garden hose filling a kiddie pool from the bottom up. If this keeps up my glass will never empty. It might even overflow.

Jesus is about abundance.

“So what do you think?” she says.

“I think your friends are a bunch of losers,” I say.

There is a pause like a sinkhole that has swallowed the car, the amusement park ride, and the man who needs help outside my building.

I want a real fight now.

She puts her drink on the coffee table.

A knockdown, drag out. I want drinks flying, furniture tipping over, pictures falling from the walls, frames splintering, glass shattering, some blood this time, at least spit.

She gets up, her back to me. The motion of her shoulders tells me that she is crying. I had not considered tears on my list of the bodily fluids that I want from her. She makes her way up the stairs.

“Not fair,” I say, downing my drink. “You don’t fight fucking fair.” She is gone. “You fight like a fucking girl, you *throw* like a fucking girl,” I yell up the stairs, seeing myself run to the bottom of the stairs to do so, to be more effective in a big-screen ranch-owner epic kind of way. To be heard. But when I look I find I am still standing next to the cabinet, not even a foot forward to start the motion.

“You smell like a girl,” I say with affection balancing on the precipice of misery and rejection.

I pour myself another.

The Post-It sends me part of its message and a peak of it comes to me, more the memory of the idea of the letter-to-letter act of writing the words down; more accurately, the idea of the memory of the act. It is right on the edge of my recollection and I attempt to pronounce what little I think I can make out to give it a verbal push, but my effort backfires and the slight vision recedes, and nothing comes out of my mouth but gobbledygook.

I start to go to the closet to check for the Post-It one last time, but I turn back and go to sit down on the couch and miss. My drink spills. With a deft twisting of my wrist, I manage to keep more than half of it from soaking into my shirt and pants and couch and rug. I come to a final resting place with my head against one of the seat cushions. My neck is pinched, so I let myself slither the rest of the way down, a cool snake against the cool, cool floor.

Cool. Groovy.

But the floor is not cool. It is a square of thick rug silencing any approach to the furniture. The ceiling distracts me with its series of patterns of white squares within white squares. Something I have never noticed before. Trapped within the last and the smallest of each of the squares within squares is a flower. Open blossoms within blossoms. Roses!

Which never need water or sun.

“If they could see me now,” I tell the roses. “All those diseased ones that I have sent help in order to get the cure. They would know that I am here to take on all their afflictions and rid them of all their floods and fires and famines. They would know that I am the vessel into which all the filth must empty.”

My drink tips from my hand and falls through the molecules of my living room.

Suddenly, the words of the Post-It appear in the smallest of one of the squares within squares far above my head as raised letters, riding the blossoms, alive and nearly permanent until the day when the ceiling will crumble and fall.

It tells me: *A vessel can be both a ship that rides the water and a container that holds the water.*

“I am the vessel,” I yell. This time I turn my face away from the stairway even though I’m pretty sure I’m standing at the bottom of it now.

I raise my foot to take the first step. “I am the vessel.” I will chant it with each step up, until I reach my blushing bride.

Olivia is sitting on the edge of the bed. She smiles at me and I know that she has not been crying at all. She knows what the truth will do to me and she frees the words without caution, with intent. Like bait taken.

The watering of the vodka had been more an experiment than an act of alcoholic sabotage. Intervention twice removed. She had been doing it incrementally, she says, by slight degrees, she says, by exact measurement, she says, for months. What I am drinking, have been drinking, all this live-long day is more water than vodka.

She has always been smarter than I ever was or ever will be. Perhaps the word is devious. I tell her this. She smiles at the compliment.

By this ratio, it is not possible for me to be as drunk as I am acting and feeling. But this knowledge, all knowledge, changes neither the way I am nor the way I act.

Nor.

So close to *now*.

Change.

Another thing for me to add to my list of continuing verification of everything solid, then liquid, then gas.

Rise up and smell the roses on the ceiling.

Golden Gate

Brian Cordell

When it comes to suffering, there is no right or wrong.
On my last day in San Francisco,
the day my marriage ended,
a woman jumped from the bridge.
The span was busy with commuters
and tourists leisurely crossing the walkway.
Not caring about the boxes of albums or clothes thrown
into the back seat, I left my car unlocked and running
while I took pictures of the bay,
a final look at the towers rising into the fog,
and fishermen on the pier casting against the wind,
their weighted lures struggling through air,
then plunging into the water.

Meredith Is Missing

An interpersonal history

Suzanne Richardson

As I write this, my friend Meredith is missing in Washington,

DC. A police report has been filed. The facts are these: she never showed up for dinner with her family, and the next morning her belongings were on the curb. Her wallet and phone were on her bedside table and no one had seen her in twenty-four hours. Her neighbor was the last one to see her. According to the neighbor, Meredith got emotional, told her that certain plans she had made for herself might have to go on hold for a while and that her parents would be there shortly to move the rest of her things to her grandmother's house in the suburbs. Meredith told her neighbor to take what she wanted from the pile of things on the stoop and gave her a hug.

On the pile was Meredith's boom box. This detail worries me the most. Since we were kids, she was always listening to music. Her family's home has one central stereo and in high school we'd crank it up and have dance parties in the middle of the night. Her parents thought it was funny. Meredith and her sister Theresa sang opera, and starred in every school musical. I met Meredith in a local theater production of *The Sound of Music*. Her sister played Mother Superior, while I (not a good singer) chanted Latin with a pantyhose habit on my head. Lily stood behind me, also a nun, but because she had a beautiful voice she had a solo. That was the summer Meredith, Lily, and I became friends.

Lily's the one who told me. I got a short text: *M is missing*.

When I talk to Lily on the phone, we run through various worst-case scenarios. Meredith's never been suicidal, but her breaks with reality are so intense, she could inadvertently harm herself. Step off a bridge, step into traffic, step into a car with a stranger. If the wrong person found her, what could happen? We don't fill in the blanks. What if she boarded a plane to Romania? They can't find her passport, and she's a dual citizen. She was supposed to go back in a month for research.

We are three. I can't bear to think of Lily without Meredith. There are certain bonds we each have to one another. Lily makes Meredith make sense to me. I'll often look to one to understand the other. I know they do the same with me. If one of us is missing we don't make sense.

"Lily, I'm scared."

"Me too."

I think about how Meredith called me a few days before she went missing, and I didn't call her back. I didn't because I was tired, and because I know that every phone call with her risks becoming circular. She'll spin on one or two topics incessantly. Usually having to do with men—recently, a very devout Hindu man who claimed he needed a Domestic Goddess as a reason for no longer seeing Meredith.

"I could learn how to cook," she had said to me over the phone.

"Domestic Goddesses just know how, they don't have to learn."

I replied. "Besides, you're a Rhodes scholar, who needs a Goddess when they can have a scholar?" She always dates men who are intimidated by her rare, very real intelligence. A part of her is very drawn to a traditional man, and traditional gender roles. I think she likes being dominated in certain ways, but Meredith is exceptional, and at twenty-nine is already one of the world's leading scholars on Romanian studies. She's a playwright, and a highly creative, beautiful person who is always following through on the smallest promises and projects. All the things I admire so much about her could feel overwhelming to a potential partner. Part of me laughed at the scene she recounted, some random D.C. graphic designer telling a woman who graduated at the top of her class from Oxford University that because she can't cook, she's not worth his time.

"The people here are boring, heartless, uncreative," she complained to me about D.C. "They aren't like you and me." I always value when she groups us together. I've never been exceptional in

the ways she has, but her opinion that I'm smart, creative, on her level means a great deal.

Eight years before Meredith goes missing she had the first bipolar breakdown of her life. She was a Rhodes scholar at Oxford.

Friends of hers there informed Meredith's family that something was wrong, she was in the hospital, and she'd had some kind of breakdown. Meredith recounted the story to me later. She was under a lot of academic pressure, and had gone to a party weeks before her break down, a costume party. She had dressed provocatively, but everyone had. She was drunk, very drunk, and a boy in her program offered to take her back to her apartment, or maybe they ended up at his apartment. Either way, he stood in front of a door, wouldn't let her leave, or wouldn't remove himself. This boy in front of the door, with blonde hair, very straight teeth, a real pedigree WASP, had been publicly challenging her all year about her studies. Meredith said he seemed angry, unreasonable, and this led to sex that she can't quite remember, but didn't want. By the end of the week he had told everyone that he'd tasted Meredith, and it was sweet, and hoisted what she now calls rape up as a trophy. She told me that thing, with that jerk, it really bothered her, and might have caused some sort of depression. The rape could have contributed to that first breakdown. The rape was probably a factor in the fracturing that was genetically inevitable. But it is also something other than a factor, it is a robbery, it is a misery, it is a separate wound, and as her friend I don't want this to be two thorns, but it always will be. I don't want these things to pile up. Isn't one thing enough?

Lily and I took a trip to visit Meredith while she was on her Fulbright in Romania. We traveled all over the countryside before ending up in the region of Transylvania. We decided to tour Dracula's Castle.

It turned out that our tour guide, Julian, gave this tour up to

six times a day. He could give it in ten different languages. Having grown up in Brasov, he hooked up with the Transylvania tourist thing early on. All the languages he learned, he learned from tourists and tapes. As he drove us further up into the mountains, the Romanian countryside rushed past in a quiet, green, beautiful blur.

“Dracula’s Castle!” I exclaimed when it came into view as we entered the town.’

“Bran Castle,” he corrected quickly. “And actually, it’s a fortress technically.”

Bran Castle rests at the top of a small rocky mountain, and the town below is all a-buzz with activity. Huge power lines obstruct a perfect view of the castle from almost every angle on the ground. Julian parked the van, and instructed us to follow him through the chaos.

“A small walk,” he said, taking a sip from a water bottle then tossing it in the van. We weaved through hundreds of people walking along the streets; vendors lined the streets like liquor bottles: trinkets, clothes, food. Advertisements plastered the building walls, and advancing towards the castle a dirt corral of souvenir booths appeared to the right. Each booth held hundreds of different images of Dracula, on t-shirts, on mugs, on aprons, on rugs. The vampiric, toothy, deviled grin of Dracula dangled venomously from every vendor front, doubled and redoubled, shaking in the wind. We walked past the trinkets up the stone path to the castle.

But like Julian told us, it’s a fortress, not a castle, and Dracula may not even have ever set foot in it. There is one room where Julian let us touch the stone wall that *may* have held Vlad the Impaler for one night only. It’s a tourist trap. At some point people came to that region of Transylvania looking for a castle and Transylvanians pointed to Bran Fortress to make a buck.

But there are two stories there still. What is actual and what is believed. These stories are somehow in the same place at the same time. Meredith’s bipolar breakdowns result in something similar.

S. RICHARDSON

She has what doctors call “a running narrative.” Her breaks with reality are so intense that she has an alternate story in her head of what happens to her. False memories. Part of her job, part of her recovery from each breakdown, is to reconfigure her story. Begin to discover what the truth is, understand her experiences, and try to uncover what is real for herself.

The truth about Transylvania is that it was the star in a piece of fiction—fiction that was actually fiction, as opposed to thinly veiled truths. As we toured around the fortress grounds in Transylvania we walked to a back balcony. From there, Meredith pointed to a small stone path that lead into the woods.

Two years before Meredith goes missing, she has a breakdown in Vanuatu, a small island in the South Pacific where she lived with her boyfriend. While Meredith had been in Romania on Fulbright they had broken up, and she longed to make things work so she flew to Vanuatu to live with him and try and fix their relationship.

Lily was visiting me in New Mexico. We got up early to hike Kasha Katuwe and on our way back, got an international call from Meredith. It’s a tradition when two of us are together, that we call the missing third. She sounded strange on the phone. She said she’d been up all night and the birds kept distracting her. We knew she lived close to the sound on the island, so the birds were plausible, but the sleep concerned us. We told her we loved her, and wanted her to get rest.

“Okay,” she said, “Hugs. I wish I was there.”

We thought she might not be well. But we decided that her boyfriend Rob would know if she needed help. But a week or so later, I was sitting at my night job as a receptionist at a financial firm in downtown Albuquerque on the nineteenth floor of the Bank of Albuquerque building, and I got an instant message from Lily.

*Suzanne I’m on the phone with
Rob. Meredith isn’t well and*

*we can't get
in touch with her parents.*

I emailed Meredith's sister, called Meredith's house and left more messages. In each message I said: "I'm worried about Meredith, I'm afraid what happened at Oxford is happening again." I didn't say episode, or bipolar breakdown. I didn't say she's sick. It seems unfair to call it what it is. Maybe I'm afraid there's a reduction of her that happens when I say it, even though I know it's not offensive to say what's true. I tried to remind myself that Meredith is still herself and her condition does not define her but I didn't say the words into the phone. Instead I referenced Meredith's first breakdown.

It's later that I heard the full story: Rob finds Meredith wandering in her nightgown down the road to the neighbor's house in the early morning. I imagine her looking like a kind of Angel in a holy trance, her white-blond curly hair waving along her back. Her brown eyes dilated in fervor, her thin lips parted slightly, and the square of her jaw clenched as she steps unconsciously farther and farther away. She has lost language. She laughs, and cries. Eventually, she convulses on the floor of their kitchen involuntarily, unable to stop, unable to communicate, her eyes darting wildly, unfocused.

When I heard this I wanted a throat to choke. How could Rob have let her get to that point? Even talking with her on the phone I could tell something was wrong. How in living with her, could this go unnoticed? I told Lily over the phone that I blamed him. Lily said, at least he brought her back stateside.

"Yeah, on her dime," I spat. Rob made Meredith pay him back for both plane tickets when she got out of the psych ward at Duke.

I've never met Rob, but I've seen photographs: him on a sailboat, shirtless, his black hair in his green eyes, him patting an elephant on the head in Sri Lanka, him with his arm around Mer-

edith in a restaurant in Cambridge. I know what he likes: spicy food, anal sex, numbers, the color blue, liquor over beer, always blondes (there's a parade of them after Meredith; Australian swimmers, rich equestrians on vacation, lonely pig-faced tourist girls and Meredith will wail about each one.) Lily said it's not his fault; Meredith is sometimes withholding about how she's feeling. I know that Meredith is ultimately responsible for taking care of herself, keeping herself healthy, reading her own highs and lows, but I'm protective, angry. He was supposed to be her partner. He wasn't listening. He wasn't looking. I'm pretty sure Rob was scared and didn't know what to look for, listen for, but he also never asked.

That summer Meredith is in Durham recovering from Vanuatu, and I'm also in Durham by coincidence. Lily has moved back to Durham with her fiancé. We spend the summer in each other's orbit for the first time since we were teenagers.

"What if things don't get better?" Lily said to me over a beer. It's my twenty-seventh birthday, it was hot-as-hell July in North Carolina, and I was trying not to sweat too hard in my birthday outfit. The bar fans spun above us, the bar light was predictably low. Our elbows were almost touching on the wooden bar top. In high school people thought we looked alike in the way that young girls with long brown hair who dress similarly look alike. Now older, we're more distinct, we've grown into our own faces, own styles, but Lily feels like a sister, in the same way Meredith does.

"What if it keeps happening even though she's recovering?" It hadn't occurred to me that episodes could build and tumble in a snowball effect. Lily told me about a hallucination Meredith told Lily was a memory.

Lily sipped her beer, "It's scary. It made no sense. She said she was in her house, by the sound and through the trees she could see an island, and a boat, and on the boat there was a flash of light, and through the flash of light Meredith said she knew the people on the boat wanted something from her. The light flashed again, and she

picked up the phone, and on the phone were the men from the boat. The men invited her to a secret island.”

Meredith hadn't told me anything this concrete. She had told me she believed the Chinese government was after her and she thought there were spies in her yoga classes. Once, earlier in the summer we had gone to brunch, and she was very bothered by the flies that were hanging around our table. She kept saying that there were also flies at her house, and so why were the flies also here? She was afraid the same flies were following her, or that the flies were somehow connected to her, that all flies were connected through her and it meant something.

This same summer I was sleeping with a social worker—until then, an unconsummated crush from high school. When we were younger, he was a drummer of a punk band called The Human Flies, and like most high school bands they weren't very skilled, but played often. I say we were sleeping together, because even though we know each other, and our parents know each other, and we went through half-hearted motions of caring about one another's life goals and aspirations, we didn't really hang out except for a weekend my parents went out of town, and he stayed for a few days. In those three days I told him about Meredith, her condition, how I was worried. He told me about running group therapies at mental health clinics in Raleigh. He teaches mostly coping skills, life skills, how to manage emotions, reinforces the importance of medication, hygiene etc. He confessed he plays mostly ping-pong with the patients, or cards, and it soothes them. It didn't occur to me that his patients have similar diagnoses to Meredith until he pointed out some of his patients are bipolar.

“But they're not like Meredith,” I insisted. He looked at me thoughtfully, his white-blue eyes didn't really ever show emotion, but I could feel something building behind them. I was making eggs in my bathrobe. He was lounging sideways in my mother's favorite reading chair, in just his boxers, his legs dangling over the sides. For

some reason, in my memory it was a visual joke: tall, broad, half-naked boy doesn't fit in floral patterned chair.

"Okay," he said, and held out his mug for more coffee.

"I mean she's not going to be like that," I said, now scrambling the eggs I've failed to fry properly.

"Okay," he said and got out of the chair to refill his own coffee. I know he was trying to tell me that it's a possibility that she could become low functioning like his patients over time, and in my own passive-aggressive way, I didn't let him.

Eight months before Meredith went missing I visited her in Washington, DC. We walked the mall at night. We took in the Washington Monument. American flags whipped in the dark wind as we got closer. Meredith said she used to take pride in walking the mall daily, but now she's rundown by this town. She told me her plans to meet a married man at the Washington Monument within the week to discuss his proposition of an extramarital affair. I made a joke about how presumptuous it was of him to ask to discuss a sexual affair next to the most famous erect phallus in our nation.

"It's not exactly subtle," I smiled wryly, "but I see where he's going with it." She laughed loudly; her laugh is always peppered with hiccupped sharp noises. She always says the person's name who's made her laugh over and over, and sometimes a hurried "omygod." People turned to see where the noise was coming from as we hurried down the paved path away from the monument. Her laugh makes me laugh.

"Suzanne," she grabbed my arm, "you're so right."

This whole trip I tried to tell her I think this affair is a bad idea. I gave her a lot of reasons: *You'll get hurt. You deserve a relationship not an affair. If you get insecure about his feelings you can't call him—can't email him. If you get caught you are the fall person—women blame women. You'll have to stop being friends with him to avoid suspicion. Everything will be in his control.* And the

one that I don't say is the one that is most logical; *it could give you an episode*. This man had painted himself the victim and Meredith felt sorry for him. She said, he said he's tried to make it work. I said, he'll say whatever it takes. It sounds strange, but I wish she could have had this affair. I want her to be able to make bad decisions, or have strange, terrible experiences and survive them. I want her to be stupid like the rest of us, but stakes are higher for her.

We walked arm in arm up the mall towards the Capitol building.

"Suzanne my love, your being here makes me feel strong," she squeezed my arm. When I'm with her and Lily I feel strong too; we bring out something inside one another. I feel a renewed strength around her. Boundless wonder and energy like being fifteen. We went to a French restaurant, drank tons of wine, ordered mussels and pate. We are grown ups, we are children; we stumbled home in fits of laughter. On the edge of D.C.'s China Town we reassured one another despite recent failures that we're worthy of love. In bed Meredith started crying, she couldn't sleep, she didn't want me to leave, and she's worried about her hair. She's convinced its falling out. She's convinced she's no longer beautiful. She feels old. I sat up and held her hands in the dark.

"You're always beautiful. Take a deep breath. Have you talked to your doctor about this? Your hair isn't going anywhere. It's a beast!" I tugged playfully on a strand of her long blonde curly hair. She laid back down still sobbing. I've felt these kinds of things in different waves so I tried to soothe her, talk her through it. I had a 9 a.m. flight, but even after she fell asleep, I couldn't. She was crumbling.

In the spring, Meredith and I were bridesmaids in Lily's wedding. When we arrived at the pre-wedding hotel room, we dressed, did our make-up, and then both realized we'd forgotten the jewelry Lily had gifted us specifically for this occasion. Running to the hotel parking lot we simultaneously called our mothers, instructing them on places to look in our childhood homes for the jewelry we're sup-

posed to have: bedside table, bureau—top drawer, bathroom sink, kitchen table, coffee table. When we pulled up, Meredith’s mother was waiting at the end of the driveway holding the box out with a tight-lipped frown, and worried eyes. Meredith got out of the car, kissed her mother, and grabbed the box. At my house, my mom was on the back stoop holding the same box, same look. I got out of the car, hugged her, kissed her, and thanked her. Both of us laughed, at the scenario as we sped back to the hotel. *Mothers are important* we nodded like baby chicks.

Later, after the reception and all the bars closed we were at Meredith’s house. I was on her living room couch making out with a high school friend, Maurice, for old times’ sake. I could hear the cadence of Meredith’s voice in the other room as she spoke to other friends. Maurice kept asking my permission to touch me, touch various places on my body. Everything felt like seventeen again. I passed out on the fancy couch, the one no one sits on, next to Maurice with my high heels still on. When I woke it was still early, so I crawled up the steps to Meredith’s room, and got in the bed across from hers (she always had a guest bed in her room.) Taped above the bed were letters, photos, and collages Lily and I gave to Meredith in high school.

“You still have all this stuff up,” I murmured.

“It’s important,” she said, and rolled over in her bed.

I didn’t tell my parents where I was going to be, but the first place they called was Meredith’s house. I asked my mom on the phone how she knew where I was; she said she just knew.

In that moment: I had to catch a plane in three hours and I could still feel the champagne in my feet and there was hot, raw, alcohol at the back of my throat. I walked barefoot down the driveway in my light-green, wrinkled, bridesmaids dress feeling like I was still a kid, and I was playing dress up, but feeling too old to walk barefoot, too old to be a bridesmaid. Feeling like Lily didn’t just get married—because this is Lily, and she’s always so sick of boys after a few weeks. And this is me and somehow I know this is the tallest

I'll ever get, and I used to not know. And this is Meredith, and *Lord* I always thought Meredith would get married first.

Four months before Meredith went missing, she visited me in New Mexico—a birthday gift from her mother. That was the last time I saw her in person. I was frustrated with her because she became fixated on a guy she met here, Brian. I could tell she was on a high. She was overflowing with energy, fixated on men, wanted to go out every night. At a concert downtown she got emotional. She was up against the wall with her eyes closed.

My friends noted that Meredith was really comfortable being herself, as she kind of rocked out alone in a corner in a hippy-ish way. She's always been like that and I love that about her. The way she lets herself feel things out in the open. She let a guy pick her up at the venue bar, but I didn't let her go home with him. I told her to get his number and call him later; if he's serious about getting to know her he'll come out again. She agreed that what I suggested was reasonable. All the next day she was playing phone tag with this guy, and it preoccupied her mind. We were visiting Acoma pueblo, west of Albuquerque, we got out of cell range.

“He'll call?”

“He'll call.” This repeated up and down the tour for some time.

Saturday night her guy came out; we were meeting up with friends downtown. I didn't talk to him much, as I was focused on my crew, and when I was ready to go, Meredith told me she was going home with Brian. I gave him a look.

“She's welcome to come with me,” he said.

I didn't smile.

“I wasn't worried, that she wasn't invited,” I shot back. I demanded his cell phone number and address. I called him at the bar, and made him show me his ringing cell. I let him know if I didn't hear from her by noon I was going to drive to his house and get her.

“I’ll pull her out of your bed,” I said flatly. He laughed. “I’m dead serious. Noon or else. She’s my best friend.”

The next morning I waited for what seemed like hours. I was drinking coffee, trying to have a normal morning. I’m not her mother, but I’m worried. I had let her do what she wanted, while trying to be safe, cautious. I texted and called both his and her phone multiple times over the course of two hours with no answer. It crossed my mind that his address could be fake, but I tried to kill that thought. This guy, this social worker, with brown kind eyes, who during a lackluster round of truth or dare at the bar table revealed something too serious and painful (he was once in foster care), thus killing the game, just wasn’t a creep I kept telling myself. I grabbed my car keys and that’s when my phone rang.

“I’m so sorry Suzanne, we overslept, I swear. Brian says he’s sorry too, he’s dropping me off in ten.”

The rest of her trip was about Brian. We ate meals with him, constant texting, and she spent each night with him. I drew the line at watching him play volleyball at a bar uptown.

“This is not 1955.” I rolled my eyes. “I’m not watching a boy I barely know play a sport at a bar just because you’re banging him. We’re not even allowed on the court.”

“But Suz! It’s our last night together.” She whined quietly. The *our* hurts because she meant herself and Brian, even though it was also her last night with me.

She really wanted to be with him, so I didn’t confront her about it. When I hugged her at the airport she told me she wanted me to hang out with Brian, she gave me permission to date him. I was not interested. Finally, she begged me not to tell him about her bipolarity.

The next time I heard from Brian is four months later when Meredith is missing. I knew he had heard she was missing before I did, because the police called everyone who had recent contact with her. Brian had.

For some reason that bothered me the most. The way he contacted me was in a tone where he informed me of what was going on. Like he was her friend, and I was the stranger.

Meredith is missing. Have you heard from her?

I didn't respond. Did he forget that she came to New Mexico to visit me? That we told him we were childhood friends. Best friends? Did he forget he was the one-night stand?

When he called later in the day, I picked up and tried to turn the conversation around.

"I'll let you know when we find her," I said, reinforcing the "we." The subtext being *we* are the people who really know her, who really cared. There's nothing wrong with Brian. I know he's a "nice guy" but I can't help disliking him. I've pegged him as a horny opportunist in nice guy clothing. These men who hook up with Meredith don't understand what part they're playing in an ongoing narrative. She's amazing, but she requires more understanding, more work, more awareness, and I've seen a whole host of men fall down on this task. Men who have dated her for years, and just evaporated, or worse, blamed her for her own sickness when things got bad.

A month before Meredith goes missing I got a phone call from Sarah. Sarah never calls, she's more Meredith's friend than mine, but Sarah hung out with Lily, Meredith, and I in Romania. She was also a Fulbright scholar with Meredith placed in a small town north of Bucharest called Timisoara. I was writing, but I picked up the phone. Sarah wouldn't call me without a reason.

"Meredith's been committed, and she's refusing to take her medication. Can you give me a bartering chip for her to take her meds?" I got up from the table, and walked out the back door. I was sitting on my stoop in Albuquerque listing reasons for my best friend to take very high doses of serious medication.

A few feet away was the patio table we had eaten brunch at one morning during her visit. Meredith had made a perfect omelet. I was feeling down. Tears wet my face, and she was calmly telling me

my worth was innate and no one could take that away from me, and she thought I was worth a great deal. She had moved a chair closer to me, and given me a hug, which prompted my roommate's highly emotional pitbull to jump up for a hug too. So we both hugged the dog, and told her, she was worth a lot too. *See Meredith had raised her eyebrows. Look how lucky we are.*

"How bad was it? How bad is she?" I asked, the pitbull now roamed the backyard every so often looking up when I spoke.

"She was stripping off her clothes in public, doing yoga in the middle of the street, on the stretcher. She couldn't put any sentences together. She's really bad, Suzanne."

"Just make sure you mention Romania and I'll call if I can think of anything else."

"Okay."

Meredith is found almost exactly seventy-two hours after she has gone missing. She was in the middle of a huge intersection in D.C. trying to direct traffic when someone took her to the hospital. It took almost three days for her to remember her own name.

The same day that she is released she writes me an email:

I'm at Grandma's, don't worry.

As if she'd never gone missing at all.

In the middle of my worry I find a memory from a trip Lily, Meredith, and I took to Greece. We had rented a car to drive around Naxos Island. I was driving, and we hit a small village where the road kept getting narrower and narrower, the buildings and church structures were closing in on us. It got to the point where I was afraid the road was going to end, and I'd have to back the car up this winding hill out of the village. I put the car into park as we approached a sharp turn between two buildings.

"Someone has to get out, and make sure this road continues. I won't be able to back the car up through this curve." I turned to Meredith. She was wearing her bikini bottoms and a t-shirt over

her bikini top. Large black sunglasses with diamonds on the sides shaded her eyes. She always wears embellished stuff like that; beads on bags, fake diamonds on sunglasses, textured embroidered and ribboned shirts. Meredith laughed at the task, and got out of the car.

“Oh my God, Meredith’s going to run through this village in just a bikini.” Lily was gleeful in the back seat, and got out her camera steadying it for a shot. Meredith disappeared down the hill and then reappeared her butt barely covered by her pink and black striped bathing suit. I realize as she’s running down the street, that what she’s wearing isn’t a bathing suit bottom, it’s actually spandex hot pants that went under an outfit she wore to prom. Then, I wore it to my prom, then Lily wore it to a party, almost ten years ago. Locals that were sitting outside of businesses gaped. Old women came out onto their porches to watch Meredith run through the center of town in practically nothing. Rounding a building she disappeared again. But before we knew it, Meredith was bounding back up the hill towards the car. She was smiling, laughing, running, she made it to the car window out of breath.

“It goes through, the road goes through,” she said, putting her hands on her knees catching her breath. “We’re gonna make it.”

Flickering into Oblivion

Greg Santos

The neon moon
Burning a circle
Into the carpet
My daughter
Slumping in my arms
Neither of us can sleep
Feeling her heart
Flutter like tiny
Blackbirds
Against my chest
It is otherwise quiet
The universe
Has been good to me

On Being in Debt

Wende Crow

Attention should only be paid
to the mangrove trees
and the shadows of their limbs
on the water
and the light between
and the water itself,
to the sun and the scull boat,
the charging clouds, the change.

A foot gains purchase
on a sandy bank where
the lagoon sinks into the sea.

Attention
should only be paid
to the girl tossing
raw meat to the caimans
and turning her back
on the feed
and to the crack and growing
dark above
and other miracles,

and to the first drops
embracing everything
and witness.

To a pair of eyes
sliding under the water.
To everything that's gone.

The Winners Are...

Three poems

**Tarpley Hitt, Samantha Ostrowski, and
Willow Maya Giannotti-Garlinghouse**

We are pleased to print here the winning poems from the 2011 New Haven Free Public Library Poetry Contest. Tarpley Hitt, Samantha Ostrowski, and Willow Maya Giannotti-Garlinghouse won in the teen, adult, and youth categories, respectively.

—The Editors

Othniel Marsh

When Othniel sat on the Green, did his
fingers dig—
did the roots of his forked beard
bury themselves
and did they find each other
meeting soupy gristle and soupy gristle
When Othniel sat on the grass, blue and blurry
did he lie.

His sacred place was a
constellation—
dotted with Orion's bones and
dressed in the silks of dead fires
Quiet and still and
pulling roots into its revolution

As the sassafras juice trickled from
his mouth like arson
did Othniel wonder what it meant to
name something that
was already gone—

—Tarpley Hitt

Elm 1638

The quills, squeaking, and typewriters clack like keys
Today, the sounds have never left. They rise,
Renewed, each time we write or crack the spine
Of favorites on our shelves. I revel in it.
We are not known for any famous greats,
Like Dickinson or Poe, anthologized,
But many more have passed this way, beneath
The elms and down the streets, appreciating
Books built into stone, concrete, and slate.
A history of words combining, piling,
Remembering each syllable's design.
Their presence lingers, we know this to be true.
New Haven, like a book, absorbs its wards,
Remanding to the ceaseless current, time
And time again, that flows along its streets.
There is nothing to say. To do. To moderate.
Embrace it, smell the paper, and dive in.

—Samantha Ostrowski

From

I'm from black and white film,
and finger paints and chicken soup.
I'm from rainboots,
and Saturday afternoons at East Rock Park.
I'm from sunblock and woodchips
and rusty swings which sing their bittersweet song for whoever will listen.
I'm from the lavender and sage
that grow in their own bed,
with rose that I tried to pick with my round child's fingers,
but it drew blood.
I'm from melting popsicles,
and homemade hot chocolate with Mexican vanilla
and banana-peanut butter sandwiches.
I'm from secondhand sun dresses,
and homemade halloween costumes.
I'm from baby powder and cumin,
and cinnamon that I tried to eat by itself.
I'm from paperback books,
read until their pages fall out.
I'm from photo albums full of memories,
pictures snapped at Lighthouse Point and the Green,
lost but never forgotten
forgotten but never lost.

—Willow Maya Giannotti-Garlinghouse

The following individuals have supported the *New Haven Review* through generous donations. We wish to thank them for their confidence and support in our effort to represent the talents of writers from the Greater New Haven area and across the globe. The *New Haven Review* is a community-inspired effort and depends for its success on readers, writers, subscribers, donors, interns, volunteers, and a whole assembly of individuals of good will. We wish we could thank all of them right here, right now. But for the moment, we shall let tradition dictate the matter and offer our deepest thanks to our individual donors:

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Announcing *New Haven Review's* 2012 Bassine Prizes

The Bassine Prizes have been established through the generosity of David Bassine to encourage and recognize poets who have not yet published a full-length book of poetry.

Winning poems will be chosen from those published each year in *New Haven Review*, a nationally distributed, independently run biannual publication of poetry, fiction, and essays. Poems will also appear on the journal's website. All entries will be considered for publication.

Award amounts are \$400 and \$100 for first and second prize, respectively. Poets may submit up to six poems per entry, totaling no more than ten pages. There is no entry fee. The poetry editors of *New Haven Review* will select the winners, which will be announced in print and on our website with the publication of our winter issue. Only those poems accepted for publication and published in *New Haven Review* for that year are eligible for that year's prizes.

- All entries must be previously unpublished poems.
- Poets are eligible for the prizes if they have not published a full-length book of poetry as of the date of the publication of their poem in *New Haven Review*.
- A cover email shall state that the poet has not published a full-length book of poetry. All poems that meet these qualifications are automatically considered, unless author specifically indicates that he or she does not wish to be considered for the prize.

To submit, send up to six poems, totaling no more than ten pages, to

poetryeditor@newhavenreview.com

with your name and "poems" as the subject header. Send them as a single PDF and not as a Word document or other format. That's just the best way to make sure we read the poems in the form that you intended. Also, include contact information on every page (seriously). You'll hear from us regarding publication in two to four months.

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Frank Bill has been published in *Granta*, *Playboy*, *Oxford American*, *FSG Work in Progress*, *Talking River Review*, *Plots With Guns*, *Thuglit*, *Beat to a Pulp*, and many other outlets. His first book, *Crimes in Southern Indiana*, a book of stories, was released in September 2011, and his first novel, *Donnybrook*, will appear in 2013.

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James Charbonneau once wrote a bad advice column dedicated to giving mostly bad advice. He has also written fiction and fact for children of all ages in a variety of publications, including *The Scene*, *Read*, and *The Sun*. He lives in Middletown, Connecticut.

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Jeff VanderMeer writes for *The New York Times Book Review*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Los Angeles Times*, among others. His fiction has appeared in *Conjunctions*, *Black Clock*, and many others. He is best-known for metafictional novels like *City of Saints and Madmen* but recently completed *Annihilation*, a Kafkaesque account of an expedition into a strange quarantine zone. He lives in Tallahassee, Florida.

