

# *New Haven Review*







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# Ergon

George HS Singer

*Ergon: the good arising when something or someone achieves the purpose for which or for whom it was created*

What then is the ergon of the hopelessly insane?

In 1948 the good Doctor Walter Freeman achieved the Aristotelian virtue of realizing his ergon by setting forth on a pilgrimage through the archipelago of the mad where treatment for the poor souls with pseudoneurotic schizophrenia, or florid psychosis, violent rage, or psychotic nymphomania were bundled in hot wet sheets and held down while doctors injected such quantities of sweet syrup into their veins as to induce a diabetic coma in the hope they would awaken cured or at least manageable. But the *ergon* of sugar is not a narcotic and neither was its purpose to course through the veins of the abandoned.

That year 600,000 wretched or strange or wild ones dwelt in rooms with no door knobs. The comatose gathered in wards like cocoons clumped in trees who, upon waking, emerged a second time with black ragged wings beating against the black light from slag and char.

Therefore Doctor Freeman drove his Buick station wagon from Meadowbrook State Asylum to Pine Crest State Hospital for the Insane to Fairview State Asylum and ever onward, stopping for a day at the Iowa State Asylum at Cherokee, Iowa where on December fifth, nineteen-hundred-and forty-eight, in an office converted to an operating theatre deployed a tool of his making, christened the *luekotome*, derived from an ice pick, created with the intent to hammer

with a wooden mallet under the eyelids, steadied  
against the supraorbital notch of the skull. Walter Freeman, MD  
pounded this worthy implement (see patent # US7400927 )  
into the frontal lobes, the seat of planning and mapping,  
the place of comparing and accepting, the loci  
of the higher reaches of the mind and the persona.  
When properly placed, he worked  
the flattened end of the device to and fro,  
oblating the offending grey matter  
of comatose David Singer and his sleeping sister Evelyn.

The ergon of the eyelids is sleep.  
And of the tear ducts is weeping.  
That of the socket—to serve as a nest  
for the viscous human eye.  
And the ergon of ice? To glide  
on a frozen lake under an innocent moon.

Thereafter neither Uncle David  
Nor Aunt Evelyn spoke again  
nor were they visited, not once,  
not by Nana S., nor Poppa S.,  
not by lovers nor friends,  
not even by Walter Freeman  
who drove on to the next State asylum  
and then the next, achieving  
the lifetime record for singleton performance  
of prefrontal lobotomies. Neither did  
my sorrowing angry father, not ever, not even once,  
speak the names of his little sister nor of his  
big brother, carrying this secret to his grave  
until a safety deposit box provided  
the commitment documents whereby  
I first understood my father's outrage

when, as a young boy I taunted my sisters,  
calling them crazy, thereby causing father  
to scream an admonishment that I could  
end up living out my life in an asylum.  
The *ergon* of silence in a household is strangeness.  
What, then, is the *ergon* of the insane?  
Perhaps that of the Angel Who Does Not Stay the Hand.

# **A Perfect Day at the Market**

**Dustin Junkert**

*For A. Camus*

The woman at the hypnotist's  
booth claims to be able to cure suicide

urges. First she deprives her victim of consciousness  
of consciousness, then she says life is worth living

and never snaps her fingers again.

When she goes to jazz clubs  
hundreds of lives hang in the balance.

Most of the other booths at the market are dedicated  
to endless handkerchiefs and landscape photos.

The presiding sentiment is that one must always be prepared

for another handkerchief. Some people  
are still making bead geckos, and everyone else is

still not buying them. If not for pretty girls  
I'd never buy anything (today, four bars

of home-made soap.) I was blinded  
by white Daffodils in the sun at noon.  
My perfect day at the market was ruined

when you told me my mother had died  
in her sleep. Some days

later, I recalled how happy I was  
at the market and promptly became so again.

There are two truths and one of them is unspeakable.



**140**

# **Characters**

**Liam Callanan**

### **The old nun, Agnes, who keeps to herself.**

The old nun's friend, Frieda, because even old nuns who keep to themselves keep at least one friend and that's who Frieda is, and why not, because she, too, is an old nun but also a former one, and was happy to drive over this fine summer evening and help Agnes root around the front yard looking for Joseph, who's not a nun but a saint, or the plastic replica of one, buried upside down somewhere here in front of the convent, the two old women are sure of it, because the building is for sale and tradition holds that this is what you do: hire realtor, plant sign, bury Joseph, hello buyer.

Suzanne, who doesn't go to church anymore—Sundays are for open houses—but happily retweets the odd biblical passage she comes across and keeps a trunkful of St. Josephs rattling around in her car to give to clients: *hey, you never know....*

Her clients, the nuns, specifically Mary Pat and Mary Grace, two of the three women remaining at the old convent in the inner city, who are wondering when Agnes, the third, is going to come back from that walk she claimed she was taking, what that high-pitched sound is, whether their hearing aid batteries need replacing, who will pay for that, and if they really should ask Hector to bury the statue of St. Joseph in the yard, because they haven't yet.

Hector, who installed the smoke detector that's confusing the nuns, and who has buried the following things in his own backyard: five mice the poison killed, two the cat killed, and the cat; a chicken neck, a votive candle, and a picture of someone he hated; a chicken heart, a votive candle, and a picture of someone he loved; Mrs. Reynoso's business card with the bright red palm; two Pic-n-Save Supermarket bags, one inside the other, encasing a Glock he was told didn't work; 300 U.S. dollars and 2,000 Honduran lempiras in an old pickle jar; a startlingly large dead crow he found Tomas and Angelina playing with one morning as he was headed to work at the convent he knew would close soon.

Gladys Reynoso, who attends mass every Sunday in the old convent chapel, sitting high up in the loft, the designated seats for the laity, looking down at the long empty pews below, the designated seats for nuns, wondering where those nuns are, wondering if they buried the secretly extra-special statue she gave that woman Suzanne, whom Gladys told would die very wealthy, but not that she would die next year, nor that this one particular St. Joseph, which Gladys gave to Suzanne to give the nuns to give to Hector to bury to sell the convent, had a teeny, tiny curse on it that would render it useless.

Father McGreevy, who says the mass for the nuns and Gladys Sunday mornings, or thinks he does, he's eighty-eight now if a day and has retired thrice—once as pastor, once as principal of a small and beautiful school in Hawaii, and most recently as chair of the Monday Afternoon Inner-City Interfaith Golf Council, the collection of priests, rabbis, and pastors—three Toms, one Marc, one Mark, a John (on-and-off), an intolerable Sven, and toward the end, that Angelique—who all spent a cleric's most blessedly empty day of the week, Monday, golfing, and for whom the group's acronym, MAGIC, was a source of great ironic pride, though Father McGreevy can't remember why or how the acronym worked, because it doesn't, not really, and neither does he, and the golf in Hawaii was so much better, or so he'd read in the Michener book, which was so long he couldn't remember the characters from one page to the next or whether he himself was in the book or not.

Alice, the librarian around the corner, who checked out the Michener book to Father McGreevy, though no longer remembers doing so because it was eighteen years ago and she's never taken an interest in Michener's books coming or going, much less distinguishing between the books themselves.

Grace Paley, whose death Alice still mourns, in part because she had a ticket to see her at the auditorium in 1980 but had to cancel to take her husband Ralph to the hospital for chest pains that turned out to be heartburn; in part because Paley writes so lovingly

of libraries and librarians in her story “Wants,” wherein the narrator returns an Edith Wharton book that’s also eighteen years overdue, is charged \$32, happily pays and says of the librarian, whom Alice has always liked to imagine is her, “Immediately she trusted me, put my past behind her, wiped the record clean, which is just what most other municipal and/or state bureaucracies will not do”; and in part because Paley’s character immediately checks out the book again.

Ralph, Alice’s husband, who has never read Michener or Paley or Wharton or the man Alice’s library is named for, Walt Whitman, and who wonders every Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday night, the nights the library’s open late, why Alice hasn’t retired yet, because she’s eligible, they’d planned for this, she’s put in her time, and they were going to go on a cruise because that’s the one kind of trip where they don’t care how heavy your luggage is and Alice always brings books and Ralph would like to go to Hawaii.

Janice, the travel agent who’s amazed she still has clients like Ralph who still call travel agents.

Donald, her brother, who told her he was taking his share of what they’d inherited from mom and dad and investing it in a 1-800-We-Buy-Ugly Places franchise, for which \$100,000 bought you nothing but a call forwarding scheme that sent nearby calls from prospective clients to whatever primary number Donald gave the service, and he gave them the number of a prepaid cell phone he’d bought from a man named Zeni who ran a gas station, and if the primary number didn’t work, which it often didn’t, the cause of which was disputed by Donald and Zeni, then the automated marketing service rang the secondary, emergency backup number, which was Janice’s work number, which was fine, Donald said, because who calls travel agents anymore?

Silvia does, although she thought she was calling a realtor, or not that, but someone who buys homes cheap, fixes them up, and then resells them for a big profit to finer people, someone who would do just that for the old convent across the way, which is crumbling, not an expression, not a metaphor, she stressed in her letters to

the archbishop, the mayor, her alderman, the other alderman she wishes were hers since he's always in the paper giving a damn, and that pretty woman from Channel 4 who does the All 4 You consumer segments where they generally get The Man to *pay attention*, which is what Silvia wants, someone, anyone, to pay attention to the fact that the building is physically crumbling: a brick tumbled from somewhere high up one morning and landed within four feet of the stroller she was pushing Sara around in, which means that the building will go for sale so cheap that some students or pimps or meth labbers will wind up buying it and then there goes the neighborhood, unless someone looking to make some honest money buys it, fixes it, and—Silvia loves this next verb and she can't, couldn't, won't, wouldn't say why, because the reason is private and related to sex—*flips* it, whereupon the convent will go to someone who really cares, who will make it into apartments, bring some new families onto the block, which the block needs because Mr. and Mrs. Rodriguez aren't friendly, Mr. Pimentel is too friendly, the old white lady just strange, and the nine kids in the Christian commune or whatever it is are too eager, too excited, to be living in such a poor neighborhood that so clearly needs their help, particularly free toys at Christmas, which Silvia just wants to shove back at them, especially the stuffed white lambs, and say *no thanks* and *we don't need the dusty, dented canned food either* and *if you really want to give the neighborhood a gift, bathe more, wear socks*.

Orlando, who tells his grandkids Petey and Truman that the city in Florida was named for him, who reglazes the commune's windows for free because they're always getting broken.

Emilio, the plumber, who charges the commune 50 percent more than his usual rates because he doesn't like the neighborhood and because they never pay anyway.

Esther, the mail carrier, who buys a forty, just the one, each Friday, from José, from Iran, who runs the package store and doesn't drink, not since Frank died.

Ernest, Tom, Kevin, Chip, Rich, Reggie, and two guys who go

by nicknames, Legs and Red, who all used to shop at the package store, just sodas, always sodas, and always wondered about Frank, if he was a brother or a friend or—and now won't find out because the new lieutenant, whose rank is her name, came on board and said firemen shouldn't shop at package stores, not in uniform.

The lieutenant, who tweets as @number53, because she is, and because it's not about her, but the firehouse, which is home to Engine Company 53, and almost no one notices that she extends her sense of discipline to her tweets, which she limits to 53 characters: *Change of seasons = change smoke detector batteries.*

@firemom, the lieutenant's mother, who does notice and retweets her daughter's tweets to the world and/or the eighteen accounts she follows or who follow her—@purplerein, @chumash, @granny2go, @47northbargrill, @tl3442, @seniorctrparknrec, @halfoffTuesdays, @mortsmith7, @tellyouride, @cindyloowho, @29palms, @ladygaga, @sarahpalin, @smokey\_bear, @readhead9, @firedad, whom she's never met, @number53, whom she has, of course, and @TideMom, for the coupons, and that video, which was funny.

Denis, the twenty-two-year-old tech geek the city hired, who doesn't follow anyone because tweeting is for old people and corporations and because he's too busy moving the closed-circuit TV municipal monitoring network online so police and firemen can access it more easily and see stuff like that tendril of smoke climb the screen, which Denis misses because he's under the desk looking for the other end of the yellow cable and finding instead a scratched Jackson Five CD, *ABC*, that someone apparently used as a coaster.

Jackie, Jermaine, Marlon, Tito, and Michael, the Jackson Five, though Denis googles "CD coasters" instead and finds "the Coasters," whose four-man group (J.W. Lance, Primotivo Candelara, Eddie Whitfield, Dennis Anderson) is much more complicated than the five-man Jacksons, since there were sixteen Coasters who came before (Carl Gardner, Billy Guy, Bobby Nunn, Leon Hughes, Adolph Jacobs, Young Jessie, Will "Dub" Jones, Cornell Gunter, Albert

“Sonny” Forrest, Earl “Speedo” Carroll, Thomas “Curley” Palmer, Vernon Harrell, Ronnie Bright, Jimmy Norman, Alvin Morse and Carl Gardner, Jr.) *and what exactly is doo-wop anyway* Denis wonders and asks Google this, too, which means he misses the tendril becoming a cloud.

Dave Montemeri, the Merry Weatherman of Channel 4, who once wrote a book for kids about clouds that Alice never displayed because he confused *altocumulus* and *cirrocumulus* and nobody caught it but her, which inspired her to do a display of novels with the word *cloud* in the title that she thinks of now as she begins to smell smoke, though it could just be the latest dinner retired Ralph has burned, still stuck in her nostrils, and maybe that should be next month’s display, the senses.

Danny, the census worker, who took the job because he needed and needs the money so badly he thinks twice before calling 911 because he worries it will count against his minutes and wonders, since he has limited voice but unlimited texts, if he couldn’t just text the fire department.

Rachel, the dispatcher who takes the call and knows she’ll get marked down on her weekly scoresheet because she failed to keep the caller on the line long enough to confirm his location, to explain to the caller that they can’t track cellular calls automatically like landline calls, not as fast, anyway, so she hits the blue light to summon her supervisor, Sonia, so they can both rewind, listen, rewind, listen, and take four minutes to parse what the caller said and thereby find the fire’s location, four minutes the fire takes to find the location of the boxes and boxes of candles that Dolores, long-dead, a miserly mother superior in the convent years ago, purchased because the feast day of St. Lucy, their patron saint, is celebrated with candle wreaths, and because the bulk price was so cheap, and because every lit candle meant one less electric light wasting money.

Teresa, the name Dolores gave to the baby who died in her arms before she entered the convent at 17. Edgar, the baby’s father, who betrayed them both.

Francis, the finish carpenter who built the cabinets in the kitchen. Adolph, who dug the first garden and argued that Francis should have put brass, not wooden, knobs on the cabinets because the ladies deserved it. Margaret, the girl the two men fought over eighty years ago. Dahlia, the grand-niece, who bought the fire extinguisher ten years ago and put it in the cabinet Mary Pat and Mary Grace are now fumbling to find.

Andy, the passerby who asks Agnes and Frieda, still outside digging for St. Joseph, if everything is okay.

Gilberto, another passerby, who interrupts to say that it's definitely not, and who interrupts Agnes agreeing that everything is not okay (though she means with the state of nuns today, the plight of historic convents) to ask if there's anything—anyone—worth preserving inside because the building, ladies, is on fire.

Marcus Anthony Taback, Ph.D, author of *A Short History of the Sisters of Saint Lucy in North America, including the Daughter Houses of the West Indies* (New Brunswick, NJ: Lighted Way Press, 1911), the final forty extant copies of which sit in wooden crates in the basement, next to the boiler, a location no one should ever have thought safe, but which is the safest place today as the building burns from top to bottom, meaning that if the firefighters arrive in time and manage not to flood the basement—doubtful—the crates may be later discovered unharmed, allowing the pages to flutter open to the story of Mother Annabelle Macalester, who founded the order with the mission of aiding blind and almost-blind children, and, having found them aid, found they needed schooling as well, and that, as she often said, was that, which indeed made for a short history.

Dr. Filipello, Taback's dissertation adviser, who advised him to write long histories about bigger topics, which Taback opposed: wasn't there freedom in restraint, and wasn't it Mother Macalester herself who said of religious life and study that it represented "the freedom and peace of a wilderness existence, a return to the desert that is also a recovery of (inner) paradise"?

No, it was Thomas Merton.

Whom Mary Pat and Mary Grace met once in a situation not unlike the one they are now in, feeling their way down some darkened stairs through smoke, though then it was New York City and in that old hotel run by nuns down in Chelsea and they were saving money on lightbulbs or there was a blackout or someone hadn't paid the electric and Mary Pat and Mary Grace were delighted to happen upon Merton, whom they'd heard was in residence, but was suddenly, like them, out on the fire escape, smoking, another surprise, as he'd famously quit.

Lucas, the nine-year-old boy on the sidewalk outside the burning convent who overhears an older woman, red-haired, Russian, say *too many stairs* and *they are too old* and *there are too many stairs*, and Lucas thinks to tell her, *this is why I want a fire pole in my house, in any house I ever live in*, but he doesn't and walks on even though he wants to stay and watch and listen, because if he's not home by six, the bad babysitter, the one who comes on Tuesdays, will leave anyway and leave his baby sister Tamika, six, alone in the apartment.

Timothy, the news director, with the tough call to make: the murder investigation on the south side or the in-progress fire on the north side; the murder would fit in with the station's Our Deadly Streets campaign but the flames would be more exciting visually and the scanner says it's still out of control so he sends the Wolf Coach there first.

Ron, who drives the Wolf Coach—the tricked-out van any TV station needs to do live remotes—and hates the north side because the old buildings might as well be built of lead the way they interfere with the signal, no matter how carefully he aims the stinger, rising even now from the roof of the truck.

Devin, who rides a fixed-gear black bike he bought for half a month's rent and whose purchase he refuses to regret, whose AmeriCorps project is a hyperlocal community news-and-take-action video blog that he feeds seven days a week with his not-Apple smartphone,

and who, when he sees the convent burning, thinks *justice is served*, not for any particular personal reason but just because, Catholics, you know.

And Desmond, who does know, who is haunted still by what happened to him so many decades ago—and who knows, maybe the resulting splintered childhood is why he’s living in this crappy neighborhood today instead of Hawaii, retired, with wealth beyond measure—and yet still feels a call to run up the stairs, ahead of the firemen who are only now arriving, and yank open the door and head for the central staircase calling, *let me hear you, let me hear you yell*.

And Trixie, which is not her name, just what Ron, Merry Dave, Timothy, Chas the weekend anchor, and most of the station call her behind her back, who hears Desmond calling and turns to Ron and says *oh God there’s people in there, I can hear them screaming*, which Ron interprets as *hurry up, we’re missing good audio*, and so he only says in reply, *give me a sec*, though he knows he’ll have longer than that, five minutes, maybe, while she does her hair, finds someone to talk to, and then, just before air, per the new guidelines, tweets the breaking news.

Agnes and Frieda prise open the front doors in time for Mary Pat and Mary Grace to tumble out, followed by Desmond, who has rescued them, and in so doing, rescued some lost piece of himself before they all lose themselves in the crowd as the building burns, brighter and brighter and brighter.

**Patricia, who knows they call her Trixie, but keeps this, and that** she speaks three languages, was a Rhodes scholar, ate two bagels this morning, is six years celibate, all to herself, because not everyone needs to know every detail of every other individual’s life, no matter how set the current world seems on disproving this.

Patricia, who finds no one to talk to, because she’s busy staring at her station-issued, last-legs Blackberry, preparing her tweet, thumb-typing, untyping, retyping, trying to stay within the limits,

trying to stay focused, and failing, because for her the story is always elsewhere, like that woman walking down the other side of the street this very moment, ignoring them all and the cloudless sky from beneath her bright red umbrella: *and that's 139* she thinks.

Patricia, who looks up and sees the For Sale sign, and thinks *that's the story*, who sees the boarded-up school just beginning to burn next door and thinks *that's the story*, who sees herself bent to her phone, hands folded in front of her as if in prayer, and knows *that's* the story, and its protagonist is her one constant and most annoying friend, Anders, her name (and why don't others have a name?) for the pinched, angular cursor that endlessly, mercilessly blinks out at her from whatever screen she's staring at, as now, as she wonders, worries, marvels at what we miss, of this world, of others, of the one above, when we reduce our stories to 140 characters.



# Monstrous Creatures

Jeff Mock

Electroshock, Michael says, as if  
Chanting a mantra: Electroshock, electroshock ...  
It does sound like some strange prayer,

A magic spell, an incantation to make  
His grief disappear. It's come round  
To midnight, and Michael says he's tired

Of feeling like he lives in a great hole—  
The walls above him crumble and crumble in.  
Electroshock, he says. I wish I knew

What to say to him. Since Sharon died,  
He's like a tree in a gale, or maybe  
He is the gale, or maybe he's just one

Drop of rain driven into the night.  
He takes the last of his coffee and grabs  
His coat. I give him a hug and say,

Stay, sleep on the sofa. I'll make a fire  
And you can chant some more. Yeah,  
He says, if only I were drunk. Leaving now

Or in the morning, it's all the same.  
Whatever comfort we leave, he says, whatever  
Light, we all go when it's time. And then

He sits back down. Okay, he says,  
I'll stay, but only because leaving  
Takes more nerve than I have right now—

I mean, why turn my back on even  
A little light, the fire in the hearth,  
The fire in the cave. Who wants to disappear

Into the dark, into our fear of the dark,  
The unknown, that gloom we call  
The future, all of our delusions and ill-

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Formed plans gift-wrapped,  
Ribbioned, and bowed like one more  
Awful necktie-and-handkerchief set

Under some garish fake Christmas tree?  
But for most of us, I say, that  
Is a blessing: a cup of spiced eggnog,

The colored lights blinking on the tree,  
And Bing Crosby on the stereo crooning  
“White Christmas.” I nudge him. It is

Possible, even in the Christmas shock,  
Even in the clutch of all the odd-  
Ball uncles and third cousins, even if

You’re appalled and must endure that kind  
Of claustrophobic, jammed-  
Shoulder-to-shoulder comfort. Like Japan,

Michael says, the nation-family, one  
Hundred and some million crowding  
Their string of sea-spewn rocks. He smiles,

Almost, and I see that we're in for  
A night of it. Japan? I say. Yeah,  
He says, after Hiroshima and Nagasaki,

They made all those B-movies, as if  
Little Boy and Fat Man weren't  
Enough, as if sci-fi fiction, somehow,

Could illuminate the real thing. And they  
Thrilled to it, the horror, annihilation made  
Fake and real all at once—nature

Gone completely berserk, giving  
Life to hordes of monstrous creatures  
Impervious to their tanks and rockets:

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Godzilla stomping ashore like MacArthur,  
Rodan swooping across the sky  
Like the Enola Gay with its fiery breath,

Mothra, Kumonga, Anguirus,  
Varan, and dozens more, tramping all  
Across Japan because we had to drop

The bomb, not once, but twice.  
Hurray for us, he says. We'll be up  
Till dawn, so I put on a pot of coffee

And grab two glasses and a bottle of vodka.  
You know, Michael says, more than two-  
Hundred-thousand people died,

But Godzilla came to life, and that's us,  
Monstrous creatures, all too ready  
For the red-hot and rip-roaring. So long,

Toy tanks, toy bridges, toy towns. So long,  
Japan. Small wonder  
That in the spring the Japanese visit

En masse the cherry blossoms, delicate  
And fleeting, nostalgic even before  
The petals fall. But even before the bomb,

I say, they went. For a thousand years,  
They've seen that we're momentary,  
Transient, and made their pilgrimage

To honor the beauty of our brief lives.  
But the bomb, Michael insists, has proven  
The more appropriate metaphor: a blast,

Then nothing at all. Armageddon,  
Judgment Day, golden harps and hosannas,  
Et cetera. So there you go, he says,

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The bomb is our modern Christ,  
A gift to us—as one public idiot said—  
Given by our benevolent God,

In whose benevolence we are at last  
All made equal, right down  
To our very atoms. And he raises

His glass and shoots back a shot  
Of vodka. Every couple of weeks,  
Michael needs a night to let out

All that's pent-up. This last April,  
His girlfriend died, a car accident,  
Sharon and her younger sister, boom,

Both dead, and I think dawn  
Always seems farther off for him.  
Who can live one long night

After another? I worry for him  
And I listen because there's something pure  
About his grief. I listen because

There has always seemed something  
Constant, something invariable, about it.  
Does his life make his grief or does

His grief make his life? One night  
A couple years back, he came home to  
A busted latch, an open window, a living room

With a breeze and emptied of stereo, TV,  
DVD, lava lamp, and more.  
The material world blossoms, he says,

And the crime rate rises accordingly,  
But how can anyone really argue  
Against the unruly abundance of even

The most temporary physical pleasures,  
 The trinkets and geegaws, the baubles  
 And trifles and jumbles, the everything

And even the far-too-little? Why argue  
 Against the objects of the easy life? That they  
 Decimate the spirit, perhaps? What

Doesn't? Michael says and holds out  
 His cup for coffee, black and strong,  
 And goes on to extol the spunk and sheer

Recklessness of the small-time thief,  
 The cutpurse and mugger and housebreaker,  
 The thief for whom theft may be

Pleasure but not a game, the thief  
 Who must recognize not the price  
 But the worth of a stereo, a vase, a camera,

Whatever modest jewelry adorns  
 The victim's vanity. It is, Michael says,  
 A distinction worth noting: The goods

Have got to sell, and so the priceless is  
 Just as well worthless. Say you steal some  
 Newly unearthed papyrus, and on it, say,

Is that carpenter the Christ's signature  
 —Maybe on the road to Gethsemane he signed  
 An autograph for some good Little Samaritan—

It isn't worth the tab in any back-road  
Barbeque joint. You simply cannot buy  
Ribs and white bread with the priceless.

That is what the spirit's worth, he says  
And pours a shot. Spirits, he says, *boom!*  
The whole damn thing, *boom!* Everything

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Gone but you and me, and what remains,  
The spirit? Some abstraction? No—  
Our hunger remains. And there's always

The chance. In the last four hundred  
Million years, Earth has seen five  
Major mass extinctions, and even more

Minor mass extinctions. Think of that,  
He says, a *minor* mass extinction.  
Suppose one fine day you're a trilobite,

A fairly sophisticated roundhead,  
The top of the heap, grubbing  
In the muck of a limestone platform

Far out at sea, above what we've come  
To call Utah, and a just-large-enough  
Chunk of rock, some debris, some

Piece of celestial garbage, it plunges  
Into your atmosphere and sizzles across  
Your sky and splashes straight into

Your ocean. Up from the sea floor come  
Waves and waves of deep water,  
Which is oxygen-poor and, it turns out,

Deadly to you. Who knew? *Whoosh boom!*  
You and all the immediate kin  
Are history. The third-rate cousins,

The squareheads, move in and grub  
In your muck. They're more primitive  
And adaptable and have it made for the next

Hundred million years, then *boom!* again—  
There goes the whole family. So long,  
Trilobites all. Hello, goodbye, hello,

**vii**

Goodbye. And well, hello, mammals.  
Hello, bipeds. Hello, opposable thumbs  
And sentience. Hello, shame, hope,

Honor, and despair. And hello, Provo,  
City of trilobites and true believers.  
The ocean has withdrawn, the trilobites

Are fossilized, and the clock on the stove says  
It's far too late. I yawn and rise  
And pour coffee for both of us. I know

There's no allotment on grief, but I hear,  
Still in my father's voice, the old saw  
*So who said life was fair?* and I can't help

Wondering just how much sorrow  
Any man gets: as much as he deserves  
Or as much as he desires? Or is it purely

Chance? The day after Sharon's funeral,  
The dogwoods blossomed and up  
Michael's walk to his door came one of

The earnestly concerned, a young man  
In coat and tie, a boy really, fresh faced,  
Blond, his blue eyes, as Michael tells it,

Unsullied by thought, and confident,  
Having beheld some blinding,  
Comforting light. And in the crook of an arm,

He held a stack of complementary pamphlets  
That showed in a crude drawing the lyres  
Of heaven and the rising flames of hell

And between them the face of a man  
Puzzled by the need to make a decision.  
No thanks, Michael said, I'm tidy

### **viii**

With the God of Abraham. The young man  
Nodded and handed Michael a pamphlet  
And said, Good. The end time, as you

Surely know, is near at hand. And Michael  
Agreed, perfectly sincere that day,  
I'm sure, in his own grief and belief.

How could he not, standing at the door  
Next to the boxes of Sharon's things  
That he'd been packing away? So long,

T-shirts and hiking boots and toothbrush.  
So long, pink nightgown. So long,  
Stuffed lion and diary with its pages

Of clean, clear script. Those days,  
Michael has said, were easy with certainty:  
Clean out everything—clean out

And drink and wish for numbness, or sleep,  
Or death, or the freaking end of the world.  
Whatever would come. Whatever.

It's almost four in the morning. I'm tired,  
But the vodka tastes good and, really,  
The end of the world isn't all

That far-fetched. It seems always  
Welcome somewhere, or expected,  
Though we clothe it in humor and scorn:

The eternal cartoon character in his beard  
And gloom and grimy Biblical garb,  
Shuffling along a busy city sidewalk,

The crudely painted letters of his placard  
Proclaiming *The End Is Nigh*,  
And some young scamp has just taped

To his back a paper that says *Kick Me*,  
And at the corner we wait for the light  
To flash *Walk* so we walk away

From our common ruin and eventually  
We arrive home, safe and warm,  
Although later in the evening, in the bedroom,

After a few frenzied minutes of love,  
One of us will say, That old man,  
It's sad, but what if it's true? What

Would we miss most—our small talk,  
The stock portfolio, the tulips, the sweat  
Glistening right now on our flesh,

The public library system...? Then  
We fall asleep. It strikes me, though,  
That no matter how we portray the doomsayer,

No one actually kicks him. Isn't that  
A strange sign of faith, too? What if he is  
A prophet, some god's right-hand man?

Who'd dare it? Michael would, maybe,  
A few months back, fresh and raw  
In this long downward spiral, kick him

Or shake his hand. I pour another  
Shot of vodka for each of us. It's going on five,  
Still dark, but not for long, and I should be

—Should long ago have been—in bed  
With Margot, but I am warm with the coffee  
And vodka and I have Michael here,

A friend who needs, as I have needed,  
A safe place simply to be. He pours coffee  
And says, Some days, all I want is to feel

**x**

Nothing at all. That would be a relief,  
One day not to live in a hole  
That's constantly caving in, to stand

In the open and have a sun that's more  
Than a pinprick in the clouds. I miss  
Sharon, he says, and I can only guess

At what it is to live in her absence,  
To feel that hole opening beneath me  
Wherever I stand and pulling me down.

Strange how sometimes we cultivate  
Our grief, feed it, water it, train it  
To grasp and wend its way up the trellis.

Given a lifetime, it covers the house.  
But what the hell do I know,  
Standing on the outside looking in?

It may be some neurotransmitters  
Have shut down, the dopamine  
Doesn't flow, the serotonin ebbs,

The neural connections fail, the signal  
Is lost, and the mind turns back on its own  
Frail pathways. The line is cut,

The lights go out. And then joy  
Is only a notion, hope only  
An abstraction. Oblivion, Michael says,

Isn't such a mean conceit. People say  
*The end of the world*, but all that means  
Is the end of us. Strangely, he seems

In a better mood, as if he's achieved  
Some of the nothingness he says he wants.  
But I think of reading bedtime stories

**xi**

Every night to Paula and Leah,  
My daughters, all of us jammed snug  
In the overstuffed chair in Leah's room,

The classics: *Goodnight Moon*, *Frog and Toad*,  
*Little Bear*. When we close the last book,  
I say *the* and my girls say *end*, and then

I tuck them in bed. Tonight we'll have  
More stories. Michael, I say, I don't want  
The end of us. I want all of this

To go on forever. So what that yesterday  
Was an awful day, and the day before,  
And last week. So what that we spin

Through space faster than we can believe  
And still have nowhere important to go.  
So what that some days don't do,

That the mail brings bills and junk,  
And the revolving doors at the hospital  
Spin people in and out and in again,

And the futures exchange falls and rises  
And falls. So what. Michael, I say,  
Get up. Help me set the table. The girls

And Margot will be up soon. Next up  
For us is breakfast. He says, You are such  
A cliché—another simp who lives for

The happy ending, the great fake-out,  
The cheery pregnant couple at the end  
Of every sappy romantic comedy.

Tell that to my girls, I say, and see  
Just how far it gets you. So, Michael,  
If you're staying for breakfast with us,

**xii**

Break some eggs. Get yourself busy.  
I switch on the radio and put on another pot  
Of coffee, and set the table this morning

For five. The weatherman, in all his sincere  
Fallibility, promises a clear, cold  
Beautiful day today. All I'm sure of,

Michael says, is that this *beautiful* day,  
Like every other, will end.  
Darkness is more than a metaphor,

He says while whisking the eggs,  
And it's all so ridiculous. It's a double-  
Edged faith Michael has, and suddenly

I want him to feel the other edge,  
To run it down his wrists and slide it  
Across his throat. And I say so—.

And maybe we can make a new holiday,  
National Suicide Day. Why not?  
Think of the mess, he says. After you, I say,

Why not me, a whole line of us, one  
After another? That is us, isn't it,  
Monstrous creatures? He feigns shock,

Which I appreciate. Feel better? I ask.  
Yeah, he says, let's do this again next week.  
I pour two fresh cups and raise mine:

Here's to Death in a robe of cherry blossoms.  
Yeah, yeah, he says, to nukes  
And meteors, like I need even less hope.

Whether Michael he feels better or not,  
The coffee smells good and today  
Is just as good a day to live as any other.

# Wiring

*On the pleasures of  
orthodontics*

**Sydney Spiesel**

**When I was maybe fourteen, our family dentist told my parents** that I needed braces. He was a small, wizened man, generally pleasant, who kept his radio tuned to Chicago's FM classical music station. The only time he seemed irritable was when the radio played something composed after the middle of the nineteenth century. He wasn't irritable for long since he would immediately reach over and snap off the radio, no matter what I said. I think he was a pretty good dentist, though, so I'm not sure why he didn't tumble to the trouble with my teeth earlier, when I was younger.

There I was, a very old kid compared to everyone else brought to the orthodontist's office.

I don't know how my parents found that particular orthodontic practice—probably the dentist recommended it—but it was horrible. It was a factory practice with many small machine shops (disguised as dental offices) scattered over Chicago's South Side. The ham-handed orthodontist, one of about six who came in rotation to the office I went to, would pry my mouth open, excoriate me about the shreds of chewing gum on the wires or my inadequacy with a toothbrush and start saying things out loud for an assistant to mark down. Things like "tighten A9; loosen B7." (I am, of course, making this part up: I have no idea of what he actually wanted written down.)

Then he would take out some wrenches ordered from Sears Roebuck, put his foot on my chest, and start to tighten. Now, that, you might think, would have put me off dentistry forever. And perhaps it would have, except for what happened at the next few visits, when the orthodontist wasn't there at all, just the dental hygienists, following the directions to "tighten A9 and loosen B7."

I guess it's possible that those women weren't as intelligent, kind, beautiful, sexy, or fragrant as I remember them, but I can only tell you that that's what still comes to mind when I think of them. It

may well be my fantasy life—certainly then and maybe now—speaking, but I always felt as if I did have a little bit of a special relationship with them. You know, the suave, debonair fourteen year old. Really just a few years younger than the hygienists were, and surely much more interesting and sophisticated than the other kids seen in the office.

Anyway, I was in love with each of them and I can't tell you how thrilling it was when they would talk with me about something really interesting—well, to me—and then lean over and tighten A9 or loosen B7.

Like most teens, I caught on fast. I learned the way the office worked and could easily read the appointment book upside down. So I never, ever made an appointment when an actual orthodontist was going to be in the office. I know I was supposed to be seen about every third visit, but I only saw the orthodontist about every six months, and only when the schedule changed unexpectedly. In between those undesirable visits, I'd just show up and A9 would be tightened and B7 would be loosened week after week for six months.

I still smile—perhaps with less than perfectly aligned teeth—every time I think about their delicate and careful work on my wiring.



# **Definitions and Assignments**

**Rachel Hadas**

Sculpture was memory.  
Desire was observation.  
History was an almanac.  
Music was a screen.  
It all made perfect sense to me at the time.

What is poetry? a medical student asked.

The first assignment was tropes,  
although according to Aristotle  
the art of metaphor cannot be taught.  
Second assignment: Q and A.  
Third assignment: laws of life and death.  
Fourth assignment: tell a story.  
Fifth assignment: speak as from the edge.  
Apostrophizing whom?

Then out into the April evening  
from the subterranean seminar room.

# **We Could Be Heroes**

**Matt Salyer**

***It must look wicked to the deer, he thought, and when he*** thought, he wrote: *We wake in the woods where a red metal sign marks the day's lane 8, 9, 10, 11, 12 by the bivouac site, our bodies knocked down in sleep, one after the other alongside rucks and LBVs and rifles loaded with blanks flop flop flop (we exhaust, stop, flop; we don't exactly sleep), one after the other by team and squad, flop flop flop and sigh ahhh, like meaty dominoes wrung of sweat to gristle. We make a saggy O around the bivouac where we settle. We wet our gristle down with baby wipes and we stuff the smeared wipes in the side pockets of our rucks. Pits, faces, balls, assholes. The deer can still smell us. We can't smell it anymore. I mean us. But everything natural smells us and avoids us. I wish I could avoid us, too. By which I mean me, especially me. And I wish I could see the deer in the chemlight glow of the wood line or the red lens lights that we use to stumble when we need to piss. I wish they'd stop and stay for a while. It would be something to see. For them. For us. Me. No one would move a muscle. I wouldn't. The TACs won't let you fuck with the wildlife when you're running lanes, and I don't think I'd want to anyway. It's hard to tell, though. If the deer would just stop for a minute, at least I'd know XXXXX.*

There were words under the Xs but you couldn't see them anymore.

He stopped writing and bit the inside of his cheek and crossed out the last part from *us. Me* all the way to the end. And when he was done XXXXXXing it all out, he went back and crossed out *I mean us* and *us, too. By which I mean me*. It just didn't make any sense, he thought. You were either *us* or *me*. You couldn't be both, or at least it didn't seem right that you'd be both at the same time, and when there was nothing more of *us* or *me* to scratch out, he skipped a line and started again *We wake in the woods and the deer smell us* and he crossed it out again. *We wet our gristle in the woods and*

it still wasn't right. He stopped. Listened. Alabama sounded like a motor. *It's our last week and we're lucky*, he wrote. *The TACs run you on the lanes all day but they let you bed down early (no 2, 3 hrs a night shit) when the tree frogs are still pulling the night to life like* a something. He didn't know what. He thought about a man pulling the string of a boat's motor. Wrote it. Crossed it out. *I shouldn't be talking about shit like that*, he thought. He was from Schenectady. He managed a U-Haul on the civilian side and took classes online. He didn't know anything about starting boats. *Maybe it's like writing letters*, he thought. *You start and stop and start and stop until what you're trying to say starts running on its own*. He started again. Stopped. Started. Stopped. Sometimes it didn't work. Maybe boats were like that.

He turned the page, but the next page was full of acronyms and numbers and coordinating instructions, a kind of outline of his day smeared together into nonsense by sweat and dirt and part of an MRE that had leaked in his cargo pocket a few clicks back. He closed the notebook and set it on his lap and brushed the hard, green cover clean. He opened the shoulder pocket of his ACU and withdrew a fingerlength packet of tissue paper. A single serving of instant coffee sealed in a little red wrapper. There was a man's face on the red wrapper, all clean and whitetoothed and smiling with thick, brown hair drawn back and up at the widow's peak over an aquiline nose. White waves of odor drifted in front of the clean man's profile from a hot white mug of fresh coffee. *I bet this fucker's got a boat*, Schenectady thought. Maybe the aquiline man liked to drink his coffee on the boat. Maybe an aquiline woman from Westchester served it to him in the white mug. Maybe the boat always started on the first try.

He bit the red wrapper open along the edge, tearing the man's skull in two with his teeth. He took a single square of tissue out of the packet and laid it flat against the notebook cover and poured half of the coffee out in the center of the single square and he rolled the square at the edges until it made a kind of pouch for coffee grounds.

Then he twisted the edges, tore them off with his thumbnail, and packed the pouch in his jaw like a dip.

Shutz was watching him. The one from Nebraska. Lutheran. No, Mormon. Something. Rawboned. Decent looking. Decent. Shutz was a schoolteacher or something back home. A basketball coach. Something. He used to be fat before he joined the Guard and when they were all still in the barracks, he used to show the platoon his old driver's license, the one with the fatman picture in the corner. You were supposed to notice how much weight he'd lost. How seriously he took Officer Candidate School. How much he was willing to sacrifice for a wife and three kids in Nebraska, a better career, a right way of doing things. *It's because he doesn't think I should be here*, Schenectady thought. *Or because he can't figure out why I'm here in the first place. That's why he watches.*

You're not going to eat that, Shutz said.

It's Ranger dip.

You're going to dip coffee?

Yeah.

Do you really need a cigarette that badly?

No, Shitz, I just really need something that's mine.

Whatever you say, Cahan.

We can't all be Captain America, hero.

He said it *heyrow*, twanging and bending the vowels like notes stripped raw from a slide guitar. That's how Lieutenant Pitt said it. It was his catch phrase: a singsong, ironic, dismissive *heyrow* punctuating questions that weren't really meant to be answered, negative spot reports, corrective actions, reminders to stand at parade rest, attention, salute, close your pockets, fix your IR tab, reminders that you weren't prepared, qualified, competent, that you were *still day one, phase one, heyrow*, that you owed him time in The Pit and he wouldn't forget. *Ah ain't gwon to ferget, heyro*, he'd say. *Yew owe me. Ah see yew in The Pit.* And you saw him in The Pit. You saw his clean, jumplaced boots when he had you push in the sawdust *one-*

*two-three one sir* until you could only breath it *one-two-three fifty* but you said *sir* or at least you grunted it. In either case you pushed the word out well enough for him to hear it, *sir*.

But you didn't always push. After five or six weeks you knew how to hold your body straight like a plank, how to put a hump in your back or sag your belly when you couldn't keep straight, and all you could think of then was the absurdity of it all. The little patch of ground by the pullup bars framed with 4x4s and filled with sawdust and play sand. The bronze plaque on the whitewashed post nearby that announced your arrival at The Pit. The commemorative plaques, cordoned in their own beds of sand or sawdust or bright red yard mulch, that displayed the names and mottoes of old graduated classes of officers and warrant officers. About a dozen paces from The Pit, some field grade Major or Colonel had built a little graveyard with flat granite markers dedicated to the memory and repose of luminaries and alumni with names like COL Cigar Butts or MAJ Corrective Training or OC Failure T. O'Adapt. It was meant to be funny.

And every time Schenectady went down to The Pit, he stopped to read another grave name, thinking *because it is funny; it's funny because they're letting you know that it's all a game and it's funnier still because no one's listening*. No one. Not the squared away NCOs and E4s with two deployments and New Testaments in their personal drawers who should have known better. Not the patrol car cops and firefighters from Worcester, Mass., or Providence, Rhode Island, who should have just smirked and squinted and gone with the flow. The college athletes waiting to take the fire department exam or get a second interview with the New Jersey State Police when they got back home. The serious Smallville types from Kansas or Iowa or wherever the hell Shutz *no, Shitz, he's still Shitz, he hasn't fucked off yet* was from. *They're the worst*, he thought. *The farmboys. The Dawson's Creekers*. The hopeful and neighborly Creekers who slung their grins easily across their jaws and lifted their eyebrows the way you did when you were talking to women; the ones who had been more athletic once than they were now, whose bodies were marked

indelibly, old hat, by what he could only assume was some kind of rural ballet practice of running in track meets and going long for a catch in the cornfields. *No, he thought, the wheatfields. Superman flashback panels. Clark in a shrunken teeshirt, jeans, like a uniform. Doesn't drink much, still young, godlike, cut out for good uses. The Kent farm's a wheatfield. Someday, he'll play a silly game with a woman named Lois and save cats in trees and curb his power for a silly game with a rich man named Lex, but he'll wear a nice costume. And the game will mean everything to him. More than his parents. More than his own home. More than the woman he keeps saving from rich men and trees. The Kent farm's a wheatfield, but not a home, not his home, only his gameboard.*

More than anyone else, it seemed, the Creekers should have known better. Everything was a game to them. They spoke to one another in a secret, laconic code of preseason trades and twelve-and-oh records. They sang the Ohio State song for the TACs. They *knew* the Ohio song. Ohio *had* a song and they claimed it for their own. But they were the ones who seemed to hate the Lieutenant most of all. It was as if they couldn't bring themselves to accept that sometimes a game was just a game. Or that the game was fixed. That the plays didn't matter. When he didn't rotate his boots out, Shutz would come up to him whispering *it's knot day, Cahan. Don't you see everyone else has the pair with the knots in the laces?* and he'd answer that yes, he did see, and let the silence hang between them like an insult. It wasn't the right answer. When they went out to the field, he'd leave his sleeping mat in the barracks, pack two t-shirts, clean socks. Freeball for a few days. Sleep on the bare grass with his ruck for a pillow. And when they came back, he'd shove his dirty laundry into his personal drawer. They never gave you time to get the locker display right. It was a move they made in the game. And he knew the inspection schedule, anyway. You had to make your own moves.

That was how the Lieutenant stayed on top of the game. He was constantly moving, changing, preempting the gambits of his

ward-opponents with pushups, front-back-gos, Iron Mikes, rifle PT. Sometimes, when he'd exhausted the playbook, he'd have you just roll around in the sawdust, back and forth, over and over, until you puked *all over Major Barrett's Pit, heyro, you get that out of the Major's Pit*, and you had to grab the dust where the puke clumped and put it in your pocket. There wasn't much point in rolling after that, so he put you on your back doing flutter kicks *one-two-three-one sir one-two-three two sir* and you could see his face, haloed by the sun, the lines of his countenance cut and scribbled dark by the shadow of his cap. Flat. Hard. Stretching at the jowls with weight and diet and age. The Lieutenant was at least fifty or so with bright, stark salt-and-pepper hair tipped in blinding white crewcut shocks below his black patrol cap. A narrow blackdyed moustache with blackdyed skin beneath that faded into deep, even tan around bright, boyish eyes that darted and squinted. Former enlisted, no doubt. Maybe an E6. No, too authoritative, too familiar with the deep intimacies of one man's power over another. It all seemed old hat to him. Somewhere along the line, he must have gotten his sevens or eights, and his eyes must have twinkled like a boy at Christmas who's seen how much his parents spent. Twinkle, twinkle, little eyes: he seemed to live for breaking soldiers. Making *heyrows*.

But lately, it had gotten to the point where Schenectady would have to remind the Lieutenant to send him down to The Pit. Sometimes, usually between breakfast chow and noon meal, the Lieutenant would start with *you all jacked up, heyro, day one phase one or it ain't over, heyrow, the Army don't need bad officers*. And Schenectady would just stare back with a sudden, noticeable flash of hatred that shocked his face tight, a hatred for the Lieutenant and for all lieutenants. A hatred of being *jacked up*, of being called on it, of not knowing whether it was true or merely part of the game. A hatred of chiggers and triple digit temperatures, of Alabama Julys, of Schenectady anytime, of *us* and *me* and Creekers, officers, candidates, anyone. And the Lieutenant saw. Knew. Smiled. Inflated the tendons in his neck until they were red and ready to burst, saying

*don't you gimme that eye, heyrow, or I will kick you in the neck, you know't. I got a thing for you. I will see yew later in The Pit, yew want to be playing fuckfuck games with me, heyrow. I will see you.*

Lately, though, the Lieutenant seemed to forget all about his threats by lights out. Or, when he did remember, he just squinted and puffed out his chest and muttered *oh, I didn't ferget yew, heyrow. I got somethin good comin just fer yew later.* It was always *coming*. Soon. Later. It didn't matter when; it was *coming* without fail like the old sacerdotal Last Things that his mother used to pray about in Schenectady. Death. Judgment. Heaven. Hell. The end but sillier. And that had become the Lieutenant's final gambit: restraint, revelation, the foreknowledge of judgment. And that was why Schenectady, in turn, always went looking for the Lieutenant right before lights out on the days when he was *day one phase one*. It was like being a boy again: when you didn't want to play anymore, you just knocked over all the pieces and walked away, saying *sir, you told me to report* and the Lieutenant, turning red, *first five words, heyrow, goddamnit you know your first five words*, and the *heyrow* says *Sir, Senior Officer Candidate Cahan reports with a statement, 1,2,3,4,5.* Like that. And the revelator *git on, heyro, what's yer statement?* and he *gits on*, saying *1,2,3,4,5, sir-senior-officer-candidate-cahan, you were going to see me in The Pit.* And the Lieutenant, *right, right, you git on now in yer bunk or I gwan write you up for* [pause] *insubordination refusing to obey a direct order* [pause] *failure to adapt.* It was like being a boy again, knocking over the toys. Or a man at his mother's funeral, knocking over God. *Right, right, you git on now in yer bunk.* The silly graves and the grave endgame. Judgment. No more judgments. Jacked up. Sleep.

It was all worth writing about, he decided. He opened the field notebook again and turned to the first blank page he could find. He pressed the tip of his tongue against the Ranger dip in his cheek and felt the sudden rush of bitterness fill his mouth. It made him feel present. Alone in the sensations of his body. His *own* body. He pressed the tip of his pen against the paper and tried to think, and

when he couldn't, he wrote anyway. *When Lieutenant Pitt killed Blanch*, he began [pause], and then XXXXXed out *killed*. He didn't know that for sure. It was other people's language. Gossip. And it hadn't happened yet, anyway. Blanch was probably still at the Birmingham hospital. He had even overheard someone from 1st Squad saying that the battalion was going to fly the family in from Ohio to see him. *No*, he thought, *so they can see how much the Army cares*. The Army was good at decorating people. They were going to make him like the old pictures of Christ taken down from the Cross, the speechless body surrounded by doctors and nurses and gentlemanly field-grades, a whole Pieta of majors and lieutenant colonels and staff chaplains slapping him gently on the shoulder and reassuring him *you're gonna come through this, hooah* and called him *son* or *soldier* or *brother* when they couldn't remember his first name. He wondered if they'd call Blanch *heyro*. He wondered if they had boats.

He started again: *The Army will have to hang someone out to dry*, but that wasn't it, either. He could see a scribbled OPOD bleeding through from the other side of the page, jumbles of letters and numbers: *NLT 0800 hrs ... IAW ... coordnatng inst. 3rd sqd to conduct recon in AO Witt*. It had all made sense to him earlier that morning when he wrote it down. It had been the most serious thing in the world. *No*, he thought, *the Army never had to hang anyone out, or at least it hung who it wanted where and when it wanted, because it got to hide bodies in a jumble of language*. He tried the idea out. Wrote it. Read it. It didn't strike straight. The Army wasn't a person. Ideas don't hang or hide or want anyone. Men do. *We do*, he thought. *There's no Army, just us*.

He looked up. Shutz was sitting against his ruck, curled like a cicada, powdering red, raw feet speckled with blister. *No*, he thought. *The us is a game, too. Something to hide in*. Soon it would be dark and there would be no more regular *O* of bodies at intervals, no more Army, no more jumble of language or jumble of *us* and *me*. Only *me*. Secret bodies fumbling in the darkness to piss. The furtive display of red lens lights flickering and dashing without pattern. Pri-

vate conversations. Minds isolate in their separate sleep. Endgame. Sleep. Soon. He wrote quickly:

*no one's killing Blanch and if he dies no one killed him.  
if someone killed him, we want it to be the LT because we hate him.  
I don't hate the LT, so it doesn't have to be him.  
we don't want people to die just because they die or because of more  
than 1 thing.  
we want someone to be a killer and someone else to be the hero.  
we want the LT to kill Blanch. we want to be heroic in our hatred.  
I don't hate the LT. I don't know Blanch. there's no we.*

He stopped. He wasn't ready to XXXX it all out. Tomorrow, maybe, when he thought about it more. He stuffed the notebook back into the top flap pocket of his ruck. He unlaced his boots and peeled off his socks and stuffed them deep into the toes of his boots where he couldn't smell them. He put the boots beside his ruck in a pile of gear and lay down. *The LT's only one of the reasons for Blanch*, he thought. *But he was just playing the game and Blanch was playing the game and all the heroes who've hated the LT for weeks and just learned Blanch's name. They played, too.* Then stopped thinking. Slept.

**He woke at zero three. From a dream, he marvelled. Back home,** he never dreamed. That was his girl's thing. She kept a journal of her dreams and she told him about the really good ones, the ones that were strange and violent and teetered on the edge of meaning like Nick Cave songs or *Naked Lunch*. She was convinced that he dreamed, too, but he knew better. *Everyone dreams*, she'd say, *you just don't remember. You need more B vitamins.* And he'd shrug. It was all the same if he didn't remember. He'd get off work with his mind racing a million miles a minute and stay that way until he slept, stopped, just stopped like a clock, at zero three or four, and he stayed that way until he lurched awake by fits and starts midmorning. In the

Army, though, he slept whenever he stopped moving. And when he slept, he dreamed about a Schenectady that was not Schenectady, a life that was his but not his. It was better than his and he was a fugitive in his own flesh. The world was rich and vivid and when he woke, it was immediately hidden and forgotten and he went about the work of the day eating and pissing and laying prone and standing to, guiltless of having stolen the world.

Somehow he had moved about a dozen paces from his sector of fire while he slept. Somehow he'd pulled his sand tee up over his shoulders and ended up lying on his side, his arms and legs spread out, right over left, like the body of some dead buck, his heartbeat pulsing in his abdomen through a red girdle of fifty or sixty chigger bites. He was thirsty, famished, and something made his feet tingle. The heat, maybe. Or his heart pulsing doubletime in his abdomen. His kidneys. *Maybe they'll stick me today*, he thought. Since they'd been in the field, at least a dozen guys from Bravo had gone down from the heat. Even Gomez, who spent the first two days reminiscing about the march to Basra. Sweltering heat. Your piss dried on your ACUs in under a minute. Hell. Down range. One of the older candidates would start faltering in the kudzu or begin pouring his onequart down the front of his ACU and Gomez would be there playing platoon sergeant, ambling up and down the line, saying *this ain't nothing, bro. C'mon now, no fallouts, no fallouts. 'Bama heat ain't got nothing on in-country*. They stuck him on the third day. He fell out after the react-to-ambush lane and spent the rest of the day in the back of a medic truck eating MREs and napping while a sixty-eight-whiskey with a tight blond ponytail pumped bags of water through his veins. He shut up after that.

*The high-speeds don't like playing Army once they get stuck*, Schenectady thought. *Only the jacked up ones who don't care if they're sitting under a fan or pouring water down their shirts or pissing themselves in the prone with their LBV open and their sleeves loose. Us. Me. We'll run around fucking up the OPORD and swear at the Joes, shove them where we want them for support*

*by fire.* He got up and thought about fixing his shirt. He stripped it off and unclipped a canteen from his LBV and doused the shirt in the musty water and put it back on. Gasp. He could feel his heart clench from the sudden coolness that made him lightheaded, if only for a moment, until wet cotton warmed to match his skin. *That was Blanch's problem,* he thought. *He wasn't good enough but he wasn't fucked up enough to not care.* Blanch was satisfactory, earnest, easily forgotten in accountability formations and chow lines. A *third-squad-third-man*, like the Lieutenant joked, too afraid to get stuck, get noticed, named, watched, judged. Maybe he really believed all that nonsense about getting sent home without a commission for missing training, being with the medics more than twelve hours, recycled for another eighteen months, back to Phase II, Phase I, blah, blah, blah, *heyro.* The game. And Blanch was a Creeker, with two Creeker kids and a proud Creeker wife. They believed in the game and they believed in their man, their daddy, and he knew it and he stood justified before them on merits of the game. It was a way of loving, and who would surrender that? The strange language of formal sacrifice and martial endurance that meant anything and everything like all clever games do, meant *I love you, you'll miss me, please miss me, daddy, darlin, I love you, you used to love me, I still do, I'll fix it, I'll fix me, you, I can't, I know.*

*No,* he thought, *Blanch must have seen people getting stuck all the time, falling in and out, seen the TACs nervously ordering everyone to drink water, report to the medics, eat salt packets.* It cost money to make officers and you weren't commissioned yet. Even the Lieutenant had grown delicate with the candidates' bodies by week six. Your body was the Army's collateral. *If you step back from the game,* he thought, *you've got to see that they won't really hurt it. Or expell it. Even Blanch had to have seen.* Maybe it was something else, then, like the second man and the first man standing next to *third-man-third-squad*, and the fear of looking weak to them, *us,* broken. The fear of being short, fat. A bench warmer. Not one of *us,* and a fear of *us* worse than heat sickness or fever or kidney failure.

It was easier to just collapse the way he did. Someone would strip you down until were half naked and unconscious in your nakedness, and someone would stick you and soon your veins would shiver in the body the Army let you benchwarm for it. And it wouldn't be your fault. That's how the rules of the game worked. You weren't *day-one-phase-one* if you just broke. It was like getting the pawn to the end of the board. They made you a *heyro*. A real one. *No*, he thought. *They just took away the y.*

The blackness of the tall pines hid the stars where they passed in their old gambits but he could hear the ring of bodies shifting and jostling against their gear in all directions. Thirty meters out, a chemlight pulsed to mark the spot where you pissed. Where *they* pissed. Shutz. Creekers. Sleepers. He pissed where he wanted; he had that license; he was jacked up. He turned away and walked toward clear sky and starlight where the red clay road ran like a faded ribbon past the bivouac. There was a medic's truck parked at the edge of the woodline, idling, air conditioned, empty. *She must be sleeping in the back*, he thought, *the little sixty-eight-whiskey. Or eating, maybe. Eating real food. Fucking around on an iPhone. Sexing someone. Waiting to stick us and getting paid, sticking or no. And why not?* He walked out onto the road, skipped his bare feet on the gravel, a man walking on coals, until he came to a water buffalo parked in a ditch on the other side of the road. He went around to the far side of the water tank and pissed at the bushes. Stripped his clothes off and sat against the buffalo wheels and flipped the spigot open 1,2,3, short bursts, 1,2,3, so that it sprayed against his neck and ran cool water down the length of his trunk to the groin. He shut his thighs tight so that the water pooled at his groin and drowned it. Cleaned it. Cooled it. He wondered if it could still do anything other than piss. Maybe he'd hit the truck in the morning. Maybe he'd let the little 68-whiskey stick him.

*If Blanch had only made it another twenty meters*, he thought. Remembered: they'd just finished running the react-to-contact lane and the crossing-a-linear-danger-area exercise, eaten their noon

chow, and marched again, slogging two or three clicks between points on narrow, indirect paths broken by webs of kudzu and wisteria. *And looking wicked to the deer*, he thought. *Shifting the weight of our rucks up and down our hidden spines as we filed, one after the other, our heads round and hard and dull green in our kevlar. Bellicose. Instinctive. Like a long, ignorant file of snapping turtles waiting to squat and settle and practice the day's assigned game of killing.* Then stopped imagining. Remembered: from 1300 to 1445, he'd been the acting squad leader for react-to-ambush. The Lieutenant and the lane NCOs brought him into the tent and issued the order and he scribbled the important parts over a laminated OPOD template. Tried to play. Win. The Lieutenant made notes and comments about him on a yellow rating card while he stumbled through the steps of the game: (1) receive the mission; (2) make a tentative plan; (3) issue the warning order; (4) start necessary troop movement; (5) reconnoiter; (6) complete the plan; (7) issue a complete order; (8) supervise and refine. 1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8. Your tactics didn't matter. The yellow cards didn't care if you won. Took it seriously. Would have lived if you'd been down range. Might have gotten other people killed.

*It's all common sense*, he thought as the last of the water ran and dried in furrows down his chest, *but you have to make a show of it, make sure they see you making the right moves.* He'd made the sand table and laid the little toy soldiers out on it in their proper positions. He'd given a show of talking to his team leaders, running rehearsals, conducting spot checks. And all the while Blanch had been lying prone, watching his sector of fire, third-man-third-squad, dry, disoriented, feverish, silent because he was playing, too; he was the pawn for that lane, waiting his turn to play bishop, king, queen. *No*, Schenectady thought, *waiting to get taken off the board. Sent home as a Sir to kiss the little Creekers. Earn them. Show it. Prove it, having gone and played and returned for their sake.* And at 1445, third-man-third-squad was closer to home. They had gone through the mission by 1430 and the Lieutenant filled the balance

of the time with *day-one-phase-one, heyrow*. They dropped their rucks and held their filthy bodies suspended over the red clay path for what seemed like an eternity as he told them *I don't care if none of y'all graduate. Fall out, yew fall out. Army don't need you. I don't care if yew all is heat cas*. And they waited. And he waited. Blanch dropped to his knees and the Lieutenant's eyes danced like a child's; he had something to do. *Yew ain't heat cas*, he said, *yew just drag-ass. Yew just fall out, heyro. Do it. I want yew to fall out. I gonna throw a rock at yew, heyro*. And Blanch grunted, straightened the angle of his body. *Yew shut up with that noise, now*, the Lieutenant said, and Blanch shut up with it. He faced down the way you did in the Pit, and just stared while the ants maneuvered their hurried formations in the clay below him. *You-can't-see-me-if-I-can't-see-you*: you could always wait the clock out like that. Then they were marching again, and he was safe again, anonymous, stifling his burning, lumbering body, one step after the other, like a turtle cooking in its shell.

*Safe again*, Schenctady thought, *but from whom?* He heard the door of the medic truck slam shut. He launched his body up from the muddy clay under the spigot and balled his wet clothes in his hands and drenched them again before putting them on. He wondered if the ponytailed medic saw. He hoped she did. He wondered if Blanch could feel her hands on his soft, rank body when she shucked it from its shell and poked for veins. *If he'd just made it twenty more meters*, he thought, *but*—he didn't know *but what*.

When he passed the truck, the medic saw him and she nodded to him through the open cab window. She was plain and freckled and querulous and her flat, split hair hung wet and loose for the night. He moved closer to the cab. She smelled like shampoo and cigarettes and he wanted to smell her long enough to remember the next day.

Latrine, he muttered.

Three more days and a wake up, she shrugged.

Three more days and a wake up, he winked.

You hang in there, you get your goldbar.

You gonna salute me, then, Specialist?

If the heat don't get you, she laughed.

He shook his head.

Y'know he was a dozen meters off from the ORP, he said, the guy you got today.

That's what y'all keep telling yourselves.

Three more days and a wake up, he grunted.

That too, Candidate.

**It was always the same when he got home. For the first day or two,** he felt like a sleepwalker. His bills were past due, his voicemail was full, he had missed too much work, and his mother wanted to know if he could feel her prayers in Officer Candidate School. He paid the bills, went back to work, erased all the messages, and said yes, *I think so* when his mother pressed. None of it required any thought. They were like the automatic choices of a man in a dream world, and he kept waiting for something to happen to jar him awake. Anything. Airborne. Air Assault. Branch School. Not Sche-nectady. U-Haul. Online classes. Nothing about the Guard seemed like a game anymore when they sent you home.

When he landed in Albany, his girl was there to meet him at the terminal. She grabbed him and held him tight and hovered around him. *Like another fucking NCO*, he thought. He waited in line for Starbucks; she studied the changes in his body. He watched the baggage conveyor; she told him the plan for the rest of the day. *It's sweet, though*, he thought. *And it mean a lot to her*. And nothing seemed wrong, yet. He always waited to see if something was wrong before he let himself exhale around her. Really *be* around her. Home. *It wouldn't be so hard*, he thought, *to get a date for Benning sooner*. Maybe get deployment under his belt after that.

But by the time he reached the car, he knew that everything was okay. She was still hovering, talking, waiting to hear his stories. *I'll have to start calling you Lieutenant, now*, she said. He grinned, listened to himself say *yeah*. It didn't feel real yet. *Lieutenant Nathaniel*

*Cahan*, she repeated. *Do they call you Lieutenant Nathaniel like it's Father Joe or something?* She went to kiss him but he looked away and stuffed his ruck in the trunk. *Just Cahan*, he said, *or Natty, or some stupid shit. No one calls me Nathaniel 'cept you.* That made her happy enough to stop trying to kiss him. Earned him a little room. He set his duffel upright on its end and opened the clasp and fished around until he pulled out something that looked like a white branch, two feet long, with ridges and bumps covering the base of the trunk and bite marks along the circumference of the thick sprouting twigs.

For your brother, he said.

Y'know, she began, he *really* wanted to come but third grade starts tomorrow and—

I know. It's fine.

What is it?

It's an antler. It's off a deer.

How?

They shed them.

No, how'd you get it?

Couple days ago. We were marching by it and it was hanging in the crook of a tree like a claw.

And they let you keep it?

I dunno. I just took it.

He'll love it.

She kissed him. He wasn't ready for that, but he let her do it anyway. She wouldn't understand, otherwise. And then something might be wrong. On the drive home, she asked him about Alabama and he stared at the woodline running along Route 90. They were moving past it so quickly that it made him feel wrong in his own skin. She asked him about the deer. *No*, he told her, *I didn't see too many of them. They mostly kept away from us when they could.* There were plenty of deer around the Hudson. She reminded him about that. Two, three times before he stopped counting. *He didn't have to go anywhere to see deer*, she said. He nodded. The traffic slowed down near Schenectady and he could see at least a dozen

meters past the woodline. He felt better. He started telling her about Alabama. The heat. The Pit. The Lieutenant. The fucking Creekers. Blanch.

Poor dear, she said.

No they just do that naturally. The antlers grow back, he said. Like teeth.

No, I mean the guy with the kidney failure. Blanch.

Oh, he said. Yeah. He seemed like a nice guy.

He stared harder into the woodline. You-can't-see-me-if-I-can't-see-you: he didn't want to talk about it anymore. He wasn't sure what he thought about it yet. He hadn't written it down.

I'm going to go kill one, he said. Maybe next week.

A nice guy? she laughed. She didn't mean to laugh. She just couldn't help it.

A deer.

Oh, jeez, okay. You mean you're going hunting.

No. I'm going killing.

You're always like this when you get back from your two weeks. You don't hunt.

*Killing.* Hunting's a sport.

She furrowed her brow and put on the most serious face she could without breaking.

Sir-yes-sir, she said.

First-five-words, he laughed.

**The day before he went killing, he got a mass email from 2LT Shutz addressed to *Gentlemen (Bravo Co., 4th Platoon)*. Gentlemen. Us. Heroes. Spam, he thought, like the one from the prince in Kenya who had selected good-sir-you to receive a billion US dollars. The message gave an update on Blanch's condition; it thanked everyone who had donated cash to cover the family's travel expense; it offered a prayer for soon-to-be 2LT Blanch's soon-to-be full recovery from what 2LT Shutz called *the atrocity*. Shutz was a schoolteacher, he remembered. *The atrocity* sounded on point. The message ended**

with a plea for ALCON to please forward sworn statements THRU UNDERSIGNED to the Ohio Cadre of the USARNG OCS NLT 16 SEPT 20-- IOT ensure *that this kind of atrocity is never allowed to happen again*. He clicked on the attachment. SWORN STATEMENT DA FORM 2823. Stared at it. Closed it. Swearing meant writing and he didn't know what he was willing to swear to yet. He hadn't thought about it enough. He hadn't written it yet.

By the time he got to Durham, he still couldn't shake the feeling that he had to swear to *something* by the sixteenth. Right, wrong, guilty, innocent, atrocity, accident. He was a lieutenant, now, and that was the difference between officers and their joes: the officers took oaths, made decisions. Like the Lieutenant. *No*, he thought, *like me*. That much, at least, he was sure of. And he knew what he was supposed to swear by. Somewhere in Ohio, the field grades were shaking their heads about the field grades down at McClellan. They were reading statement after statement remembering first hand how *1LT Pitt said he wanted OC Blanch to fall out, knowing he was suffering from exhaustion and dehydration*. But that was the game, *heyro*, and everyone knew it, played it, *I want yew to fall out*, and it held no more weight than if they decided to report how *1LT Pitt threatened to throw a rock at me* or *1LT Pitt conspired to drop kick me in the throat*. But it had been so hot. And Blanch had been third-man-third-squad. Silent, feverish, determined to make it another twenty meters. And it had happened, just the way the Lieutenant pretended it would. Like dying in Halo and dropping dead on the couch at the same time. An alien killed the man on the couch; an alien tried to kill Blanch, a ludicrous monster who had been realer than God for eight weeks, more capricious than God, who still, after eight weeks, treated them all like they were still *day-one-phase-one*, who *didn't care if none of yew graduate*. Even though they were Senior Officer Candidates, then. Even though they were almost heroes.

*The atrocity*. He pulled the truck off the road about a half a mile outside of Durham and got out, rolling over the phrase in his mind. It didn't fit, yet. He took his cousin's AR-15 out of the truck

bed and cleared it and fingered the safety while he loaded a mag. He walked nearly two clicks into the woodline, heel, toe, heel and then toe, silent as a deer, until he finally stopped and assumed a firing position halfway up a little ridge. There were other men in the woods. *Hunters*, he thought. Upstate rednecks with trucker caps and mouths full of chew and sportsmen from Westchester in new L.L Bean boots and plaid shirts that smelled like clean blankets.

He watched his sector of fire.

By noon, he had overlaid the whole landscape with patrol bases, rally points, defensive positions. He was in a good spot to conduct a linear ambush. By 1300, he had forgotten all about the atrocity, and *I, \_\_\_\_\_, want to make the following statement under oath:* had replaced it, running through his mind, again and again, with a hundred different versions of what he meant appended afterwards. He started getting his range. He aimed at the top of a pine three hundred meters away. He aimed at a patch of moss on a rock a hundred fifty meters out. He aimed for some leaves on a poison ivy plant at a little more than twenty-five. 1,2 [pause] 3; 1,2 [pause] 3. Two in the chest, one in the head. 1,2 [pause] 3. Center mass. On the exhale. Exhale.

Trigger squeeze.

By 1400, it had become a game. He flicked the safety on, then trigger squeeze, 1,2 [pause] 3. Safety off, good sight picture, center mass, on the exhale, exhale, safety on, then trigger squeeze, 1,2 [pause] 3. Then faster. New sight picture. Then faster. Ranging, ranging, 25, 50, 75, 100, 150, 300. Then back down again and faster. Sometimes he got the order wrong and caught himself when he felt the trigger mechanism begin to give. *I don't want to scare the deer*, he thought, but he hadn't seen any deer yet. Safety on, then faster. Sometimes he saw the bright orange windbreakers of sportsmen appear and then drown in the leaves. *The ones with boats*, he thought, and lodges upstate. Gentlemen. Us.

At 1430, the brush began rustling at a little under two hundred meters. He waited for the deer, but none appeared. He waited to

spot orange, but he didn't, to hear voices, but he couldn't. He sighted the life in the bushes center mass where it shook them. It had to be a deer. You could always hear the sportsmen were always talking and swearing. Safety off, good sight picture, center mass, on the exhale, exhale, safety on, then trigger squeeze, 1,2 [pause] 3. Then faster. He kept thinking about the Lieutenant. Blanch. Soon-to-be-2LT Blanch. I, \_\_\_\_\_, *want to make the following statement under oath*: two kids and a Creeker wife who believed in their man, their daddy, and he knew it and he stood justified before them on merits of the game. No, he thought, crossed that out in his mind. *Safety off, good sight picture*. Then added it back. Then added: Blanch would have gotten someone killed down range *center mass* it would've taken a full fire team offline to medivac him out *on the exhale* he wanted to know what to write about heroes; he had to kill to know what to write; it had to be a deer *safety off, then trigger* you could always hear the heroes swearing loudly *squeeze, 1,2 [pause] 3*.



# **The Nearing of the World**

**Hannah Craig**

I move the magnets to spell *milk*, then *eggs*.  
Rain picks up. A slough is firming  
outside the small side door  
where I've gone to move the chairs.  
In and out, all summer, they've been drawn.  
In a week or two, I'll weather them away  
for the dead season. A hawk sits there, unmoving,  
close as a wood pin on the line. She looks hard.  
And hard again. The visible is always  
the most invisible. When I tell this story I'll say.  
*There was this herd of sparrows  
in the sky, but instantly they were gone.  
And then I saw the bigger bird.*  
I'll drop it like a stone. Conversation will jut  
around me, pick back up. I won't say  
how Thomas Jefferson brooded over  
the New Testament, taking out  
all the miracles, leaving just  
the *how* and *why*, the teaching  
instead of the reaching. That seems  
the kind of thing I have been engaged in  
all my life. And honestly, just now, I left out  
how bothered I am by the weather—  
unseasonably cool, dark, the earth rotting  
out of kilter. The latest polls show  
that 90% of Americans don't even want  
to have a country anymore. I don't want to start  
feeling *settled* again. To have something endless  
ripped right out of me at the end.  
Because someone was looking for a sermon.  
Because someone just wanted the facts.  
Because I spoke to you and felt the firmness.

# Two Poems

Joy Ladin

## Living in the Past

*San Francisco 1982–1992*

The views were what everyone had:

the hills, parades of paper dragons,  
the prison surrounded by sugar water.  
Tourists laughed in the crumbling showers.

Climate? Mild. No fear, no regret. Life  
stared like a lizard, blinking back  
the salt of our climaxes.

Outside, the epidemic spread.  
Ten years.  
We sipped champagne

from small black bottles, followed manicured paths  
between trees that had lost their bark  
and smelled like medicine. I wish

I'd kissed you then. You seemed distracted  
as we crossed the shell  
of the band that only played anthems.

It wasn't hot but you were covered  
in hard bright beads of sweat.  
The newly infected slumped on benches,

a garden of vanishing plants.  
You seemed to be staring at their shoes.  
I'm seeing stars, you said.

## **Wrestling**

*And he rose up that night, and took his two wives, and his two handmaids, and his eleven children, and passed over the ford of the Yabbok, and sent them across the river, along with his possessions. And Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.*

*Genesis 32:23–25*

You wish you'd stayed on the opposite shore.

Not that you're losing.  
Everything is on your side. Wings snap easily  
in the vice of your thighs

the angel gropes,  
searching out the sinew of light,  
the blessing you stole in disguise

from a father who could only love  
what he couldn't recognize. The angel  
threatens to kill; to die;

claims to be your father's God;  
the fear that took his eyes;  
your father himself, abashed and blind.

You wish you could let him go. Lose  
to keep him alive.  
Even that's a lie, dissolving

in the breaking light.  
He begs you to let him fly,  
feathers melting,

running down your thighs.

# Discussion Please, Not Coercion

*On repealing Don't Ask,  
Don't Tell*

**Bruce Fleming**

## **The repeal of the U.S. military's Don't Ask, Don't Tell (DADT)**

policy on September 20, 2011, brings to the forefront many basic theoretical questions about sexuality and sexual self-definition, and how these play out within the world of the military. Because the repeal of DADT was overwhelmingly a civilian political issue rather than primarily a military one—it was a campaign promise of President Obama—many of these questions, given urgency by the differences between the military and the civilian world, have gone unappreciated. Their attendant problems are not insuperable, but until we acknowledge and discuss them, as neither the civilian nor military worlds have shown themselves ready to do, they will fester and get worse.

### **Practical Implications**

The military is different from the civilian world it exists to serve. We cannot assume that laws or rules applicable to a liberal democracy can be transferred neatly to the military: the military is not a liberal democracy. Instead, it is more like a theocracy, a coercive structure that enforces its policies through punishment. In addition, it makes mandatory certain kinds of physical intimacy and frequently lacks a separate private sphere, a situation unlike the civilian world.

The repeal of DADT was seen by many as a vote for openness and for the ability to self-define sexuality. This it certainly was, yet it also substitutes one set of things that cannot be said for another. The fact of top-down coercion is not changed, just the things being coerced. Nor does repealing DADT do anything to loosen the myriad of military restrictions on speech and action related to gender and sexuality that are already in place, many of which are the result of the greater integration of women into all facets of the military in recent years. I offer this view as a “yes, but” corrective to the view prevalent among civilian activists that the repeal of DADT simply neutralizes

a negative and thus produces no problems of its own. This might be true in a liberal democracy, but it is not true in the coercive world of the military where the line between public and private is thin or non-existent. Rather than declaring such problems non-existent, as both the military itself and boosters of DADT repeal have tended to do, the military should be encouraging internal dialogue and discussion as the only hope of defusing them.

Because the military is a physical undertaking where the usual unit is the group, not the individual, there is no such thing as individual privacy in many military situations; physical activities are largely performed with others, and under orders. Some sub-groups of the military are equivalent to civilian offices, but many are more like athletic teams with their physicality and locker room intimacy. In general, physicality plays a larger role in the military than in most civilian organizations; for instance, the military polices the appearance of its members ruthlessly. Overweight military members can be discharged; everyone has to pass a PRT (Physical Readiness Test), and your superior can order you to get a haircut or change your earrings or take off a “showy” piece of jewelry.

What’s under the uniform counts too. Whatever the reality of warfare in this age of high-tech next-generation technology, the military’s self-image is still to a large degree based on admiration of a warrior culture of muscular force-wielders. The physical nature of the military enterprise means that servicemembers are much more aware of each others’ bodies than are co-workers in an office culture. In the Marine Corps, all the men know who can do the most pull-ups or run the fastest, and who has the biggest “guns” (biceps). Respect is given proportionate to physical strength; dress is maximized to ensure that men look “sharp” for other men. So some of the physicality of the military is what sociologists would call “homosocial” or “homoerotic.” All my students, indeed most servicemembers, love watching the glistening roided-out hulks of a movie like *300* hack each other to bits, as well as more restrained examples of homoerotic violence like the movie *Fight Club*. This sort of awareness of

other men is mission-enhancing. Typically it encourages men to try to out-perform each other, and to offer loyalty to high performers.

Part of the (paradoxical to outsiders) nature of this male locker-room-type homoeroticism is that acknowledging it destroys it: lack of articulation is its very nature, since it's a code of action rather than of words. One of the reasons DADT survived as long as it did—and why what preceded it was the rule that servicemembers could be asked about their sexual orientation and discharged for only one answer (an affirmative on homosexuality)—is arguably that the military doesn't want to acknowledge the homoeroticism implicit in its enterprise. To begin with, admitting this element is apparently difficult for many straight men, though it is at the basis of straight military worship of strong—which means muscular as well as charismatic—men. Additional points are given men in the military for known or assumed exploits with women; outsiders may disapprove of this form of bonding, but the fact is that men see other men who are sexually active with women as being worthy of admiration. If our project is to alter these attitudes, we should confront them, not just police them into silence or pretend they don't exist. I personally think it unlikely that these attitudes can be made to disappear by showering them with disapproval.

Another way that the military diverges from our civilian liberal democracy is that activities outside working hours in the military, including sexual ones, are also fair game for regulation—like any other activity by a military member that could “dishonor the uniform” or that is deemed “conduct unbecoming an officer.” The UCMJ, Uniform Code of Military Justice, used to make “sodomy” (non-vaginal penetration) a crime; this was nullified when DADT was repealed. So fans of heterosexual oral and anal sex benefited from this change too. But adultery is still an offense punishable by jail time or expulsion even if the guilty party's subordinates are not directly affected. The assumption, presumably, is that such actions by superiors will affect subordinates' morale and their willingness to follow orders.

The more specific issue for DADT was gay sexuality, but many of the military's most stringent policing policies are aimed squarely at heterosexuality and its expression. Indeed, the repeal of DADT is arguably a minor issue compared to those issues raised by the wholesale integration of women, which has created problems that remain similarly unacknowledged and unaddressed. You don't have to be a sexually deprived—much less depraved—straight male to be aware of an attractive woman working on your team, despite military uniforms' best efforts to desexualize women. The military teaches you not to react and perhaps even not to approach a woman: the control of speech and actions is just what DADT itself attempted to effect.

Current policing of what can be said stops short of forbidding, on pain of dismissal, a man from saying to someone, "I am heterosexual," whereas DADT made the comparable utterance for gays grounds for dismissal. But of course, few straight men say this; they just act on that fact, either verbally or physically. And current rules do punish almost any reference to male-female sexual attraction in the military. Sexual relations or even speech about sexuality with subordinates is "frat," fraternization; sexual relations within the same unit can be similarly policed.

Situations where sexual relations between fellow military members are allowed are narrowly circumscribed. During work hours in the military, or even outside them, depending on jobs and work relationships, a man is supposed to pretend he is not attracted to a woman even if he is; if he fails to do this he can be punished through jail time, reduction in rank, or discharge. Even being aware of the woman's femaleness and commenting on it can be perilous, in a way it is not with another man. He can compliment a male colleague's physique, large muscles, and general appearance. He cannot similarly compliment a woman's breasts or even, probably, tell her she looks good. With DADT repealed it's perhaps no longer acceptable for a man to give another a pat on the back, verbal or actual, for his workout ethic: such things might now be considered sexual in

nature, after all. Is a woman free to compliment a male colleague on his muscles if she is gay and hence giving a friendly collegial compliment rather than edging into sexual territory? Things have gotten complex.

Male-female relations in the military already were complex, even without female servicepersons present. A Navy LCDR informed faculty members of the Naval Academy attending a “Sexual Harassment Briefing” a few years ago that a sailor in an all-male squadron putting up a girlie picture that offended no one around him would still be guilty of “harassment” and of “creating a hostile work environment.” “The Navy is offended,” announced the LCDR. The coercion has changed flavor to protect women, even when absent, but that hasn’t changed the fact of coercion, which is expressed in institutional terms rather than in terms of individual freedoms.

In *Unfriendly Fire*, Nathaniel Frank looks at the militaries of five other countries and concludes that the effect of the removal of bans on out gays in the U.S. military would be minimal. Frank succinctly expresses the view I am suggesting is wrong, that the repeal of DADT is just the removal of a negative. Here’s Frank, in an interview on NPR, on December 7, 2010: “All it [repeal of DADT] really means is that you stop kicking out gay people: that you let them serve. There’s already gay people, in other words, in these militaries. It’s about whether you allow it, whether you acknowledge it and whether you allow gay and lesbian people to be honest.”<sup>1</sup> Gay people want to serve as gay people: now we allow it. It’s as simple as that.

But it isn’t. A question I was given, in 2011, during the question session following the video of the mandatory training at the U.S. Naval Academy—where I have been a professor for 25 years—made clear that the repeal of DADT does not in fact constitute a simple allowance of something that had hitherto been prohibited. What,

<sup>1</sup> “How Gay Soldiers Serve Openly Around the World,” *Fresh Air*, December 7, 2010, available at <http://www.npr.org/2010/12/07/131857684/how-gay-soldiers-serve-openly-around-the-world> (accessed October 20, 2012).

the officer who had raised his hand asked, would the Naval Academy do to accommodate midshipmen in a three- or four-bed room who were uncomfortable living with an openly gay roommate? Rooms at the Naval Academy include a shower, and roommates typically get dressed in front of each other, and the questioner suggested that for some people this would be as discomfiting as having someone of the opposite sex in a public restroom. The answer: nothing at all, since the Navy's policy now declares that sexuality is a non-issue.

Outside the military, those with this issue (leaving aside for the moment whether or not we approve of their having it) simply find a new roommate. For those in the military, this is not an option. Indeed most people I've talked to interpret the new set of rules as saying that any reference to gayness in the military is out of bounds, during work hours or off. One of my former students, now a Marine (and straight), told me he couldn't wait to "bust" the first man who made a negative comment about gays, or objected to having gay platoon mates. We might applaud my Marine for his politically correct views and his eagerness to embrace new regulations, but I think this is the wrong way to go—and there's every indication that this is the way the military is going. Instead, my Marine should call his men together and encourage them to talk it out. Have a laugh, practice ways to say "no" (or, for that matter, when it's ok to say "yes"), and encourage men with issues to speak to him. That's a far better and more productive way to go than to deny, against all rationality, that discomfort with sexual attention and situations, whether heterosexual or homosexual, is real.

Denying the problem is precisely what the military has repeatedly done. Instead of acknowledging problems created by including women and gays and of encouraging the defusion of difficulties through discussion, the military has reacted to potentially sexual situations by policing heterosexual males harder. The Navy's Sexual Assault Victim Intervention (SAVI) program has produced numerous briefs that I've sat through at the Naval Academy premised on there being a "victim" of sexual assault when an assault is claimed,

rather than an “alleged victim.” This clearly abandons the presupposition of “innocent until proven guilty.” Male midshipmen routinely tell me that they feel the assumption in these briefs is that all of them are potential and indeed probable rapists. The Annapolis *Capital Gazette* used the information obtained through a FOIA (Freedom of Information Act) request in 2009 to conclude that Academy justice was tilted toward women. The article, by Earl Kelly, begins: “In an apparent attempt to curb sexual abuse, the Naval Academy created a double standard that punished male midshipmen harsher than females from 2001 to 2006, according to reams of documents obtained by the *Capital*.”<sup>2</sup>

Unlike in the civilian world, close physical intimacy is not the most common way that sexuality enters into military situations. Gender, physicality, and even sexuality are fair game for bonding in the military, in a way they are not in the civilian world. And paradoxically, so is denying that this is so. Men in the military can be “counseled” and given a bad “fitrep” (fitness report) if they suggest that men will not, for example, be as likely to follow a woman—or perhaps now, a gay man—up the proverbial hill, that gender or sexual orientation play any role at all in the subjective building of bonds and the establishment of morale. Yet most military personnel would agree this plays a role. Masculine men, who not coincidentally are known as sexual powerhouses with women, typically engender greater loyalty than men considered less masculine. We might insist that women, gay men and gay women can be masculine too; still, the purpose of DADT is to allow gay men and women to be open about their sexuality, and it’s silly not to acknowledge that gay behavior, like much female behavior, is a hurdle to acceptance by many males. The same hurdle, for that matter, exists for small or slight men. Any of these particular characteristics can be compensated for by toughness, but better still, in this view, is to be large and tough—and heterosexual. It is not impossible

<sup>2</sup> Earl Kelly, “Academy Justice Was Tilted Toward Women,” *Capital Gazette*, May 17, 2009.

for a woman to inspire combat loyalty in her men, it's just exponentially more difficult.

No individual quality, certainly, need make leadership impossible, but some will clearly place leaders at a disadvantage—to an even greater degree than in the civilian world, where, as Malcolm Gladwell reports in *Blink*, a large proportion of Fortune 500 CEOs are tall men—58 percent over 6 feet, as opposed to 14.5 percent in the population as a whole.<sup>3</sup> Fair? Probably not. But a fact. There are fewer problems with open biases in the civilian world because people can quit or leave a place that treats them unfairly, and can more openly question superiors. None of these are options in the military.

The repeal of DADT has thus produced a situation in which a powerful institution that polices internally through top-down policies is now using that force to implement a policy supported perhaps primarily and most insistently by a minority: gays and lesbians. To this, the formerly marginalized minority can react in several ways: perhaps first by noting with satisfaction that turn-about is fair play. The oppression has been reversed, and the oppressors are now paying the price. The problem with this attitude is that the minority is still the minority and unit cohesiveness is shattered if the new victors crow too loudly or grind their former oppressors' noses in the dirt.

Another possible reaction is to deny validity to any objections to the new policies. Usually a comparison between the repeal of DADT and the forced racial integration of the U.S. Armed Services, mandated by President Harry S Truman, is used as a means of dismissing any objections to the repeal. Troops may well have been uncomfortable with the effects of forced racial integration, but they had to get over it.

<sup>3</sup> Malcolm Gladwell, "Why Do We Love Tall Men?" excerpt from *Blink*, available at [http://www.gladwell.com/blink/blink\\_excerpt2.html](http://www.gladwell.com/blink/blink_excerpt2.html) (accessed October 20, 2012).

The argument implies that any reason for sexual discomfort is as baseless as that produced by differences in skin color and in racial or ethnic backgrounds. However this need not be so, as servicepersons might well be uncomfortable for a valid reason. Considering the widely divergent social backgrounds and geographical areas that contribute to the enlisted corps of the military, or the overwhelmingly conservative officer corps, there are many persons in the service who do feel discomfort at physical intimacy with people who, in theory, could be sexually attracted to them. The “closed,” or all-male, ostensibly all-straight military could simply deny the existence of sexual situations, or punish any that arose; the “open” military of mixed genders and mixed sexual orientations ignores such situations at its peril, and cannot indiscriminately wield its former demands of discipline. We can argue this is a price worth paying for a greater good; however the civilian watch-dogs of the military seem bent on arguing that there is no price to pay at all.

It’s facile to make an easy parallel of skin color and sexual orientation, though this is one of the most frequent defenses of the lifting of DADT. I hear over and over, “they resisted integration, now they’re resisting gays.” What’s common between resistance to out gays and resistance to non-whites is, however, only the fact of resistance: we can’t assume on that basis alone that the two are comparable. And indeed they are not. Sexuality is understood as the underpinning of (the precise phrase is hotly disputed) actions, whereas skin color implies nothing besides itself. Once you accept the skin color, nothing else follows. But acceptance of a certain sexuality and hence the possibility of sexual attraction does imply something further: potential actions. This is true whether the sexual attraction is gay or straight, involving women or men.

This fact is surely at the basis of our continued societal division of public places where nudity or undress is tolerated such as locker rooms and bathrooms into gender-divided spaces, while we’ve long ago given up race-divided spaces for such things. The some-

what outmoded assumption is that gender division of such spaces eliminates the possibility of sexual actions. It was never true that it eliminated them completely, but surely it was a basic first step. Now we have greater public awareness of the fact that sexual orientation is less predictable from gender than most people thought. Recent events such as those at Penn State, as well as greater public awareness of the fact that a specific gender does not imply a specific sexual orientation, would logically imply a finer tuning of the rules for such places, though this creates so many problems it's unlikely to happen.

Still, some changes in this direction have been made already. Recently I volunteered to monitor "drown-proofing" for my fifth grade son at the local pool. The boys changed behind a strung-up sheet inside the locker room, not openly, and there had to be two fathers at all times, so that one could monitor the other or defend him against charges of improper interest or behavior. (The woman running the program said, "I have two words for you: Penn State.") I don't think separate bathrooms for out gays are in the offing; however, creating them would certainly be in keeping with the impulse that created separate-sex bathrooms to begin with, as well as the logical outcome of holding that gay is something people are: if you're gay, the proclivity to seek out your own gender for sexual purposes is always there.

DADT repeal has already caused re-thinking of the rationale of closed or private spaces in the military. The regulations at USNA have changed from requiring room doors in the dormitory to be open at a 90 degree angle if anyone of the other gender ("opposite sex") is visiting to requiring open doors if anyone not a roommate is present. As my students point out, this leaves unconsidered what the roommates may be up to among themselves. But at least it's acknowledging that possible sexual attraction (which used to be assumable from gender and now no longer is) is still the basis for our policing of private spaces. No mention, of course, is made any more of skin color as a determinant factor in such USNA regulations. Sexual orientation is not identical to, or even the same type of quality as,

skin color, so the assumption that the former can be as unpoliced as the latter in the military needs to be put to rest.

The net good of repealing DADT—retention of gay service-members and radical improvement of their quality of life in the military—is greater than the negatives it entails. But we are on the track for more problems if we continue to insist that there are no negative results at all. Instead we should be open about these and encourage their controlled expression so as to make it clear that they are not insuperable. Ignored, they will produce silent grouching; if servicemembers feel they are being forced to shut up, they will lose the “can-do” attitude that powers a lot of the military’s extraordinary achievement, that subjective feeling of trust and bonding that pushes people in uniform to super-human achievements on occasion.

### **Theoretical Considerations**

Apart from these practical implications, we should ask the larger theoretical question of why the military is so disapproving of sexuality within its ranks and so resistant to talking about it, preferring instead to try to pretend it isn’t there and forbidding all reference to it. Sexuality, as I have argued in *Sexual Ethics: Liberal vs. Conservative*, exists uncomfortably in an undefined middle realm between social and private.<sup>4</sup> Sexuality is amenable to ethical considerations only to the extent that it involves someone or something else beyond the individual: other people, or a principle. Liberal ethics are typically expressed in terms of other people; conservative ethics in terms of principles. Thus a liberal will typically disapprove of sexual actions if they hurt another, a conservative if they contravene an impersonal principle. Very social organizations, such as the military, resist anything that lessens control over its members. Sex, which is tantalizingly close to the social and involves other people in indi-

<sup>4</sup> Bruce Fleming, *Sexual Ethics: Liberal vs. Conservative* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2004), 1ff.

vidual ways, seems a provocation to highly social organizations that impose constant attention upon their members. I believe that it was the highly social nature of Freud's nineteenth-century Austria that led to his conviction, in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, that all societies are fueled by sexual repression. It's not true of all groupings, just the most tightly-wound, of which the U.S. military is certainly the best current example.

Sexual relations thus construct what I call "bubbles" for social structures—these are unproblematic when they are kept transitory and occur in off-duty hours, as soldiers and sailors have known for centuries. It's not as if there was no sex for the military before the mid-twentieth century; it's just that it largely took place off stage and so did not threaten the structure. Now it's clearly there as an issue, so we have to accept talking about it as a way of dealing with it, not just referring it to more intensive policing.

The DADT policy itself was typically understood by those who opposed it as a repressive one enacted upon gay people by an institutionalized straightness that refused to tolerate Otherness. The fight for its repeal was thus seen as a salutary, if rare, success for the marginalized against a hegemonic position of the empowered—and for many of the proponents of repeal, a victory sweeter for that reason. The terms in which the fight to repeal DADT, and indeed its imposition, are usually framed are thus those of a thinker influential in articulating relationships about power and sexuality, Michel Foucault.

In numerous works including *The Birth of the Clinic*, *Discipline and Punish*, and *The Order of Things (Words and Things)*, Foucault suggested that virtually all attempts by the more powerful set of actors, however these are defined, to interact with the less powerful will be an act of domination. Most particularly for Foucault, this domination is expressed in words, in an act of naming. At his most extreme, Foucault can be understood as saying that no attention offered by the more powerful partner—say the sane to the insane—can

be merely neutral or even benevolent; it must always be an act of subjugation.

Saying is not a neutral act, as anyone caught in a socially sticky situation knows. Sexual self-identification is not a neutral act either: the act of labeling or naming changes one's relation to the world. Repealing DADT has thus meant that the military has had to alter its own labels. Namely, that homosexuality is not something people do, which can be policed, but is something people are, which cannot be. According to the Foucauldian terms of the debate, if the powerful use a term for the less powerful, it's oppression. If the less powerful use it of themselves, it's appropriating the power position, and hence a good thing. Thus the repeal of DADT lifted the ban, in Foucauldian terms, on the articulation of gayness by gays, restoring to them the power position of self-naming.

Yet this action assumes that the act of self-naming invokes a coherent and meaningful entity, here gayness or homosexuality. Thus the repeal of DADT has committed the military to a theoretical position it had not adopted before. Namely, to the position that sexuality is an essence rather than a pattern of actions.

Conservatives, who tend to be the majority in the military, continue to insist that homosexuality is a choice, a "life-style"; while it is largely a liberal response to insist that it is an essence just as real as heterosexuality, and just as good. Conservatives tend to insist that the "natural" position is desire for, or at least copulation with, the opposite sex, usually for the purpose of producing children; copulation with the same sex (as well as, usually, various non-reproductive sexual acts) are not in line with God's laws. Following Augustine, who held that evil was only the privation of good and not an essence in itself, deviation from the naturally intended form of sex is merely deviation, not an essence. And so conservatives tend to refuse to dignify homosexuality as an essence. Someone "is" not gay, he or she merely acts that way—and should stop. I have argued in my book *Why Liberals and Conservatives Clash* that conservative ethics are

always expressed in terms of right and wrong actions; liberal ethics are expressed in terms of the actors.<sup>5</sup>

Foucault's fundamental claim in his *History of Sexuality* is that in the late nineteenth century a classification of what people did (e.g. "sodomy") became a distinction of who people are. Homosexuals and homosexuality were thus, according to Foucault, invented, an act of naming inflicted on gays by straights. The creation of the concept of homosexuality re-draws the map of sexuality, essentializing the "Other" conceptually. Foucault's contribution to the argument was to return the compliment, to regard heterosexuality as equally possessing such an essence, turning it into an "Other" with respect to the now-essentialized homosexuality. It is difficult not to see Foucault's point: turn-about is fair play.

The theoretical position implicit to DADT was that sexual orientation was irrelevant so long as no action occurred. Indeed, DADT refused to take a position on the question of orientation by mandating that a question asked in essentialist terms (such as "are you gay?") would never be asked; it was only actions that were policed. This stance even produced the diverting spectacle of a one-strike exception, quickly baptized the "Queen for a Day" clause, that a single act of homosexual sex, if not part of a visible larger pattern, was declared an aberration and not evidence of sexual orientation.

Thus the repeal of DADT itself re-poses the theoretical question of whether homosexuality, or indeed heterosexuality, is a set of actions or an essence, an "orientation," or something either stronger than this, or weaker (a "lifestyle," as conservatives insist on calling it). Most attempts to define heterosexuality, following Foucault, do consider it an essence. Queer Theory added the final stage of reasoning. It noted that heterosexuality allows of degrees, as well as of slippages between self-identification and identification from the outside. Considerations of heterosexuality from the perspective of

<sup>5</sup> Bruce Fleming, *Why Liberals and Conservatives Clash* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

gay men and women have assumed it to be an essence, but a deeply flawed one.

In *Sexual Ethics*, I argue that heterosexuality only seems an essence from the outside, not from the inside.<sup>6</sup> Thus the military's repeal of DADT, inevitable as it may have been for political reasons, adopts a view of sexuality that will continue to pose problems for heterosexual (especially male) service members. I propose heterosexuality to be closer to Foucault's pre-modern series of actions that tend toward a default pattern (I am straight because I have sex with females) rather than the essentializing view that is at the heart of Queer Theory. It was never straight men who defined themselves as participating in (if this is the right phrase) an essence: instead, they essentialized gayness. This in turn essentialized straightness—only to show that, as the dominant paradigm, “straight” wasn't very good at being an essence. We can always see something as coherent more clearly when it's silhouetted against a larger thing to which it serves as an alternative.

Queer Theory, in a word, gets heterosexuality wrong. Heterosexuality seen from within is not an essence any more than homosexuality was when it was declared to be so in the nineteenth century. To be sure, it may seem to those looking on from the outside that sexuality is an essence, one, moreover, that attempts to enjoy the power position whose identification is central to any Foucauldian analysis. But this is not at all what life feels like to the straight male who spends most of his time trying to deal with the threat of his own inadequacy. From the outside he may be seen as projecting power, but to himself he seems to spend his time proving that he is worthy—of his own manhood. Sometimes he succeeds, but then he has to prove it again, and again, and again. And that means, contrary to Foucault's formulation, masculinity is not most fundamentally defined (as Eve Sedgwick and other gender theoreticians have

<sup>6</sup> This is a summary of my consideration of “heterosexuality from the inside” in *Sexual Ethics*, 69ff.

assumed) by “object choice,” such as through a relationship with women.<sup>7</sup> A straight male’s definition as a man, and as a heterosexual, is not only with respect to something outside himself, but also with respect to something inside it: his internalization of the views of other men.

Heterosexuality is about being a sort of man among men. And part of the understanding of men with men is also related to our understanding of how other men relate to others. Sexuality is not irrelevant, even if our relationship with other men is not itself explicitly sexual. The more intimate and physical the relationships between men are, the more relevant these considerations become.

When the military could pretend that sexuality was not an issue within its ranks—with no out gays, and with women separated from men in identifiable units like the WACS and WAVES—it could simply announce that there was to be no sex between military personnel within the same jurisdiction, and that sex, assumed to be heterosexual, could take place with no restrictions off-duty. Now, there are women alongside men in almost all units and communities, and the once-notorious bordellos that began outside the gates of many military bases overseas are shuttered as unbecoming the U.S. military. The result is a blurring of the distinctions between duty and off-duty. After the repeal of DADT, the presence of out gays means we can no longer assume, even for practical purposes, that all sexual relations are between different genders. Distinctions blur even further.

With boundaries blurred, the situation is now more complex. There’s no down time: you can’t let it all hang out with your own sex and clean up your act for the opposite one, because it’s no longer opposite and you don’t know whom you might be offending. The military has created a pressure pot that is more volatile than the old, and responded with more bands of iron around the pot. Since the military can coerce, it can ensure compliance with an unrealistic set

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of this, see *Sexual Ethics*, 59.

of demands. What it cannot ensure is willing compliance, the basis of good morale, and hence of effective performance.

In sum, the military now puts people who are likely to be sexually attracted to each other in situations far more intimate than civilian offices, and then orders them to pretend that this attraction does not exist. This is unfair to all concerned. As a society we have decided that women and out gays will serve in the military; we must be open about the problems this entails. Not talking about them only makes them worse, and produces a situation even more unfair to those in the military than it already is. Those having problems with the situation of integrated women and out gays are punished for being the problem themselves. We can emphasize the social good of integrating women and gay people into the military without, as we are currently doing, denying that there are any drawbacks to this policy.

The military must admit these issues, and point out to troops that they are the result of societal decisions and changes that cannot be reversed. Troops should be encouraged to talk and joke about these issues, not punished for doing so. Talking about what must be doesn't change it, but it does help people to understand it.

# Grief

**Margot Schilpp**

In the kitchen, the heads of lettuce are lonely.  
They wait  
in the dark for your hands to press against their ears.

The corn unzips  
its silk, a striptease with tassels just for you.  
You never use

the seasoned iron skillet that came from your mother,  
never twist  
the stove's knobs anymore. In your kitchen, flames

are only ghosts  
of flames, cold shapes shivering in echo or pantomime.  
Against the drain,

the sink's sponge is a hard, green oblong, and  
a residue  
of bubbles climbs the stainless steel. In your kitchen,

no one spreads  
out dough with the rolling pin, no one drops cookies  
on a sheet.

No measuring spoons rattle. All the spices stay  
in their own  
quaint jars, quiet and sealed. The teakettle's whistle is

a memory  
ramping up in the humid air. In your kitchen the potholders  
and placemats

and aprons and dishrags sit limp. The dip tray stays  
in the cupboard.  
The cutting board could just as well have stayed a tree.



# **An Attack of Suffocation**

**Brian Ross**

**“Maybe I *am* a son of a bitch,” I whisper, as gray-blue smoke streams from my dry lips.**

Julia is frowning at me because the cigarette I’m smoking was her last. I didn’t ask for permission. Her body is curled up in a knot against the headboard and her crimson fingernails are digging into the blue bedspread. She pulls a throw pillow over her face and snarls something indecipherable.

I take another drag of the cigarette and I kill the lights. I don’t know where my watch is, I haven’t seen it in two days, and there are no clocks in her place. Julia doesn’t believe in keeping time.

I stab out the spent cigarette into the tiny pool of brown liquid at the bottom of a white coffee mug that sits on the antique dresser. Julia has pulled the pillow away and her wavy brown hair is spilling across her angular face. The first time she brought me back here, to this barren little rental home in the middle of North Jersey, a hot day in what was probably August, I asked her about the absence of clocks.

“Time has little or no value for me,” she said that morning.

“Which is it?”

“What?”

“Little or no value? Which is it?”

She looked away from me, out the window, at the motionless elm leaves held captive by the muggy air. “When I decide, I’ll let you know,” she said.

Now she pushes back her hair with delicate fingers and wraps a white sheet around her head like a cowl. The slightest trace of a smile appears and vanishes quickly. “Veer in some trouble, no?” she asks, using another one of her mocking accents, and I gravely nod. “The police will be searching for someone vitting your description. What vill you do?”

I shrug and sit on the corner of the bed. My shirt is open and my bare chest is exposed. I run my fingers across the soft, cool bedspread,

and I can feel Julia's small feet buried beneath the fabric. "I don't know," I say. "Either they'll get me or they won't."

A guttural laugh from the black depths of her chest. "Brilliant," Julia says, softly kicking at my abdomen through the bedspread. "*La police, ne t'a pas encore trouvé?*"

It's always something with Julia. This week, it's everything French. I rub my hand across the stubble on my chin and examine her face. "What will you do, sweetheart?"

She sighs and her eyes move toward the window, where the curtains sway softly in the breeze. "Europe, possibly. I've been thinking about moving to Europe for some time now."

"Anywhere in particular? Europe's a big place, baby. I went to London once. I bumped into Albert Finney in the middle of the street. Right smack into Albert Finney, and you know what he said?"

She looks down at the box of smokes. It's still empty. "You finished my cigarettes and I think you *are* a son of a bitch."

I shrug.

"Just Europe," she says. "I've always liked the ring of it. Europe."

"Maybe you just don't want to tell me where you're going."

"Maybe."

I stand up from the bed and move to the window. Outside, people are doing the things that mark them as productive members of society, things like mowing lawns and walking dogs. One shirtless guy is tilling a small garden. His hairy back is slicked with sweat. The breeze is delicate on my dry lips. "I could find you anywhere," I say.

Julia is facing the other direction, smiling in profile, never more beautiful than when she's not looking directly at me. "Sticks and stones."

**My hands are on Julia's small shoulders, gently drawing her back and then releasing her. Her slender fingers encircle the chains that support this playground swing. "Police cars and movie houses,"** Julia says, ending what seemed an interminable silence.

“Hmmm?”

I cannot see her face, only her hair as it flutters behind the pendulum of her body, but I imagine she is smiling right now. “That’s where I spent most of my childhood, it seems. It’s funny, I guess. Whenever I was in that cool, dark theater, I rooted for the cops. But when I was in the back seat of their car, well, that was a different story.”

I wrap my hands around her hands, which still cling to the chains, and the rhythmic sway of the swing slows to a halt. “How about now?” I ask. “Ever root for the cops now?”

“Don’t be foolish.”

There is no one else on the playground and the sky is ruddy above the gray-brown brick wall of the school. This place, the kind built as part of the W.P.A., looks very old now, but somehow still dignified. “You never just played in places like this?”

“Nah. Not until my friends and I were older, and that wasn’t really playing.”

“You never—what do people do here?” I inhale and the smell of the grass on the nearby field fills my lungs. Children played and sang and ran and spat and bullied and learned to fight here. “What,” I say, “what do people do in places like this one? I don’t know, frolic? You never frolicked?”

“I definitely missed all the frolicking. We did come here from time to time in high school, though. We needed a secluded place to smoke cigarettes and drink the whiskey we stole from our parents.” She laughs, and I try to imagine the private memory she has unearthed.

“So neither of us spent much time on playgrounds,” I say, in what amounts to a half-whisper.

“I’m glad,” Julia says with a distant sigh. “All this grass would’ve made me sad.”

**Nico has ketchup at both corners of his mouth. It’s a bright** crisp Sunday in April, bright enough that I have to wear sunglasses,

and the lot is empty save for Nico's Cadillac and my stolen Plymouth, which is parked about thirty yards away. Inside, Julia is reading a dog-eared French paperback and smoking cigarettes. I don't like it when she smokes in the car. She doesn't ask for permission, either.

The wind kicks up and I feel the collar of my brown corduroy blazer ripple as I study the ketchup at the corners of Nico's mouth. Nico looks at me, then at Julia in the car, then back at me. "That little number in the car, she's with you?"

"Yeah."

"You two serious?"

"Not sure I know what that means, Nico."

Nico rolls his dark eyes as I turn my back on the wind to light another cigarette. My collar flares again. "You love her?"

"Is that so important?"

"Jesus." Nico shakes his head. "Some things change," he says. "Some things don't."

I smile and look back at the statue of Julia in the car. She's wearing black sunglasses and hasn't moved since I stepped out of the Plymouth.

Rubbing the sleeve of his windbreaker across his face and looking down, Nico sees the ketchup on the fabric. "Were you going to tell me about that?"

I grin and suck my cigarette to the filter. "What do you need me to do, Nico?"

"Simple," he says. "One day's work. There's a house with a couple of guys inside. These two guys, they don't matter. You understand me? What matters is that these guys took something valuable from some other people who do matter. A suitcase. I need you to bring that suitcase to me."

"What about the guys?"

"You know what happens to people who don't matter."

"How messy do you want it?"

"I hire you because you're not afraid to make things extra

messy.” He hands me a scrap of paper with an address. “Do this for me and all debts are forgiven. Plus two thousand on top.”

“Forgiven plus two?”

“You heard right.”

**After we leave Nico standing in the lot with the ketchup now on his jacket,** I tell Julia I’d like to buy her lunch. She shrugs disinterestedly and impatiently searches the car radio for a good song.

“Are we in love, Julia?”

“I don’t know. How would we know if we are?”

“I don’t know.”

“What do you think?”

“I don’t know what to think. You?”

“I think we’re in love but I don’t think we like each other very much.”

I roll down the window and watch the houses fly by us in a torrent of front doors, red and white and brilliant yellow.

“You know why I wear sunglasses?” I ask.

“So other people can’t see your eyes.”

I take off the glasses and glance over at Julia. “How did you know that?”

She smiles and leans back in the seat, satisfied at last with the tune she has found. “Same reason everybody else wears them.”

**After lunch, we sleep together in her rented bungalow and** when we finish she stands up and pulls a weathered gray sweatshirt over her smooth white body. “That salad was delicious,” she says. She’s walking around the bedroom and examining her own belongings with what looks like a sense of detachment, as though she is the visitor in this place.

I lean back against the headboard and exhale deeply. The bright afternoon sun is held at bay by the curtains. It is beginning to get warm in here and I’d like to open the window, but it’s too great a distance

from the bed. I am too weak. "That's all you have to say?"

She puts on my sunglasses and twirls, her brown hair trailing just a split second behind her lopsided smile. "I never make love on an empty stomach," she says.

**We sit on a bench staring out at the Hudson River. On the other side, the skyscrapers stand like sentinels with nothing to guard. People swirl around us, talking on phones, taking photographs of the skyline, discussing plans. A light rain begins to fall, not enough to force us to seek cover, but just so that I can savor the drops on my face and hands.**

"Did you ever think about going clean?" she asks. She motions toward the buildings on the far side of the river. "You know, joining society, maybe even taking a job over there?"

I laugh. "Of course not."

She smiles. "It pleases me to hear that. I wouldn't want you to." She sighs. "I've seen what it does to people."

I touch her hand, mixing the drops of rain on my fingertips with those on hers. "But what about us? Are we really any different?"

"Of course we are."

"How do you know?"

She takes a deep breath and looks back at the buildings. I watch her beautiful profile, the slow creep of the smile across her porcelain face. "When you used to go to the movies as a kid, did you think the characters on the screen were real? Did you think they were alive?"

I laugh again. "No. Of course I didn't."

"But how did you know?"

"It's not the same thing, Julia. Not the same thing at all."

"Yes, it is." The smile disappears from her face for just an instant, then, in a burst, it returns. "Come on, you can buy me an ice cream cone."

I wrap my arm around her shoulder. "Why would I want to do a thing like that?"

“So you can ask for a bite and I can slam it into your nose, just like in the movies.”

**The last time I smoked a joint was over two years ago and I am** not about to begin again tonight, but that does not stop Julia. She sits on the couch, legs crossed, with an ashtray on her lap. I’m on the floor with my back propped up against the couch, the back of my head just touching her bare right foot, and the smoke, bitter and silvery in the dim light of the room, is beginning to bother my eyes and my lungs.

“I’m going to open a window,” I say, although I do not move.

“No.” A great exhale. “*Il fait trop froid* and I don’t want the neighbors smelling this.”

“Baby, I can barely breathe in here.”

She shrugs and takes another drag.

Shafts of street light are falling through the thin slits between the blinds, illuminating Julia’s face in a series of sharp angles.

“Baby, just how old are you, anyway?”

“Does it matter?”

I turn back to the dark, silent television screen. “Probably not.”

“So, why ask?” She takes another drag and carefully ashes into the tray. “Either I’m younger and you get off on that, or I’m older and you get off on that. And what if we’re exactly the same age, what then?”

“Nobody is exactly the same age.”

She laughs. “I suppose not. And there’s no fantasy in that case, is there?”

“This isn’t about a fantasy.”

“Sure it is. It’s a fantasy about two people who are exactly the same age.”

“But we’re not the same age.”

“We can be. We are now.”

“But I know we’re not,” I say.

“That doesn’t matter, now does it?”

We sit in silence for a long time while Julia slowly works on the joint. When I look back up at her, I half expect that the light on her face will have shifted, but it’s artificial, it’s from a street lamp, and her face is there, still lit in the same sharp angles.

“What words do you like?” she finally asks.

I shrug.

“Words, words, words,” Julia says. “I think I really like the word *feign*.”

“Feign? Why?”

She finishes the joint and rubs it out in the ashtray. She cups the tray in both hands and stares at it for a moment. “Well, it’s supposed to be a synonym for fake, but it’s really not. When you fake a smile, there’s something selfish involved. When you feign one, it’s, I don’t know, it’s not for your benefit, it’s somehow, I don’t know, somehow altruistic. When you feign, you’re definitely doing it for the sake of others.”

She hands me the ashtray and I place it on the coffee table.

“Julia, are you doing something for my benefit? Is that what you’re trying to tell me?”

“Let’s go to sleep,” she whispers.

**Shortly before dawn, Julia’s wispy breath on my chest rouses me.** Her eyes are wide, and I sense that she has been watching me sleep for quite some time. “We never really say anything, do we?” she asks. “About ourselves. We never really tell each other anything.”

I caress her soft cheek with my right thumb. It glides down to her upper lip, then down across her mouth, resting on her chin. “I thought that’s what you liked about this.”

She closes her eyes. “No,” she says. “That’s not it. That’s not it at all.” She opens her eyes, and for just a moment, possibly in the shifting light of the dawn, they seem as though they’ve changed shade. “You’ve never told me anything about where you’re from or

any part of your life before now. You've never once talked about your parents."

I press my lips to her cool forehead, then softly to the bridge of her nose. "What's there to say? I'm not one to blame everything on my upbringing."

She grins. "Nor am I. I blame a continuing erosion of society's value system. Entropy's a real motherfucker."

"Are you never serious?"

"Why should I be?"

"It would certainly be a change."

Julia sighs and rests the back of her left hand on her forehead. "What's the point? One day, I'll be dead. We both will. That's the time to be serious. Until then, I plan on trafficking in flippancy."

"Good luck."

Her lips find mine, then move up my cheek toward the base of my left ear. Her breath is cool on my sensitive skin. "Tell me about them."

"There isn't much," I whisper, before allowing my voice to gain a bit of strength. "My father, he killed himself when I was eight. Shortly thereafter, my mother started going crazy by degrees." Julia's eyes grow large and her mouth quivers a bit. I touch my right index finger to her lips. "She remarried and went west. I haven't heard from her in over a decade," I say.

Her soft kiss on my left shoulder. "How did he do it?"

"Who?"

"Don't stall."

I turn my face away and look at the white wall above us. "Shot-gun blast to the face," I whisper. "Charming, isn't it?"

"My god." Her left hand cups across my right cheek and gently turns my face back to hers. "My god. Why?"

"The why, the why, the why." I close my eyes and allow her to gently stroke my throat and upper chest. Her touch is rhythmic. I let it go on for what feels like a long time. "That I never did quite figure

out. I was only eight at the time. He didn't leave a note and I was too young to notice any real unhappiness."

"That's awful. I'm so sorry."

I open my eyes and look at hers. "It's funny that the detail I remember most, the one that stays with me, more than his hair color or aftershave smell or the sound of his voice, is that he did it on a Saturday morning. He just woke up one Saturday morning and drove to his office—he was a lawyer—and he just killed himself. Nobody ever knew why. Nobody even talked about it much afterwards. I never knew if it was a snap decision, or if it had been something he'd planned on for a long time."

Julia kisses my cheek and drapes her left arm across my chest.

"Sometimes," I say, "sometimes I like to think that he didn't plan it at all. I like to think that he just went to work one day, sat down at his cluttered desk and realized that it was Saturday, that he wasn't supposed to be there on a Saturday, that he never worked a Saturday in his life, that something in his life had unraveled to the point that he didn't even know what day it was anymore, and the gravity of that was just too much for him. Knowing that, realizing that, he had no choice. He had to do it."

Julia's arm tightens around my chest, and I touch her right shoulder.

"I'd like to believe that," I say, "but that theory, while comforting, doesn't explain why the hell he kept a shotgun at his law office."

She nuzzles into my face, and she is weeping very softly. "You're going to kill those men tomorrow, aren't you?"

"It's already tomorrow, baby. And if I can avoid that, I will," I say. "But it is a possibility. Does that frighten you?"

She lifts her head and wipes her eyes. She props up her chin with her right palm. "No," she says softly. "It's not a crime to kill those men if they're already dead."

"I don't understand," I say, looking into her eyes. I think now that they have changed shade.

"Yes, you do," Julia whispers. "You just don't know it yet."

**The Plymouth is parked a block away from the house with**

orange aluminum siding. My cold palms are on the wheel and Julia is in the back seat, where I made her sit after we parked. I am fourteen minutes early.

“I could come in with you.”

In the rear view mirror, she looks very young behind those black sunglasses. I know that bringing her along was a mistake, but she gave me no other option. She doesn't ask for permission. I shake my head and she flops back against the seat. “I don't think,” she says, pulling a pack of cigarettes from her hip pocket, “that you appreciate me at all.”

I turn around and face her. “Julia, this is dangerous. These are the facts: there are men in there with a black suitcase and they won't want to part with it. If I let you go in there with me, you might be killed. The fact is that I might be killed, regardless.”

Julia lights the cigarette and blows a cloud of smoke into my eyes. “Nietzsche says facts don't exist, only interpretations.”

“Good for him.” I turn around and remove the piece from the glove box. I feel the weight of it. “Julia, never take advice from dead people.”

She leans over the seat and rolls down the passenger window, angrily flicking the cigarette out onto the street. We stare at each other for a moment, then she slaps me on the left cheek, knocking my sunglasses askew. “So what? We just ignore everything that came before us? Every dead thinker's ideas are worthless?”

I calmly fix my glasses before checking the rounds in the gun. “Unless Nietzsche is going to kick in the front door of that house, I don't really think his opinion matters right now.” Julia settles back into the seat. She uses her lower lip to blow air up toward her forehead—the act of a child. “These philosophers of yours aren't living our lives, are they, Julia? What could they possibly know about us?”

“And what do you know? What do you know about us? Please, please tell me.”

The smile on my mouth feels grim. “I know that we can't last,

because you won't let us."

Julia laughs. "You know nothing. You're a criminal."

"We're both criminals, baby," I whisper. "I'm just more honest about it."

I gently close the car door and make my way toward the orange house, my heavy footfalls drowning the sound of Julia spitting curses at me in French through the rolled up driver window.

**The front door is locked but, predictably, the two men who have Nico's suitcase have left the back door unlocked and slightly ajar.** I slowly edge it open with the tip of the piece. Somewhere, deep within this house, Jim Morrison is singing faintly. The inside of the house smells of stale food and old, wet newspaper. This place, it tastes of ash.

Softly, softly I am walking across the kitchen, toward the dining room, which connects to a dim living room. Someone is reclining on the couch, watching television without sound. She is young, hair pulled back. When I reach the dining room, I see that the girl is maybe seventeen. She has not seen me.

I sense the movement to my right even before I hear one of the bedroom doors off the dining room click open. This first man, thick and bearded, steps in front of me and I react, fast. A burst of thunder and his left kneecap disappears in a cloud of smoke and powdered bone, a shower of crimson. He tries to cry out. I can see the agony rippling across his creased features. Behind him, at the periphery of my vision, the girl on the couch snaps to life. Falling backward to the floor, the man's head strikes corner of the dining room table. I fire again, first into his chest, then his throat, and move toward the living room.

The girl is shrieking. The girl is wailing. On the coffee table before her is a semiautomatic pistol, the black suitcase, a stack of old magazines, and an old rotary phone.

More movement and I turn but it's too late, he is already on top

of me, too close to fire. We crash to the floor and he strikes me in the face. My gun is pinned under my leg. The blows smart. Salty blood pools at the back of my throat.

The girl is shrieking louder and the rotary phone begins to ring.

I backhand him across the jaw and free the gun, smashing the butt across the bridge of his nose. Blood cascades down onto my face and he and the girl are screaming in unison. I smash him in the face again, and he rolls off of me, clutching at the place where his nose was, while I quickly regain my feet.

Standing over him, straddling him, I look over to the girl. She is balled up on the couch, looking directly at me and the rotary phone rings a third time.

“Do it,” the second man says, spitting up blood and bits of broken tooth. “You win.”

“Shut up,” I say, my breath weak, looking back at the girl. She stops screaming, frozen on the couch.

“I know you,” the man on the floor murmurs. “Everybody knows you.”

“Who am I?” The tide of blood is rising at the back of my throat.

“You’re Nico’s guy, everybody knows that.”

“I’m nobody’s guy.” I fire twice into the place where his face used to live.

The girl on the couch, she is trembling and I put up my free hand to calm her, to slow down my own breathing. Something is wrong, because she’s extending her right hand.

The telephone rings a seventh time.

The girl’s hand is creeping toward the table. Maybe the phone, maybe the gun, maybe the suitcase. Maybe the goddamned magazines.

“Don’t do it, baby!” I point the gun at her.

Her eyes, large and wet, fix on mine. In those eyes there is something innocent and something knowing. Something.

“Please,” I say, “please don’t.”

Her hand is hovering above the table, just above the gun and the ringing telephone. She is sobbing now. The hand begins to descend.

    Holding my breath, I close my eyes.

**The water filling the basin in Julia's bathroom is scalding my hands** but it does little to remove the blood. The water is so hot that the mirror is fogging and I can feel beads of sweat forming on my hairline as I scrub harder and harder at my palms. It is very difficult to breathe inside this bathroom. The steam chokes me.

    Julia leans against the white doorway molding with a look on her face that I find difficult to catalogue. She is very still and her eyes are fixed on my red palms.

    "Are you just going to stand there, Julia?"

    She says nothing and her eyes never move from my hands, which shake from the heat of the water and the seeming lack of air in my lungs.

    "You could help me, you know?"

    Julia blinks and smiles. "*Je vous aurais bien aide, mais je ne vous aime pas.*"

    The blood finally starts to drip from my hands onto the wet basin, pink streaks trailing down, down, down. As they mix with the hot soapy water and spin down the drain, I think about how water circles in the opposite direction in the southern hemisphere, one of many facts I am supposed to believe, sight unseen.

    "Besides," Julia purrs, "you don't need my help. You never have."

**Cleaning the inside of the car takes nearly an hour. When I finish,** I toss the bloodied rags into a black garbage bag and open the trunk. Inside is the black suitcase I removed from the house. I pull the suitcase out of the trunk and drop in the garbage bag. When I slam the trunk closed, I look around the neighborhood but nobody is in sight. All the windows on the adjacent houses are closed. People

are either not at home or they are locked inside. I tell myself that all of this, not just whether or not I am seen by a neighbor, makes very little difference.

**Inside, I place the black suitcase on the kitchen table and take** off all my clothes, placing them into another black garbage bag. The bathroom mirror is still coated with a thin layer of condensation. I turn on the cold water in the basin and splash it over my face, rub it into my eyes. When I mat dry my face with a powder blue hand towel, I trace the first three letters of a word onto the foggy glass, then think better of it and rub away the moisture with the back of my left hand.

Julia is sprawled out on the living room couch reading one of her French paperbacks. An unlit cigarette dangles from the left corner of her mouth. She lowers the book and looks at me without a hint of real interest. "I'm truly sorry about before," she says in a flat tone. "Do you have a light?"

**In the kitchen, Julia yells something about making dinner, but** I can tell that she has no interest in food. I sit on the couch in the living room and stare at the lifeless television screen. I know she is thinking about the black suitcase.

Julia walks in from the kitchen and looks at me and I already know what she is going to ask. "No," I say.

"Why not?"

"It's bad news, baby. You know that."

"So what do we do instead?"

I clear my throat, arch my back and finger the white blinds behind the sofa. From this angle, the world is upside down and the sky outside Julia's window is in the place I'd normally find the ground.

"Let's go away," I say. "We could get married."

"Marriage? You're serious?"

"People do it all the time, baby."

"People do lots of things."

“You won’t even consider it?”

She pads back into the kitchen without a reply.

Outside Julia’s window, a tiny plastic airplane crawls on its stomach across the bright blue ground.

**The next morning Julia and I meet Nico in a different parking**

lot. I stand very close to him, my knuckles turning white as I grip the suitcase. “There was a girl, Nico. Inside the house, there was a girl.”

“Hey, it happens,” he says.

“No, Nico. It doesn’t happen. It doesn’t.”

“What do you want to do? File a grievance?”

“You never said anything about a girl, Nico.”

“I’m really sorry, pal. I really am.”

“Not good enough.”

“Hey, that’s life, brother. This is a zero-sum game. Somebody has to lose so that I can win.”

“You?”

“You too, brother.”

The hand holding the suitcase begins to tremble and I find myself desperate for a cigarette, a drink, something, anything. Nico smiles and takes the suitcase from my right hand. Into my left, he places a thick white envelope. Trembling, I tuck the envelope into the inside breast pocket of my navy blazer and Nico shakes my hand. He turns away without a word.

After we remove the license plates and dump the Plymouth, Julia and I take a stolen Chevrolet to a diner because we both want omelets. As I drive, I have to roll down the window to let air into the car.

**Inside the diner, in our booth, I realize that nearly everything**

in a diner is made of glass. There are huge plate glass windows to see both in and out of. The doors are plate glass. The interior walls are lined with mirrors. Everywhere you look you can see yourself

amongst other people and they can see you. Even people outside can see you.

You can never be alone in a diner.

“We could make a movie, you know,” Julia says.

Those mirrored walls are moving toward me now.

“The two of us. Jean-Luc Godard says that all you need to make a movie is a girl and a gun.”

Images of myself, inching closer and closer.

“You’re sweating,” she says, passing me her napkin and I dry my damp forehead.

“I can’t,” I say. “I can’t breathe.” My right hand finds the booth’s plate glass window and it is cold to the touch of my warm fingertips. On the other side of the window, out in the parking lot, a woman opens the rear door of her Ford and places a very small little girl into a stroller. The fabric lining the stroller seat is patterned with ice cream cones. Scoops of orange and brown and green atop those yellow-brown waffle jobs. The woman closes the car door and lovingly touches her daughter’s nose.

“Maybe we should go,” Julia says.

“Where?”

Her eyes widen. “I don’t know. Maybe we’ll get the hell out of here and start something entirely new. Maybe I will marry you someday.”

I sip my water. My hands are shaking and my breathing is shallow. Julia clasps my hand. “Well, what do you think?”

I force a smile. “Sure. Let’s do it.”

“Hey,” she says, “you never told me what Albert Finney said when you ran into him in the middle of the road.”

“You never asked.”

“Well, now I’m asking.”

“He grabbed me by the shoulder, looked me square in the eye and said, ‘Look out for that fucking Jaguar.’”

She grins and lifts her menu. I stagger out of the booth and tell

her that I need to use the men's room. As I walk away, passing image after image of myself, an infinite repetition of me, I look back to see if she watches me go, but her head never turns around. I see her wavy brown hair perfectly framed by the oversized menu.

When I pass the men's room on my right, I continue on to the diner's side door. This door, too, is made almost entirely of glass. I look through the door for a few moments, out at a row of shimmering cars in the lot, before extending my sweaty right palm and gingerly pushing it open. Stepping outside into the brilliant sunlight of the late morning, I do not stop walking west until I've covered a great deal of ground and my breathing returns to normal. It takes a hell of a long time.



# **On the Way to the Institutionalized Insane**

**Laura Manuelidis**

Steam smelted with lead  
Spreads horizontally, twisted as past work  
Discarded, on this thick milled town.

I drive along the stream that carves out rust-soaked rock  
where buildings hummed with ancestral wives borrowed during war.  
Behind the broken windows the teeth of gears now disappeared

Worn down, still make ugly scratching  
Sounds of:      Have to      Will do      To survive.  
In basketball's black Keds and dungarees  
Ruffian children play their abandoned, honorable games:

Their leap of fish I dream.      As if the Housatonic were still pristine  
with sweet water trout thrusting their open and barely  
Carbonized wide mouths, eyes still sublimely closed:      Accelerating

There's little available work now for the hands.

# Girl

**Kit Reed**

**So, Bobie. When I phoned Atlanta your office said you were no longer in practice, but I didn't ask whether you're still on the planet. Intruders from the past don't necessarily want to know these things. You may have died long before I came looking for you, which for the purposes of this story is probably just as well.**

I mean, how likely is it that a nice old guy just about your age is still going in to work every day, let alone running flat-out for the roses in the race that some of us are too dumb to quit? It defies probabilities, although most people spend their days defying probabilities—at least writers do.

If the hand you were dealt is hard to play, you work with it, and when you move a lot, it's easier to leave unwanted lives behind. Finagle, forge documents, lie if you have to, invent futures, anything to make it better. Most of us have survival narratives—stories we tell ourselves to make it all make sense.

Or write fiction.

Growing up, I told myself, *if it gets too bad I can always move*. San Diego, Honolulu, New London, and, before I turned six, Honolulu and New London again; grade schools in Washington, New London, Panama, Florida. We were beached there for too long.

My mother thought every next move would fix her life. In the same way that she haunted Navy dispensaries in search of a cure for everything that ailed her, she believed. Long after the Navy gave up on my father's drowned submarine she kept on moving, in hopes. Hope took us up and down the Eastern Seaboard because things had to be better in the next place.

They aren't, not really, but when I landed in your town on the Carolina coast I didn't know that. You guys grew up in houses owned by your parents and grandparents before them, so you don't need to know that. Starting fresh at Beaufort High, I didn't want to know that.

I was in St. Paul's School for so long that boys stopped seeing me. In Beaufort, boys thought I was sexy because I was new.

Public school! It was like walking into a circus, all color and racket. The homeroom teacher was late. You and Bucky or Jake were hanging a ninth grader out the window by his feet. You were the tall kid with the Woody Woodpecker cowlick and an easy grin, cackling while he hollered and you threatened to let go. You didn't haul him up until Mrs. Combs smacked her books down on the desk.

Coming to attention, you spotted me. I recognized that look, *new girl*, and I thought: *new world*. I went from moody and introspective to airhead at lightspeed. You bet I was running ahead of the truth about myself, and you?

You guys, with your football gear and the girls you went with ruled the school. Alcy and Jean and Paddy and all. Paddy Watson had your letter sweater, and I thought: *I want that*. Not that I was ever in love with you. I was in love with the new aristocracy there on the Inland Waterway, under the live oaks and Spanish moss that made it all seem not quite real and, oddly, better than real, almost invented. I loved this new life in your old, old town.

Mrs. Combs shouted us into our seats. You slouched in your desk, pretending to sharpen pencils in your ear—for me? I laughed.

You leaned across the aisle. "What's your name?"

I was mesmerized by your eyebrows, but I managed. Adding, "What's yours?"

"Bobie." Right. Not your given name, but at the time you liked it better. Mrs. Combs called us to attention and you muttered, "Once more into the breach, dear friends."

I whipped my head around: "You know *that*?"

"Me? I don't know nothing." I saw the liberated me reflected in your grin. Whoever you were, you weren't that person in that school. You were one of the cool kids, roving the halls in a flying wedge.

I studied you all, what the girls wore, how they were with you. I unbuttoned that top button and rolled my waistband to shorten my skirt. I flirted. For a while there, I had everybody fooled.

I was, I thought, hundreds of miles from the old me and for the first time in a long time, I was glad.

My sweet, Three Bears family lived too many places before Daddy left us in Florida, where my mother and I ran aground for six bad years. Camphorwood chest, teakwood tables, the Chinese rugs were unpacked and set up in nine different houses—iconic objects that made each new place home. In Florida, they looked cramped and wrong. Back in New London we had snow. Daddy took us to Sunday dinners at the officers' club when his sub came in from patrol; he left often, but it was a given that he would be back.

When he said goodbye at the train station in St. Petersburg for the duration, I didn't know it was forever.

I was brave because officers' children don't cry.

Everybody on our block was old. Nuns may like smart girls, but kids don't. I thought if we couldn't move, maybe some new boy with no father would come to my school and I wouldn't be the only one. Nobody answered when I prayed for snow. Thank God we moved.

Even slick, pretty girls like Paddy didn't know the new kid was only me. When we got up to change classes, a brash, ugly one leaned in. "What's your name?"

I hated mine. I tried on a better one. "Kaysey."

She had straw hair and thick glasses and spreading teeth but she radiated power. "Cheerleader tryouts after school."

"You're a ..."

"Manager." She bared those teeth as if to gnash my cheek—I guess it was a grin. "T.J."

At three I had to climb on the olive drab Marine Corps bus with four others for the long ride out to the base, but I didn't tell her that. My mother was managing the officers' club, her first job since she quit to marry the handsome young ensign—nobody knew the future then. That year I hit rebellion full throttle, and my only mother was too worried and distracted to slow me down. I said, "OK." I'd think up some story later to make it all right with T.J.

At lunch hour T.J. let me run with her and Alcy and Paddy and

Jean and them. All I wanted was to be one of the gang. Not your gang, one of the covey of girls flaunting trinkets they'd extracted from you. They all had boyfriends except T.J., but when she let me hang out with them under the bleachers, French-inhaling and cobbling swear words, I would have done anything she said.

She ruled the pack. I took a drag on T.J.'s spit-drenched Lucky Strike thinking, *Now I'm really in with them.*

For too many reasons, I never was.

They were indigenous. They belonged. I watched them and listened hard, picking up inflections; when you move a lot, survival is about fitting in. By the end of that week I thought I looked and sounded like them, but I felt the pressure. All that year I ran hard and coined obscenities to please T.J. because at any minute the group could contract and squeeze me out like the core of a zit.

After school you guys sat in your cars, idling until all the girls I cared about got in with you and rode away. I had to wait in the cavernous bus for the other freaks: honor society secretary, thirteen-year-old freshman who looked twelve, clumsy girl with the trombone, chaplain's son; I stared out the window a lot, which is how I happened to see T.J. Unlike the pretty girls she herded like a trail boss, she was walking home. She left with big Geraldine from the cannery, trailed by this girl Jocelyn, who wore her brother's old clothes, and the foreign girl: four outcasts, slouching toward Bay Street. I couldn't figure out exactly what I was seeing, but I didn't have anybody to ask. Certainly not the lumpy trombone player or the chaplain's son with sausage-link lips or the cute Marine driver who ticked us off the list on his clipboard as we got on.

It would have helped if I'd known I wasn't the only freak, but you never let on and we never really talked except that one time, an empty Sunday at your father's store.

The thing is, Bobie, at school, talking was never just a conversation. It was all innuendo and flirting unless one of us bumped into one of you in the outside world where nobody would see.

One Sunday when everybody who mattered was someplace else,

I ran into the drug store for my mother while she waited outside in the car. I found you stacking boxes in the center aisle. Surprised to see you being so *ordinary*, I laughed. “Hey.”

You looked up, embarrassed but pleased. “Hey, girl.” Nice!

“I didn’t know you ...”

“Yeah.” Careless shrug. “Have to help Dad.”

There were a hundred million things we could have said to each other. “Oh. Is there somebody around who can fill this ...”

“He’s asleep.”

“Prescription. Um. Can you?”

You shook your head. “I’ll wake him up.”

Your smile was so nice that I called after you, “It isn’t for me.”

I made you laugh! “If he hasn’t died. It takes a while, can you wait?”

“Sure. The Mother’s in the car.” *I should go out and warn her*, I thought. All those lifetimes in the car while she shopped. Every time, I wondered: *what if she never comes out?* “The Mother worries.”

You gave back, “The Father’s out of it.”

Our grins matched. Let her wait.

So you and I stood there talking like two old friends while your dad’s creaky pharmacist fumbled around behind the counter and my mother stewed, and after old Skeezer handed off the pills we kept on talking until she beeped for the third time. I made a face and you shrugged so we hung there, talking until she leaned on the horn and to keep her from coming in after me, I had to go. It wasn’t much but in that dusty store we were just two friends talking, not cute boy and ostensibly cute girl.

Stupid of me to think it would last. That Monday I went up to you, smiling with my jaw unlocked and foolishness falling out of my mouth, all person to nice person, “So Bobie, The Mother was so mad she had a cow and beat me to death with it.”

Jake and Richie were there. All three of you turned on me, blinking. The worst thing about it was the looks you exchanged before you grunted, “Huh?”

“I just wondered what The Father...”

“Say *what?*”

It scraped me raw. “Nothing.”

“Girl.” I caught a flicker of apology as you knuckled the top of my head. “Girl.”

You were all laughing as I stumbled off.

Right, everything we said to each other in that school had a subtext: who would and who wouldn't, all of us figuring out what we wanted and how very, very much. Talking, we measured desire in degrees; who we wanted to do it with and what, how far which girls would go, which of you would push too far, bottom line, who was or who wasn't *how close* to fucking, which some of T.J.'s girls were and—get this—I found out later that, without asking, my mother assumed I actually was. How ignorant can a poor little widow be?

Safe in adulthood now, I wonder at the excitement and terror: all that *life* going on inside us, the charged atmosphere, fifteen-year-old bodies ricocheting around halls that were never big enough.

I could live with the fact that guys I ended up riding around with after night games were leftovers. Since everybody who was anybody was taken, you and I and everybody in T.J.'s gang knew that they were second string. Possible boyfriends came, they went, they tried too hard and the ones I could keep disappointed me. They were too boring, some of them, too pushy, most of them, all but the ones who weren't cute enough to presume, or were, forgive me, handsome, but too dumb.

It was OK. I was in with the gang, and if one of the girls I envied and feared had dropped you or Jake or Bucky or Richie and you had turned to me.... I ask you now, even though the answer was built in, would I have been too much for you?

Which of us would have been disappointed?

I ran with the girls because I thought that unlike you, they didn't know the truth about me.

After years of my heart bumping around like a rowboat in rough waters I needed to be part of *something*. It followed that, default po-

sition, I ran wherever those smug, candy-faced girls went, stole what they stole: lipsticks from Woolworth's on Front Street, crap earrings, plastic toys; Moon Pies and pocket combs when we sneaked off to the corner market at lunchtime to buy food and rifle the bins; on the way back from the state fair—a dozen corncob pipes from a counter card in a country store, stringing all our four-letter words like beads for the outraged owner as we rode away, snug in the back of the bus. When cops stopped us, all the fried dough and corn dogs and Crack-erjack in my belly surged. I gulped, ready to throw up.

With her fierce eyes bulging, T.J. sprayed. "Shhhh. They don't know it's us."

We nodded and sat on our hands until it became clear that until we got rid of these things we'd stolen that nobody wanted, the bus was stopped cold. We passed the stolen items forward and I was free of mine; my guts unclenched and I forgot. Pipes went hand over hand to the kids up front, landing in the lap of the ninth-grader sitting alone next to the doors. Blazing with innocence, he handed them off to the police, who made the driver wait until the owner counted them. Escaping, I was what passes for happy, surrounded by T.J. and Paddy and Alcy and them.

It was good, I suppose. At least it was good just then. Alcy asked me to spend the night after the first basketball game. I forget who she was seeing but Bucky drove five of us back from Moultrie with Alcy sitting between him and Richie in front, and Eddie Fairchild and I smashing faces in the back, thinking nothing until T.J. got out. Bucky spent a long time kissing Alcy good night, parked in front of her house. It looked like Tara from outside. The front yard slanted down to the water, with the moon making that cliché path of light out to the horizon line. I was excited. They had a dock.

Next day it was all different. I woke up sore from sleeping on a lumpy couch. Downstairs I saw bare floors and ruined antiques, cartons in corners, dog poops in corners and somebody's baby hitching along on its butt, dragging a diaper that left a wide, wet track. Alcy didn't seem to notice that her mother was missing some

teeth. Should I care? She made French toast for us. I jumped up and thanked them as soon as I heard my mother's car. I didn't want her to see inside.

If there was another culture in your school, it was submerged, either because high school is the perfect democracy or its exact opposite. A lifetime later I still can't tell you which.

I didn't care. I was in with them. I was, whispering about Paddy with T.J., Gloria with Alcy, about Richie and the new girl from Charleston, who seemed to belong without trying. I snickered and hissed with anybody who'd listen, too stupid or too new to it all to get it: Watch out what you say. The sword swings both ways.

I was so in with them that when the Marine-green bus broke down one day, I peeled off with T.J. and left the other freaks from the base sitting on the curb. No guilt. We were never friends. It would take the Corps an hour to fix this bus, give up and send another. I could follow T.J. down Front Street, imagining we were close.

"This girl Betts," I said, because Betts was newer than me.

T.J. snorted. "Fool motormouth."

"Yeah."

"Want snuff?"

"Where'd you get it?" I would have taken anything she offered, but this was before the real stuff was around and people got high.

"Gramma." She didn't say any more and I didn't ask.

I chewed. It was disgusting. I spat. "Where we going?"

"No place. Oh, Carson's. Bubble gum."

I saw the way they looked at us when we went in; they knew her. We were going to steal.

From there we went to the A&P. By this time my pockets were bulging with crumpled Fleers papers and melting malt balls. In a fit of anxiety I put four apples in a paper sack and walked them up to the counter and paid. By the time I got outside T.J. was pulling a package of hot dogs and one of those biscuits-in-a-can things out of her front. Now tell me why it surprised me. "What's that?"

She slid me a sly, evil look. "Dinner."

“Ow!”

The woman had sharp elbows. “Want to come over?” Her grin was an orange smear.

“I can’t.”

“Why not?” For a minute I thought she was going to hit me.

“She kills if I’m not on that bus.”

“Well, tough tits. Tell her you ...”

“I can’t.” I held her off with my sack of apples.

“What’s this?”

“Dessert.” I shoved it into her belly and left.

I didn’t hear what she said after me, but I turned with a big, showy wave. “Saturday movie? I got free passes.”

“How many?”

I was lying. “Four.”

“OK then.”

Forgive me, I thought: let it be Alcy, Paddy, not one of those.

I don’t know what she was thinking.

The bus was idling outside the school, driver drumming his fingers on the wheel, pissed off because I made him wait. It would be cheap to say I was relieved. I wasn’t. I felt awful and I didn’t know why.

What did T.J. feel? I didn’t know. Next day I slipped into the ranks with her and Alcy and Jean and all them and we ran along together all the same but the bomb was ticking, I just didn’t know what it was or where it was.

Things were OK, I think, until the day the boys’ and girls’ basketball squads, that is, everybody who mattered, got on the bus to Columbia for playoffs while the leftovers sat through yet another Friday at school, depressed by the unidentified crap on the classroom floor, obvious now because of the empty desks.

At lunchtime T.J. said, “Let’s steal doughnuts and go over to my house.”

It turned out to be me, T.J. and sloppy Jocelyn, who I realize now was a depressive.

The other thing I was too dumb to grasp was that these people

were poor, which was by no means what bothered me when we got to T.J.'s house. When we came into the dismal front room I thought everything in it was black: walls, furniture, sofa leaking stuffing at the seams. The windows were covered with taped-up grocery bags, keeping out the light. T.J. didn't flip the light-switch and she didn't explain, but that didn't bother me. It wasn't her brother's porn collection, either. I don't think it was the smell.

The three of us sat crosslegged on the rug gobbling powdered doughnuts in the room where no light came. I was OK, at least I thought I was. Until my eyes adjusted, I didn't have to see what it was like in T.J.'s house, but it didn't take long. Hair oil and grease stains had turned the leaking upholstery black. A wide gray smear lined the walls, as though some huge animal had been trapped and circling here. The rug we sat on was damp and sticky to the touch. I crossed my arms, tucked my hands into my armpits and pretended I didn't care, laughing as T.J. showed us her brother's naked lady playing cards; they were no big deal. The photos were boring black and white. Instead of a jack, there was a giant dick and the three of us went *ha ha*, but that wasn't what bothered me.

This is what bothered me. Everybody that mattered was on that bus to Columbia. In T.J.'s grimy living room crowded with objects that you didn't know *what* they were, T.J. and Joyce that I didn't even like and I poked each other and fell out laughing, pretending it was fun.

It was so creepy, bonding with the girl who scared me and the girl I never liked, that my voice floated up. "I wonder what they're doing right now."

In a flash, sullen, unlovable Jocelyn turned hostile. "Who?"

"You know. All them."

T.J. didn't look up.

"I mean, I hope they're having a good time."

Our biggest gossip wasn't playing.

I tried, "So, I wonder who Alcy is after now that she and Richie are done. Bucky, or could she be out for Dale?"

Nobody was answering. The silence was awful.

My voice fluttered. I covered my mouth with my hand but I couldn't stop myself. "What if she's out after Bobie right now?"

"Girl." T.J. jammed her fist into my side so hard that I rocked on my haunches and almost toppled.

"Who the fuck do you think you are?"

"I was just ..."

"All sacred and holy."

"I'm not!"

"Talking on like you and them are friends."

"I am. We are." I wanted her to stop.

"Like they were ever friends with you."

"Shut up."

She snickered. "You should listen at them talking behind your back."

Then this Jocelyn, who was always four beats behind, snorted.

"Who do you think you are, girl?"

"I have to go."

T.J. snapped at us like a bad teacher. "Sit down."

"All sacred and holy like a..." Jocelyn lunged for my ankle. "You stay and listen."

I kicked her off. "Let go."

"You stay here and listen, you snotty bitch."

Jocelyn clung until canny T.J. turned us around like counters on a Monopoly board. She jumped up. "My brother's car."

"I don't hear..."

She cut me off. "If Earl catches us, he'll kill me." She tugged Jocelyn to her feet. "We have to go."

We went.

You and the others came back from Columbia like confirmed winners, which in that school, you were. Big game: I don't remember who won. Things went on as usual, but I knew we were pretending and then my mother quit her job and we moved to D.C., so I was gone.

I wasn't glad to be gone, but I was relieved. Two years with those people in that place were enough, although it would have been interesting to watch all your stories spin out because eventually I found a way to settle down in my own life and if I'm a control freak, at least I know why. Naturally I'd love to find out about your life stories—what became of T.J., for instance, and all the unseen relatives jammed into that dark house; whether Alcy escaped the family history implicit in that sagging ancestral manse, and which of the boy heroes I followed like a gawking fan are bagging in supermarkets or pumping gas; the war heroes and executives, I know about. It's easy enough to find out on the web, but what happened to the rest of you between the year I fled Beaufort and now?

You, I know about—at least in a way. I and the Navy friend I've known since infancy were on the dance floor at the Naval Academy when I spotted you or you spotted me in crowded Bancroft Hall. Instead of reinventing, I was who I'd always been, just older. Your cowlick was tamed and you looked brand new in your midshipman's dress blues.

I don't remember what we said, I only know what passed between us: *You. Here. Yes, and. You too.* Both of us. *You made it out of there. Yes, and. So did you.* The mutual acknowledgement that we had never been what we seemed in that small town, where the small things that seemed so important to us then were nothing more than the makeshift furniture of our lives in what were, in fact, temporary rooms.

I remember your grin of recognition. *Right. We were never what they thought we were.*

We were always not so much more than that as different from that, although you were so good at dissembling that nobody guessed. I introduced you to my best friend, who would graduate near the top of his class. We exchanged how-nice-to-see-yous and moved on. And I'm dwelling on this now because?

When I was trying so hard back in Beaufort, I wish I'd known!

I would have been grateful if with me, at least, you'd let on.

So that's it, I suppose. Except it isn't.

Why, although I never heard back from you, am I still Googling you and the others, trying to get in touch?

What am I trying so desperately to get back?

# É (It Is)

**Alberto de Lacerda**

**translated by Calvin Olsen**

E não peço perdão nem me arrependo.  
Era um segredo audaz. Tem sido apenas  
Uma forma cruel de não estar só.  
É uma maneira de não estar sentado,  
É uma forma singular de trincar flores,  
É uma maneira de ver, nem boa nem má  
(Depende, como tudo, de tudo);  
Mas talvez desta forma surja o milagre supremo  
E um dia, não sei quando,  
Eu adquira o aroma daquelas palavras  
Segundo as quais a forma dos navegantes celestes  
É como estar apaixonado.

And I do not ask forgiveness nor do I repent.  
It was an audacious secret. It has been only  
A cruel form of not being alone.  
It is a way of not staying seated,  
It is a singular form of snapping flowers,  
It is a way to see, neither good nor bad  
(Depending, like everything, on everything);  
But perhaps in this way the supreme miracle surges  
And one day, I don't know when,  
I will capture the aroma of those words  
Which according to the celestial navigators  
Is like being in love.

January 31, 1958

# Archaeology

Heron Haas

Archaeology dims some buried remnant.  
Worms, cast cheaply aside with weeds and fine roots,  
take with them our digested history.  
Blackened fingernails scratching heaps of rubble  
unearth marigolds, faded plastic markers  
buried under a decade's shifting soils.  
The insidious looked-for thing is never  
found and finally, nothing left to feed on,  
doubt turns in on itself, regards its dirt-caked  
hands wrist-deep in a compost heap, and forgives.

# **In Conclusion**

*How to end a novel*

**Michael D. Byrne**

**What is it that is so unsatisfying about the endings of most**

novels? Think of the last ten novels you've read. Can you even remember the ending? Or did you feel that the ending was unworthy of the story that preceded it—either glib or forced or falsely elegiac or dishonest or simply forgettable? The poet and critic Randall Jarrell famously defined the genre: "The novel is a prose narrative of some length that has something wrong with it." Usually what's wrong is the ending.

Of course, the ending of what many consider the Great American Novel, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, is criticized for traducing the very values Twain establishes in the first three-fourths of the book, as Huck, who has come to realize Jim's humanity, participates in Tom Sawyer's cruel trick of not telling Jim that he is already a free man. It's hard to reread the novel knowing what Huck is ultimately going to do to his friend. Some have defended the ending of Twain's masterpiece by suggesting it embodied the nation's deeply conflicted attitudes toward race, but it is clear from reading Twain's letters and the tortuous history of the book's composition, that he himself was conflicted about how to end Huck's adventures. And Twain's novel is not alone among the masterpieces whose endings disappoint. Is anyone really satisfied with Raskolnikov's conversion in *Crime and Punishment* or Alex's redemption in the British version of *A Clockwork Orange*? What about Strether, whose commandment to others in *The Ambassadors* is "live all you can"? What to make of his rejection of the romantic advances of Maria Gostrey? Live a little, Strether! It's a mistake not to! Critics will construct formalist and theoretical defenses of these endings, but something continues to gnaw when a given novel doesn't follow its own internal logic to an ending both credible and inevitable.

How *does* one end a story? In genre fiction the very conventions of the form dictate certain endings: A mystery must be solved; a serial killer must be stopped; lovers must be reunited. But for serious

fiction, endings are more problematic. If, as Virginia Woolf claimed, “life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged,” how does the writer who attempts to capture the essence of real, lived existence end a story such that it does not seem contrived, unduly neat or sentimentally false? The memorable endings of some great novels offer instructive strategies.

**There is the gestural ending—in the modern period often open rather than closed—in which the protagonist echoes the spirit of the foregoing story through some apt behavior or action.** Think *Catch 22*. “Yossarian jumped,” and in doing so, misses being stabbed by inches. He wants to get to Sweden or at least out of the absurdity, danger, and chaos of war. Whether he succeeds or not is irrelevant; the action itself is the triumph of the book’s argument. J. M. Coetzee ends *Disgrace* as the former professor David Lurie, after emotional and physical suffering, attains a new level of compassion through action. When he assists a crippled dog in its last agony, we are witnesses to Lurie’s growth. These endings abjure finality yet achieve a fitting closure to the story.

Equally effective is the lyrical ending: The writer’s prose gives way to music or poetry as the novel swells with the grandeur of a great symphony, leaving the reader satisfied and exalted. The classic instance is *The Great Gatsby* whose last page, beginning “Most of the big shore places were closed now,” ends poetically with a vision of contemporary America where the American Dream has been closed down, extinguished. Molly Bloom’s long final aria in *Ulysses* (“O that awful deepdown torrent O and the sea the sea crimson sometimes like fire . . .”) similarly finds the novelist reaching for musical rhythms in a passionate affirmation of life. Countless novelists after Fitzgerald and Joyce have emulated their method. Few succeed—the lyrical impulse demands a poet’s gifts and, in lesser hands, can undermine the natural structure of narrative.

For centuries what could be called the Grand Life Event ending has provided novelists with a “real,” if conventional, means of con-

cluding a story. Birth, marriage, and, especially, death confer a closure most readers find palatable—after all, at least two of these three milestones inform every human life. And when the event seems particularly apposite to the novelist’s vision, this kind of ending feels less contrived than it otherwise might. What end other than death could await Tess in Hardy’s dark world? What else would one expect from the robust, benign imagination of Fielding than the marriage of Tom Jones and Sophia? The great closed endings of eighteenth and nineteenth century novels often married the Grand Life Event to the “visionary” coda in which the novelist both concludes his story and foretells the fates of all the major and minor characters. While many readers would be disconcerted with such prophecy in a contemporary novel, one of the joys of reading Dickens is watching him dole out final destinies to his characters.

Some novelists dodge the issue of endings entirely, whether out of contempt for the convention or from sheer ambivalence. Dickens revised his unhappy ending to *Great Expectations* at the urging of Edward Bulwer-Lytton, substituting a more optimistic conclusion for Pip and Estella. Satirizing Victorian conventions one hundred years after Dickens, John Fowles presented his readers with two endings in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*—the reader, not the author, can decide the lovers’ fate (students are surprisingly unnerved by Fowles’ tactic, as if his abandonment of the omniscient narrator’s authority is moral rather than aesthetic). And in hyperfiction, readers themselves are encouraged to manipulate all aspects of the work, including alternate endings, to their individual delight.

**Whatever means a novelist chooses to end her work, when** one encounters the perfect ending it allows the novel to resonate in a final flourish that burns the totality of the book into the mind. Woolf, a writer who was uncomfortable with the pat conventions of her literary predecessors, achieves this in *To the Lighthouse*. Mr. Ramsay and his children are sailing to the lighthouse. They are tacking, a sailing maneuver by which a point is approached indirectly in

a series of zigs and zags. Lily, the artist, is finishing her painting on the shore: “Quickly, as if she were recalled by something over there, she turned to her canvas. There it was—her picture. Yes, with all its greens and blues, its lines running up and across, its attempt at something. It would be hung in the attics, she thought; it would be destroyed. But what did it matter? She asked herself, taking up the brush again. She looked at the steps; they were empty; she looked at her canvas; it was blurred. With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the centre. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision.” The painter (and the novelist) has created in her art a line, a path to her object, with a directness unavailable to the sailing family. Like other great novels, *To the Light-house* possesses a richness located in its characters, its language, its insights into the human predicament. Not the least of these virtues is the ending, which arrives like a gavel being brought down on a block, sentencing the reader to a lifetime of remembrance.



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## **Elizabeth T. Gray Jr.**

for her sequence of poems “Bamiyan” (Issue 010, Summer 2012)

## **George HS Singer**

for his poem “Ergon” (Issue 011, Winter 2012)

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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 \$250, with two prizes awarded. Poets may submit up to six poems per entry, totaling no more than ten pages. There's 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.

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