

New Haven Review

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Project Arcturus

Amanda Bloom

At 4:57 in the afternoon Meghan Walrath stood in her closet

with her face pressed into a pillow, screaming. She was flushed and damp from field hockey, standing between a row of collared shirts and short spring dresses in the dark.

Outside the closet and across her bedroom was a white wicker wastebasket. Inside it a pregnancy test with two blue lines. The test and the box it came in were at the bottom of the wastebasket, tightly wrapped in many rounds of toilet paper, beneath papers and chip bags and gum and balled up notebook paper.

Her parents weren't home but Meghan was screaming into a pillow in her closet anyway. She was a polite girl.

Thursday. Tomorrow was Homecoming. Meghan was nominated for Queen, and Bobby Ericson was in the running for King. The other candidates: Evan Kneeley, captain of the soccer team; Silas Borden, star quarterback; Cassie Bates, head of Bobcat Cheer; Nicole Saunders, class president and projected valedictorian.

Bobby was short and wiry and wore crewneck sweatshirts and sweatpants in clashing colors. He walked between classes with Stargate figurines in hand, making the vehicles spin and dive with adept noises of explosion and acceleration. His glasses were so strong they turned his eyes to specks. His mom was in a wheelchair.

The whole school knew about Bobby's mission to make Meghan his girlfriend, which Bobby called Project Arcturus. It was named after something from Stargate.

"Project Arcturus was an endeavor to harvest energy from the universe itself, by an advanced race known as the Ancients," Evan Kneeley read to Meghan from his phone. They were in homeroom, the day after Bobby announced his mission in AP Chemistry. The rumors said he had stood on top of his desk to do so, until Mrs. Van Deusen threatened detention.

“The project ultimately failed, killing several Ancients in the process,” Evan read.

It was in the leaves, four and a half weeks ago. A party in the woods, in an undeveloped industrial park everyone called The G-Spot. There was a keg and red plastic cups and a big bonfire and a boom box powered by D batteries. Randy Dean handed Meghan a fourth cup of beer and she went with him into the trees.

“Do you have a condom?” she asked. Randy’s face was framed in orange-lit trees. He grunted. “I’ll just pull out,” he said, and grunted again. It started to feel good and Meghan stopped worrying a little but then Randy jerked around and came in the groove between her hip and thigh. She touched herself as she pulled her jeans back up, trying to assess the origin of the wetness between her legs. Yellow leaves stuck in her hair.

Randy was her boyfriend, though he had never asked. Randy assumed and Meghan did not object. He was a fullback, and in some ways much better than her last boyfriend, who dumped her at the end of summer just before he went back to college even though he swore he was going to marry Meghan after she graduated. Randy took her to the diner every Friday and always paid. He also handled Bobby pretty well.

Bobby loved Michael Crichton and Stargate in equal measure. He was famous for reproducing the cries of velociraptors and Tyrannosaurus rex, especially when the lunch line was moving slow. Especially when it was Subway day. When Bobby came across Randy in the hallway, Bobby would squat, inhale, and lean forward with a complex and carnivorous roar, his eyes closing and his arms flying back behind him. The boys had math together on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Bobby greeted and bade farewell to Randy with a roar. Randy roared back, or made a weak squawking noise, or gave a salute.

Still, Meghan did not want to tell Randy what happened. She did

not want to have something part-Randy inside of her. She screamed again into the pillow, making her throat sore. She took a breath and came out of the closet. She put her pillow back on the bed among several other pillows and thought she'd like to watch some TV.

Meghan wasn't sure why Bobby chose her. She was one of the popular girls, but only recently, and only because of Randy. She was more of a jock, and her best friend Anne Peters was in band. Anne said it was because Meghan was nice, and no one was truly nice to Bobby.

"And you're pretty," Anne said, loading fries into her mouth in the senior courtyard. It was early September then. The leaves were still green. "You're probably the first pretty girl to treat him like a human."

"I passed him a beaker in Bio last week," Meghan said. "I'm pretty sure that's the only interaction with him I've ever had."

"Did you smile?"

"I don't know. Maybe?"

Anne nodded slowly, eyebrows lifted and lips pursed, before tilting the fry carton up to her mouth. She played the saxophone and was very matter-of-fact about things.

Meghan felt she was going to coat the walls in puke when she woke Friday morning. The next second she was hungry for multiple breakfasts. She got dressed, had one precarious breakfast, kissed her parents goodbye, and went to school in Randy's truck.

"Be sure to cast your vote for Homecoming King and Queen!" rang Cassie's voice through the loudspeaker. "You have until last period to make your voice HEARD! Today's the big game—and we're Gonna. Kill 'em."

Meghan pictured Cassie's sweet face disintegrating into a snarl. Cassie was a flyer. A tiny girl who could whip her body around with great ferocity. Other girls on the squad brought their spirit down a

notch when it was clear the Cats were going to lose, but Cassie never stopped. She stalked up and down the field, whooping and pumping her thin arms, narrowing her eyes at the game and spinning back to the crowd. The more the Cats fell behind the more menacing her smile.

At lunch Meghan and Randy skipped and went to Jumbo Dog. She was starving, but every time she took a bite she felt a lurch in her gut. Randy plowed through four burgers and a chocolate milkshake.

"I kinda wish I got nominated," he said. He was chewing with his mouth open. They sat at a picnic table, feet on the bench and butts on the table, looking out over the shopping plaza into the valley below. "It'd be cool if we both won, you know?"

"Yeah," Meghan said, taking minute bites of her burger. He looked a little nostalgic. She put her hand on his knee. "It doesn't mean anything, though."

"I know, I know," Randy said, shaking his head to remove the silly thoughts. "It's about the game." They parked on the dirt road behind the shopping plaza and made out for a while. One of the best wrestlers their school had ever seen hung himself in the woods back there two summers ago. Meghan didn't know why she let Randy take her there.

Back at school, she ran into Bobby on her way to Economics.

"My Queen," he said, bowing deeply with his hand over his heart. Everyone else in the hall moved around them like water around rocks.

Cassie was a bull ready to stampede. From her seat deep in the bleachers, Meghan saw spittle flying from Cassie's mouth, the spray catching the stadium lights.

"RED AND WHITE!" Cassie screamed. A cheerleader beside her flinched. "FIGHT FIGHT FIGHT! WITH BOBCAT MIGHT WE WIN TONIGHT!" A triad of girls tossed Cassie up in the air, where she twisted twice and hung in the air before landing back in their arms.

Halftime. The game was tied. The cheerleaders performed, Cassie a weapon out front. Then the dance team and the marching band before Nicole Saunders took to the field. Meghan sat among her teammates. Kristy Billings, the team's wonder-thighed captain, sat next to her. Meghan wished she were Anne.

"Good luck!" Kristy beamed, giving Meghan's hand a squeeze.

"Ladies and gentlemen, girls and boys!" Nicole's voice rang crisp in the air. She looked small but sturdy in the middle of the field, a bright sapling with red and white foliage. "It's the moment we've all been waiting for. The votes are in for Homecoming King and Queen, and as senior class president, I am incredibly thrilled to announce the results. First, let's really hear it for everyone who's been nominated—Evan, Cassie, Bobby, Meghan, Silas, and—jeez—me!"

The stadium erupted in a collective roar. The sound grew as a human-sized bobcat galloped across the field, its nub of a tail moving mechanically from side to side. There was an envelope clutched in its jaw. The cat delivered the envelope to Nicole, then stood upright and performed several backflips to wild applause.

"This year's Homecoming King and Queen..." More drums as Nicole peeled the envelope open slowly. Carefully.

"Bobby Ericson and Megh-a-a-a-n Walrath!"

The marching band launched into "The Stars and Stripes Forever." It almost drowned out the laughter. Meghan felt like puking again. She rose from her seat. Kristy was laughing. Meghan's team was laughing. Everyone was laughing, except for Cassie and Randy, and though Meghan couldn't see her, she knew Anne wasn't either. Meghan wound down the red and white cement steps and onto the field. Cassie's poms sat motionless on her hips, her mouth an unenthused line. Across the field, Randy turned his back, his number 10 facing the crowd like a judge showing the wrong score. Silas Borden was to his left, doubled over and holding his fabled abs.

Nicole placed a dainty plastic crown on Meghan's head and a

bulkier one on Bobby's. Gave a nervous smile before backing away. Bobby was glowing. He bowed to Meghan, to the crowd. Meghan looked down hundreds of pink throats convulsing with laughter. The turf gave beneath her feet. The wind swung over her cheeks.

"Arcturus! Arcturus!" A slow chant started, then quickened and grew loud. "ARCTURUS! ARCTURUS! ARCTURUS!"

Meghan put her hands on her stomach. The world shimmered. Tears wheeled down her face.

They were moving, hands entwined, across the field to the end zone and over the track and out the side gate. Through the parking lot and back into school. The first stairwell. It wasn't until they reached the door to the roof that Bobby let go of Meghan in order to better karate-kick the door open.

The big gray roof was fenced in by a three-foot extension of the school's façade. Mysterious metal boxes jutted up here and there. Silvered vents sent streams of steam into the sky. A bright purple spray of graffiti: Tom + Jenna 4ever.

Meghan followed Bobby to the edge of the roof. The stadium was visible just past the parking lot. The crowd's voice swelled. The game was on, with or without their King and Queen.

The crowd grew louder. Bobby responded with a velociraptor shriek so strong and piercing it startled Meghan. His eyes scrunched up behind his glasses and his face contorted as he let out another shriek. Another. Then he straightened, looking at Meghan expectantly. He was waiting.

"You'll feel better," he said. A small nod.

The crowd erupted again, this time in an extended peal. Someone was making a run for it from downfield. Maybe Randy. Maybe Silas. Meghan closed her eyes and yelled, her voice held inside the crowd's giant one. Her pitch warbled and she kept yelling, bracing her hands against the brick and leaning forward, pausing and breathing deep and pulling her stomach muscles in to make the big-

gest sound she could manage. Her crown fell off and tumbled down to the sidewalk. Her throat burned. She felt something inside her seize and clench and not let go.

Thirty seconds passed. Meghan needed to breathe. She stood up, slightly hunched. She gulped air.

"I feel better," she said. A whisper. "I feel better. Thank you."

She touched Bobby's cheek and looked into his kind, myopic eyes, then turned and walked across the roof to the stairwell. A tiny war was being fought inside her.

In the bathroom she flushed again and again but the toilet water remained a pleasant pink. The cramps were bad. Like someone was wiggling their fingers around in her guts. She sat there through the messier part, closing her eyes and breathing slow, welcoming the raw red wringing, the cool emptiness. She became so relaxed her thoughts bordered on dreams. She was back on the roof, holding Bobby in her lap like a baby, sunset painting the sky in rainbow sherbet.

She was able to avoid Randy after the game, though she guessed he wasn't looking for her. She guessed as long as she did nothing, Randy would suddenly not be her boyfriend in the same way he suddenly was back in August. She found Anne and the band in the back parking lot.

"My period's bad," Meghan told her.

At Jumbo Dog, Meghan and Anne sat on the same table Meghan and Randy had sat on earlier in the day. The woods behind the shopping plaza were dark and blue-tinged now. Meghan sipped a large chocolate milkshake. Anne ordered an extra-large fry.

"Party at The G-Spot tonight," Anne said. "You going?"

Meghan saw foamy beer sliding down hundreds of pink throats.

"I think I'll pass," she said. "You?"

"If anyone who partied at The G-Spot actually knew what a G-spot was, I'd consider it." Anne said. She paused. "Gonna hang with

your king instead?”

Meghan smiled, shook her head. The milkshake was delicious, cold and sweet and soothing. A cramp gripped her and let go.

Across town, Meghan’s crown sat chipped and glinting on the school sidewalk. Bobby’s crown was a few miles from its mate, in his room, where shelves upon shelves held Stargate ships and pterodactyls. Little trees and rivers and mountains for creating miniature worlds. Diplodicuses. Iguanodons.

His crown was on the very top shelf. Almost touching the ceiling.

Star-Crossed Photons

Eugene Samolin

A moment of darkness...

Bada-BANG;

I'm a photon.

A rapture of light.

I'm all, whole, one.

Limiter of the universe,

Chasing a sliver of shadow.

A glimmer in an empty hologram.

A mirror with no reflection.

A point on the pupil of an eternally receding eye unfolding in infinite directions.

All ways; always.

Forever and at once.

Present and far,

Away from here.

Edge within reach;

Just out of grasp.

T h i s f i r s t m o m e n t :

Minutely small.

But I'm not alone,

I'm not afraid,

She's with me.

Splayed out against spacetime's edge,

Together we shredded through the cloak of last existence;

Tore a hole into this one;

Me 'n' you,

Last, first twoo.

A nucleus of anti-matter;
The center of existence.
We're here on the outside;
Belly-full of nothingness.

The cutting edge of light
Against the folds of shadow's throat.
Nucleic anti-mass pressed against us,
Producing just the amount of pressure,
The perfect amount of weight,
Exactly what was needed
To break the skin and tear the flesh
Of spacetime's cloth,
Ripping a hole right through to this one
Dragging the *dead* along behind us,
And waking it back up again,
Moment by moment,
Bit by bit,
Piece by piece,
Juicing every little drop,
Letting nothing go to waste.

The only way was light,
Bursting over the edge
And falling back to the moment of darkness at the start.

Are Birds Spies?

Adventures in birdwatching

Jim Cory

It's about two hours since we left Chicago and Amtrak steward

Julio casts a cold eye on the *Field Guide to Birds, Western Region*. The section on flycatchers is open to page 521 on the foldout table in front of me.

"You like birds?" Julio says, leaning in, scratch pad in hand, to take the dinner reservation.

I tell him that I do and explain that I'm headed for Silver City, New Mexico, specifically to look for some. He glances around the roomette, notes the one small bag.

"By yourself?"

I nod.

I can see his mind question: Why would anyone spend time walking around looking for birds, and moreover travel 2,000 miles to do that? I'm imagining that he's imagining what might make it an okay way to spend some time. I ask how long he's worked for Amtrak and he tells me he's been a steward on the Southwest Chief for twenty-two years, which I suppose is another way to say he's seen and heard everything at some point somewhere between Chicago and Los Angeles. The solitary birdwatcher in Room 5 of Car 0331 is minor fare compared to the geeks and freaks that come through.

"Birds, that is interesting," he says in the way that indicates it could actually be interesting but only with a lot of work.

"Now," he says, back from this mental detour, smile resuming, "will that dinner reservation be for 5:30, 6:30 or 7:30?"

In the bird world males stand out. That mostly means they're larger and/or more colorful. It enables them to attract a mate. Females are frequently drab. That's so they go unnoticed on the nest. While there are numerous exceptions, the rule generally holds true and things can get really radical when you're talking about certain species such as the vermillion flycatcher, found in Southwest Texas

and New Mexico. The head and breast of the male is a one-of-a-kind shade of red, with blackish brown on the wing and a masking band of identical black extending from the bill to back behind the eyes. The female has the same brown on head, wings and back, with a white breast brightening to buff, occasionally even a flash of red, on the belly. Unless you know what to look for, you could mistake her for a lot of things. A male vermillion, on the other hand, can't be anything else. Would I see some?

I came close on my first day. Early that afternoon I pulled the rented SUV into the parking lot of the visitor's center for Sevilleta National Wildlife Refuge, an hour south of Albuquerque. Outside, what looked like high-powered bumblebees flickered and whirred around a vertical red feeder suspended from the roof. Inside, using a glossy New Mexico Transportation map and a topographical display of the state set up as an exhibit, a roundish assertive person named Sherry ("First time? How long?") runs me through a list of all the places I need to see in eight days.

"Start with the Bosque Del Apache," Sherry says. She points to a green spot on the Transportation map. "It's right down the Interstate. The Bosque Del Apache has more birds than anywhere else in New Mexico. Of course you could also run into cougars. I wouldn't worry about that."

Sherry would give a cougar pause. She is short, solidly built, with a shade of brown hair that matches her glasses. She's probably in her fifties but the spirit is along the lines of someone mentally flown in from the hippie era. She proceeds to name, one after another, what she feels are the best parks in the state, and has, she says, sacked out in the cab of her truck in the parking lots of most of them.

"They got elk here," she says, pointing to a location on the Transportation map. She looks up. "Elk!"

I nod and ask about the hummingbirds outside. Sherry glances toward the window.

"Black-throated," she says. "Very aggressive."

I scribble.

Sherry follows my eyes wandering to the raptor on the wall with its wings spread.

“Swenson’s hawk. They live on prairie dogs. They used to be everywhere. Now there’s hardly any. But they’re bringing back the prairie dog and that’ll bring the hawks back.”

She launches into a description of the prairie dog reintroduction program, now underway in the state. Lots of detail about burrows, reproductive habits, predators besides Swenson’s hawk. She explains that if I’ve got extra time they have a list of the 200 best trails in the area at the public library at Show Low, an hour’s drive into Arizona. It’s worth the visit, in spite of the town having become “yuppiefied.”

When I was in my twenties and thirties I paid little more than polite attention to what anyone told me about anything. Not that I wasn’t curious. I just assumed there was some motive for their wanting to be helpful—attention, sex, a favor—or that such information, when volunteered, came with a condescending smack.

Besides, how could they know what I didn’t?

What changed that was a visit to a poet from Indiana. I happened to be in Indianapolis for work and called. He invited me over to talk about poetry. We soon wandered onto other topics. Two in particular: Prairie School architecture and Utopian communities. This poet, whose name is Jared Carter, knew the state’s history, geography, geology, architecture and assorted hot spots and had written a handsome coffee table book titled simply: *Indiana*. He suggested the Eugene Debs Museum in Terre Haute, the faux-Louis Sullivan bank in Poseyville, French Lick, for a view of the ballroom at the famous French Lick Resort Hotel, and sundry other places.

I jotted all down, climbed in my rental car and drove north, south, east and west, from Evansville to Lafayette and back. It was everything he promised.

I excuse myself and ask to use the restroom. The last thing I see as I climb into the car is Sherry directing nectar through the spout

of a watering can into the top of the hummingbird feeder—in effect, pouring the drinks—while 20 tiny birds watch and wait.

Bosque Del Apache Wildlife Refuge, down the Interstate maybe 45 minutes, sits in the center of New Mexico, a vast wetlands penetrated and encircled by dirt roads. The ranger running the Visitor's Center hands me a map.

"Somebody's seen vermillion flycatchers right about here," he says. Does he possess psychic powers or did Sherry call ahead? He X's a spot in ballpoint on the paper map. "There's supposed to be a nest."

The Bosque attracts thousands of bird people in the course of a year. Its draw is mostly waterfowl and wading birds, including such lovelies as the white-faced ibis, the American avocet and the stilt, which is everything the name implies. Of course, a vermillion flycatcher makes any of these seem mere names on a checklist.

According to livescience.com, 60 million Americans identify themselves as birdwatchers and "birding" is among the most popular forms of outdoor activity. Of course if 60 million people were out in the woods with binoculars and spotter scopes, places like the Bosque Del Apache would feel like the Mall of America the week before Christmas.

Who or what exactly is a bird-watcher depends on how you define the term. Most self-described bird-watchers conduct their observations from the vicinity of a feeder where the political dynamics can fascinate—all the dominance behaviors you might've imagined as purely human are on display—but it's like fishing an overstocked trout pond.

Serious birders make up a tiny fraction of the 60 million. They tend to be pilgrims and they're almost always alone. Like David, the guy in a ranger suit and hat I met in Lassen National Park, in Northern California, a few years back. He comes marching up the trail with a tripod and scope on his shoulder, eyes darting back and forth from trail to trees, trees to trail.

“See anything interesting?”

“White-headed woodpecker.”

That pushed a button.

“Seriously? I’ve been trying to see those for a week,” he says. “I even played their call.” He whips a phone from his vest pocket and plays it.

Chid-it-it! Chid-it-it!

“Nothing?”

“Nothing.”

David’s not actually a ranger. He’s a retired middle-school science teacher who volunteers to talk about birds at public parks in different Western states.

I ask about warblers. He’s seen two species in Lassen: the yellow-rumped and the hermit.

What does the hermit look like?

“The males have yellow heads and black throats.”

Suddenly he squints at some willow shrubs on the bank of a creek emptying into the lake we’re standing 50 feet away from.

“There’s one now!”

David unlimbers his scope and has got it on the bird in about 10 seconds. I can’t even get it into my binoculars.

“They’re shy,” he says, as we part ways. “That’s why they call’em ‘hermit warblers.’”

In the woods, looking and waiting are pretty much the same thing. You look, waiting for something to happen; you wait, and while you wait, you look. When something does happen, the moment’s all that matters and getting to that moment is what all the energy’s about.

This state of mind is the common property of bird people. Encounter another bird person on a trail and mention that you’ve just seen a hooded merganser or an American Dipper and watch the nervous system dial itself up a few notches. A bird person with that kind of information can look exactly like someone who’s just been

given the wrong change and can't figure out what to do about it.

These people—myself included—are put off by most human company. Who goes to the woods to socialize? If anything, you're there for the exact opposite reason—to get away from people—or, like Thoreau, to meet yourself. But when you do encounter one of these out on a trail, it's often like walking up to a mirror. Chances are they're your age, your sex, wearing clothes lifted from your closet. Or if they're not any of that, it doesn't matter. They know what you know and they're out there trying to find out more. Mention to even the most taciturn that hummingbird nest you saw plastered to a branch or the eagle that snatched a fresh-caught trout from an osprey's talons—a mid-air theft over a lake I witnessed at Lassen—and they'll be chittering like sparrows.

There are also the few who, passed on a trail, can barely bring themselves to nod, as well as the type who get all competitive about their equipment, as if the more they spent on that scope, those hiking boots, these binoculars, the more seriously they're entitled to be taken.

Sometimes these two types overlap. I'm thinking of the guy who, one April, set up a scope to watch baby Great Horned Owls in an abandoned squirrel's nest behind a pond at Tinnicum, a wild-life refuge across I-95 from the Philadelphia Airport. He had what looked like the Hubble Telescope set up on a tripod maybe 75 feet from the nest and a stone's throw from the trail. Let gravel rattle or a stick snap and he'd whirl, index to lips. *Shhhssssssshhhhhh!* Even if you came through without making a sound, the look was not friendly. Meanwhile Big Daddy owl was up there on a branch above the nest, waiting to descend on anyone who got close. Seventy-five feet was pushing it. You get the sense that no matter where he is or what he's doing, Hubble's a guy always pushing it. The world is his, not ours. I would like to report that just then a rotting tree limb descended on his head, or at least hit the Hubble, but in truth I left him scowling into his viewfinder for all the pleasure he might take there.

Back at the Bosque vehicles appear through a cloud of road

dust. A mirage? Getting closer, it looks like the parking lot at an Amish mud sale that somehow got baked, gentle side of the field, of course. RVs, SUVs, Honda Accords, Toyotas, a pickup truck or two, parked shoulder to shoulder. So are the people. They've fanned out on the rise just before the water's edge. It's Picket's Charge with spotter scopes. There are enough already so that newcomers merit barely a quick, hard glance.

I get out, scan the branches and turn to inspect the birder army. All I could see from where I stood, to crib a famous line from Edna Millay, was white males in fishing vests and camouflage jackets. Is this the very picture of much-vaunted privilege or just a bunch of guys with time on their hands? Both. What I notice is the head-gear. Half sport baseball caps, the rest are in this floppy khaki item shaped like something you'd wear while skippering a lobster boat.

I try to imagine myself in one. It's a strange thing the way that, at fifteen let's say, you see some item everyone's wearing—example: desert boots, circa 1968—and it's almost as if not having that will cause the world to end in whatever kind of colony collapse it eventually will end in. Fifty years on, the temptation to rush right out and order something like one of these lobster hats does not exist. Experience teaches that you need to be at least as careful about what you put on your head as you are about what you put in it. After fifty you can pretty much tromp around with your feet in old shoeboxes, like Howard Hughes, wear twine for a belt or stroll down the street in an accordion-pleated checkerboard skirt, no one is likely to pay much attention. But they will notice a hat.

The point was brought home once when I happened to overhear a conversation two middle-aged co-workers were having just over the cubicle wall at an office where I worked. It was 8:45 and they'd been going on animatedly for a few minutes when the conversation suddenly halted.

Fifteen seconds went by.

Then: “*What is that thing on her head?*”

I stood up to see, fast disappearing along the corridor, what had clearly begun as a beret but was now oversized, puffy and spangled in a manner that aspired to chic but failed, this perched on the head of a new hire anxious that her distinct fashion sense be known at once.

Someone pointed out to me that you should never wear a hat that has more personality than you do, and he proceeded to demonstrate by never wearing one at all.

As far as these khaki things with the brims that sort of flap down across the forehead, grow mosquito nets out the back, come with tumbling sun flaps for neck protection, and likely include other features known only to those who wear them, I wouldn't don a thing like that even if my head were in danger of turning into a clambake.

But here in the Bosque today these folks had flycatchers, not fashion, on their minds. They peered into scopes and scanned the canopy. Not seeing anything, they scowled and scanned again. The scanning and scowling went on and eventually you could pick up that vibe whereby collective impatience is about to morph into low-level hysteria. Once a crowd gets worked up, things can pretty much go anywhere and that's never a good direction.

One autumn a few years back in Cape May, New Jersey, I came on a gathering smaller in number but similar in spirit. They stood poised on the boardwalk, a dozen strong, ten or twenty thousand dollars worth of cameras, scopes and binoculars aimed at a single exhausted Pine Warbler. The bird was trying to down as many seeds as its stomach could hold before the next leg of its transcontinental migration trip. The birders, meanwhile, moved in like meth-addled paparazzi. They grimaced and leaned, strained and snapped. *Click! Click! Click!*

What, I am thinking, if these Bosque birders actually locate the vermillions? Imagine the sudden stampede for choice observation spots, the lemming-like rush into the waters of the swamp. Shouting matches erupt and escalate into shoving matches. In some people, birds bring out the inner landlord, in others the Black Friday shopper.

Sherry had circled a spot on the map that's about 30 miles west of Silver City and right before you get to a nowhere little town called Cliff, New Mexico. The way she described it, someone had shoe-horned a wildlife refuge into the space between two ranches along land bisecting the Gila River.

A day later I'm driving down first one gravel road and then another and turn onto what is not so much a road as an unnecessarily wide path. No gravel left, just dust. I follow it along the Gila to a donut turnaround shaded by willows. A gate that resembles something used to control the movement of cattle in a slaughterhouse provides admission. This device has two parallel chutes, with room for one person to pass. I think: this must be to keep people from grazing animals back here. Every rule has a reason.

Past the gate there's a meadow opening right on the river's edge, complete with raccoon tracks. It's April. The temperature's warm one day, cold the next. The trees have yet to fully leaf out, leaving a window of two or three weeks in which birds in spring plumage are easily viewed.

I spot movement but, as I focus, what comes into view is an undistinguished medium-sized bird with brownish markings that seem vaguely familiar. There is the line extending back from the eye, like a waxwing, and the hint of red on the belly. I watch for a minute or two and resume walking.

The trail picks up about 50 feet past the turnout and runs along the left of the river, between the Gila—moving deep and green over rocks and logs at this bend—and a canyon wall, into dense woods. The air smells of skunk cabbage, boxwood and the river. There are shrubs and knee-high flowering weeds. A thick stalk lifts a thistle bloom a few inches higher than the rest and a mourning cloak, then a black swallowtail, rests on the flower. Its texture calls to mind an HIV virus photographed under an electron microscope displayed in the examining room of my doctor's office. It went up on the wall one day two decades ago, in the middle of the AIDS epidemic, and never came down.

The color of the flower, though, is hardly morose. Magenta, shot through with light. I worked in an office once where a woman made the point of wearing something magenta every day. Tuesday, magenta scarf. Thursday, magenta sweater. Soon enough she was called Magenta.

A mile or so in and it occurs to me that it'd be damned difficult to scramble up that canyon wall if something threatening appears. I'm not talking about a pissed-off rancher bearing arms or the local *squadrusti*. If it's close enough, a black bear encountered in the woods feels like someone's pointing a Glock at your head. Everything else instantly irrelevant. You may think a bear's just an overgrown setter until you encounter one when there's no one else around.

And then there're lions. I scan the top of the canyon wall thinking: what if a cougar's face is there staring back? In fact, I'd be lucky to see the cat before it landed on my neck.

Right now I'd almost, just this once, welcome the loud, dumb-downed drone of some homo sapien voices. But no one's here. And suddenly scat, right in the middle of the trail, a big nasty pile topped with berry seeds like some kind of Dairy Queen for coprophagics. It could be a cow flop, if there were cows back here. More likely, given the seeds, this mess is everything that was on yesterday's black bear menu. Okay, that's it.

The SUV sits under the willow where I parked it, take-out coffee in the cup holder. Cold, but a kick. A spotted brown horse at the top of the hill shakes its tail and neighs. Time to leave?

In the branches a stone's throw from the rental car something moves. I get the binoculars on it and recognize the same bird I saw coming in. Black eye and bill, gray head and back, yellow underparts. Same bird, though now I notice a splash of faint red on the belly. The bird launches itself into the air, executes several hairpin turns and lands on the same place on the same branch. Fly wings twitch from its bill. It launches again, snagging a second mayfly. *Vermillion?*

Field guides can add another pound to the bird bag but there

will always come a point when you need to know. If she's here, an hour after I parked, that means there's a nest. And if there's a nest, there's a mate. A swift adjustment of binoculars brings a separate portion of the tree into focus. Ten feet away from her, glowing like a tiny meteor, the red-and-black jewel.

I came back the next day to find the riverbank littered with 30 smashed beer cans. But it didn't matter. I was able to spend an entire afternoon watching the flycatchers feed.

When you see a bird you know, and you're seeing it for the first

time, nerves you weren't aware you had start to sputter. It's like celebrity spotting in a bathhouse. Oh my God, can you believe it? "Hope is the thing with feathers," Dickinson wrote, invoking one of her greatest metaphors and, for all her fellow bird people, something that's literally true as well. The idea of bird watching is predicated on hope, which is belief married to a wish. On the other hand, if you don't know a yellow warbler from a loose canary, all it is is yellow. It could be any kind of anything.

Taking an adult who knows nothing about the woods into the woods is like dragging a ten-year-old who can't stand music to hear *Gotterdammerung*. The most you can hope for is polite attention.

On a road trip I once suggested to a friend from Queens that we stop at a particular spot behind the Penn State College reservoir and go hiking. He was agreeable.

"Waxwings!" I said as a half-dozen flew into a tree overhead.

He gave them a quick glance.

"Mountain laurel," I said, as we passed thick clumps of the state flower, then in bloom.

"Umhhmmm," he grunted.

We climbed another hundred feet. Something that sounded like a snare drum stuffed with feathers exploded into the air and took off on a diagonal.

"Ruffed grouse!"

He nodded, not looking.

In 45 minutes the face was bored and the pace lagging. We went back to the car.

Native Americans understood the woods as a universe bristling with information. We descendants of the people who degraded their cultures and drove them from their lands come into a forest to amuse ourselves, when we come at all. We come mostly like the tourist who knows enough to know that it's worth his while to be there, but not much more than that.

What does the tourist do?

He documents.

"Did you get good photos?"

That's one of the two questions people almost always ask. When I say that no, I did not, that I've never carried a camera into the woods, they look at me as if I they'd just spotted shit on my shoes. They can, up to a point, imagine seeking out the unseen bird, but to do so without photographing it makes no sense.

I explain that I can barely manage binoculars, forget any kind of high tech camera, and that if I dragged a \$2000 Leica or \$700 scope along with me, these'd be broken, lost or destroyed in no time.

In truth I have no desire to photograph what I see. Beyond writing a bird's name in a pocket notebook, the idea of documenting what I've been lucky enough to stumble on seems pointless. Looking at pictures or video is interesting but not like chancing on birds in the wild. Photography only tells me what someone else has seen. The experience of seeking and finding something you find only by chance is its own reward, and to photograph birds is a separate and more deliberate procedure.

Besides, there's something in the compulsion to photograph nature that reduces the experience to a commodity. What were all those bird people in the Bosque hoping to come away with? An award-winning picture of a vermillion flycatcher (male)? Suppose they did? Then what?

The picture you take is essentially a souvenir and like most

sooner or later gets thrown out. The image recorded in the brain somewhere stays put.

Kenneth Rexroth captures it well in his poem, “GIC-to-HAR.” That title would mystify many today, when printed encyclopedias have been relegated to thrift shop basements. Years ago, it indicated the way that the 32 volumes of the Encyclopedia Britannica were alphabetically organized.

In the poem Rexroth recalls “Coming home from swimming/ In Ten Mile Creek” on an early summer evening, age unstated but implied to be about twelve, when

in a sycamore in front of a ruined farmhouse...
a song of incredible purity and joy,
My first rose-breasted grosbeak...

That gets it exactly right. You’re immobilized, enthralled, even frantic.

I encountered the same bird, at about the same age. There was, first, the song: a rolling series of figures in short notes, organized in beginning/middle/end form. This casual but earnest piece of communication burst suddenly from among all the familiar swamp sounds of the day—wind, water, ducks, red-winged blackbirds—and leaped immediately to distinction. I looked around. There it perched, 30 feet away, in the only tree that grew from a small, mossy island enveloped by streams. The roseate shield of the breast, the pale, oversized bill resembling garden shears, the black on white patterning, all of it vivid, all familiar. I knew it from the shabby mimicry on the second floor of the Stamford Museum and Nature Center, located in the middle among various display cases featuring glass-eyed cadavers set in dioramas consisting of painted backdrops or three-dimensional props (marshy muskrat den, shellacked tree trunk featuring woodpecker hole). Someone forty would quickly have spotted the bobcat’s buckshot-nibbled ear, the mountain goat’s missing hoof, etc. and dismissed this spurious tableau. On the other

hand, if you were ten these were anything but dull and dusty baubles locked behind glass. They were a Promised Land.

Fifteen years after that sighting, I saw my second. This was in Pennsylvania's Pocono Mountains. I was out on a trail with a friend who'd heard, probably more than one time in that long inebriated weekend, my rose-breasted grosbeak story.

"Jim, do you think we'll see one?" he said.

Extremely unlikely, I told him.

"Look!" he said, an instant later.

I was so sure he was pulling my leg that for a moment I refused to. Then I did. There on a birch branch, almost right over our heads, was the triangular pink shield. Black head cocked, the bird gave us the once-over for a good 30 seconds and flew.

People have looked at, wondered about, and named birds for as long as written records exist, and surely before that. The Romans looked at birds enough to have a term for those considered uncommon—*rara avis*. But they also named them and studied their movements, specifically flight patterns, as well as sounds, in an attempt to discern divine messaging. This was a process known as "taking the auspices" of the gods. This (says Wikipedia) came down through various Mediterranean cultures, beginning at least with the Egyptians and later the Greeks in the figure of Calchas, a seer whose gift for interpreting bird flight was reportedly received from Apollo. (Later, the contours and distortions of a sacrificial victim's liver were considered a more accurate or telling forecast in looking for signs of divine will.)

If the gods exist, the Stoics argued, then they care about humans and if they care, they communicate. Birds were the medium. Some—ravens, crows and owls—transmitted divine omens by their cries. Others (vultures and eagles) by movements. A few, including what the Romans called *picus martius*—the black woodpecker—provided information by both their sound and movements. According to legend Picus, the genus for woodpecker, was the name of a hand-

some Latin king who spurned the love of Circe. The vindictive goddess of magic turned him into a bird.

It required a legend for the Romans to explain *Picus martius*, the black woodpecker known to ornithology as *Dryocopus martius*. It ranges across Europe, including Italy and Spain. The bird has a North American cousin, the Pileated Woodpecker, *Dryocopus pileatus*. They're both about 20 inches long. A pileated woodpecker landed on an elm in our yard when I was growing up. Duck-sized and all business, it hammered and slashed at the trunk, ignoring the clutch of little primates that watched. My sister felt an uncontrollable urge to contact the Audubon Society with her discovery and the call, once placed, calmed her.

Fast-forward two decades to a time—mid-thirties—when my fascination with birds seemed to have faded. Now architecture and utopian communities obsessed. I had lucked onto a book called *The Communistic Societies of America* by the nineteenth-century American journalist Charles Nordhoff (published in 1876 and still in print) and wanted to know what had become of the communistic societies. My mission was to find out.

Not long after, I was taking a walk one morning in New Harmony, Indiana, making notes and soaking up the Utopian vibe when right about in the center of a good-sized lawn I noticed something unusual. About every 30 seconds an object, vividly red and shaped like a detached mustache, rose a few inches above the ground line and then dropped to disappear back into the grass. Back and forth flashed the red mustache.

It could only be one thing.

A crest.

I came closer. The crest reemerged, swinging like a clock pendulum. At 35 feet I realized why the bird didn't simply fly away. Greed inspires its own special bravery. The woodpecker was tearing into a stump. Cut to ground level and left to rot, the stump was alive with panicking carpenter ants. The pileated was trying to get as many down as it could before my presence became an actual threat.

The head came up again and paused. A single yellow eye with black in its center took my measure. After a few long seconds the stabbing and smashing and tongue-flicking orgy resumed. If birds are the messengers of the gods, perhaps they have other, additional duties. Soon enough, my trips to the woods resumed.

In the mid-1960s, Allen Ginsberg and Gregory Corso went to visit W.H. Auden at Oxford.

“Are birds spies?” Corso asked the senior poet.

“Of course not,” Auden insisted. “Who would they report to?”

“To the trees, of course,” Ginsberg said.

Actually birds *are* spies. They don’t report to the trees but to each other. It’s why the first thing you learn in the woods, if you hope to see birds or anything else, is silence. Watching from branch and treetop, they know everything that goes on there, much like the residents of any crowded block of Philly row homes where “the street has eyes.”

Watching is a kind of control. You can feel their attention to your movements. In a way, bird watching is a metaphorical two-way mirror: we’re looking at ourselves (what we want to see) while birds watch us. And you may think that the motivation for each action is easily separated: we watch from curiosity, they watch to apprehend danger. But their motives, never that cut-and-dried, are often complex, and only explainable, on one level, by a fact we often refuse to acknowledge: that every creature among the higher orders of animals has a personality which includes a range of characteristics, some more pronounced than others.

In the woods most birds stay safely out of the way of human trespassers but sometimes they’re interested in the fact that you’re interested. Walking a trail north of Lake Superior once a gray jay alighted on a branch an arm’s distance, made some frantic kind of noise and stared. Up there they call it the “camp robber” for its habit of snatching campsite scraps. A guess is my gray jay expected a handout.

I have had a loggerhead shrike trail me through the Southern California desert, saguaro by saguaro, like a store detective. I have had a yellow-rumped warbler, male, fly from tree to tree to get my attention, until suddenly landing in the dirt at my feet to perform, in Scheherazade style, a series of elaborate tail-dragged-in-the-dust dances, whether to distract me from a nearby nest or merely to entertain me, I have no clue.

I thought, and books tell me so, that the only sound a cardinal makes is its crude “chip! chip!” noise, but I was proved wrong in a Florida forest when a male followed me for a mile or so. Where the trail emerged into a clearing, the bird opened up with a rhapsody, complex and of considerable length. For exactly whose benefit I wonder.

Sometimes motives are clearer. In Arizona once, I stopped to get a better view of the single black-and-white form I had just seen moving in undulant flight across the road and when I got out to see where it went what confronted me was a crew of five acorn woodpeckers, perched on the cross beam of a telephone pole. They watched for about 10 seconds before sending up an enraged and hysterical cacophony.

Their message: *get the fuck out!*

I did. Not because I was afraid of them but because I respect what they are and where they are. I’m the intruder, but a polite intruder.

On hearing that I was going to be in Nevada, a contractor named Ed who was fitting out a room on top of my house with cabinets and a closet, immediately suggested a trip to the Great Basin for the specific purpose of viewing the Bristlecone pines, among the oldest living things on earth. The like-minded Ed is forever taking off for remote Western locations. It’s not so much about birds as simply being there.

When I got back and explained where I’d been, people would ask:

“What’s there?”

“Bristlecone pines.”

“Is that rare or something?”

“Actually they’re the oldest living trees.”

“I see.”

Pause.

“Did you go by yourself?”

That’s the other question, besides the one about the camera, that people always ask. The answer will confirm the received notion that esoteric interests and an anti-social temperament are inextricable. Which, maybe they are?

No one I know or have met who goes to the woods looking for birds, or just to be there, ever asks that question. Either they assume I went alone, or that if someone came along, that was not the point of the trip and hardly worth discussing.

Ed, for instance, would never have asked. He goes hiking alone all the time and knows what’s worth seeing.

The bristlecone pines, on some otherwise bereft ridges, huddle up there like a coven of witches. Think driftwood, large scale. All gnarled and nasty, growing up out of ground that looks as if it hasn’t tasted water since the Basques passed through on their way to the Gold Rush. They grow so slowly they actually look dead. They flourish at just below the tree line, that place on the trail where most of the vegetation is already behind you and the sound of the wind, roaming without impediment, is an eerie and continuous whistle, solitude’s one-note sonata.

Going alone means traveling in the best possible company. For two reasons. The first is that there’s no one pulling all your energies into small talk, gratuitous observations, worries about whether or not the car will be broken into, etc. Solo, there’s the chance I can focus on nothing but the here-and-now. Solo, my unaccompanied thoughts arrive in places they would otherwise not venture. Solo, I know my limitations, and more especially my strengths.

The second is that, separate and apart from your knowledge

of what goes on there, wilderness exerts a dynamic pull on the mind, hauling it toward some more humble place. What we most often think of as “silence” is the absence of human noise and, in the woods, silence has a permanence interrupted only occasionally by a thunderstorm, a limb falling, a bird cry. The woods is theater, a show that rolls on forever. Its silence has a way of placating old demons by assuring the hiker that the concerns of the human world—whether the break-up you’re in the middle of or the military coup somewhere on the other side of the planet—are ephemeral. The smells in that place assure me that decay itself has benign purpose. Why else would it be so fragrant?

But the greatest reward lies not in finding what you came to see but in seeing what you never expected to find. The most extraordinary things appear without warning. On that same trip to New Mexico, I was moving on a trail that took me into the higher reaches of a rocky plateau and then down again, following a stream through a boulder-strewn rock bed. Something small and dark moved among the lower branches of the pines, dropped via strange miniature acrobatics branch to branch, flitted to the ground and, after no more than five seconds, zipped back up into the shrubbery.

A warbler of some kind, the shape of which, with its long tail, looked a lot like a redstart, but the coloration of which—black, white and rose-colored red—was nothing like an American redstart and...

And I whipped the *Field Guide to Birds, Western Region* out of the bird bag and was able to quickly identify the painted redstart. The vermillion flycatcher I knew of, and always wanted to see. The painted redstart? Total stranger.

The long double-decker train lumbered up to the Albuquerque train station right on schedule, which is to say at about 11:45, shuddered a time or two and halted. Doors slid open and small steel steps dropped to the platform. Julio in Amtrak hat, white shirt and Navy pants, a suitcase gripped in each hand, stepped briskly down the steps and onto the platform before setting the suitcases down, at

which point he turned to offer an arm to an old woman with a cane. There weren't many getting off. He didn't appear to remember me when I showed him my ticket but in a minute I stowed my big bag in the luggage rack by the bathrooms and climbed the narrow stairs to the sleeping car's second floor.

It's hard to imagine any room smaller than what Amtrak calls a "roomette." Even with only a duffel bag and a cloth sack of snacks it's tight. Space takes on a different value when you have so little. On the other hand, if you're in there by yourself, the sense of privacy makes it seem like a room at the Plaza. You can draw a curtain across the door, fasten it with Velcro, and be completely alone to watch the world pass.

A moment later the knock came.

"So, my friend, how are the birds in New Mexico?"

It's always hard to know if people are taking a polite interest in what you do because it's their job to be personable or because they're genuinely curious. I'm past the point of caring either way, but I didn't want to blow off Julio so I pulled out my notebook which, I told him, listed twenty-two species I'd never seen before in the eight days since I'd originally arrived in Albuquerque. That seemed to intrigue him so I flipped open the *Field Guide to Birds, Western Region* to point out, among the color plates, the vermillion flycatcher, the painted redstart, the red crossbill, and the stilt. I leave it at that because I can tell by the way he nods that this is just about the right amount of information either way. Oh, he says, what time would you like to eat: 5:30, 6:30 or 7:30?

In early May, moving east on the rails in Colorado, the sun sets in the hour and a half between Trinidad and La Junta, which is when many people choose to have dinner. Once it does Julio comes by preparing the beds. In the corridors you can hear compartment doors rolling back and forth continuously. He tells the people who ask that he likes to get the beds made up early so that he himself can be in bed and asleep no later than 10:15, a subtle signal that after that hour he is not looking to be disturbed.

With the beds made up, passengers draw the curtains and soon enough the car is dark. They're done for the day and done for the night. The only sound is the rhythm of the train moving on tracks, a not overly loud mechanical rolling and shaking that anyone soon gets used to and which induces the most prolonged and restful sleep.

When the lights in the roomette snap out, the dark outside is darker than the dark inside. What you see from the window is wholly black, impenetrable. Soon enough the eye adjusts. Two or three lights in a distant farmhouse wink, blink, and disappear. Now the edge of some town, which then becomes Main Street, storefronts under streetlights, silhouettes receding. The moon emerges from behind clouds and follows the train for a good long while.

A few years ago I was climbing up a rocky canyon on a trail to an oasis in the Southern California desert. I was more interested in seeing what an actual oasis looked like than anything else, including birds, though if I spotted something more exotic than a cactus wren moving among boulders, that would've been the icing. But getting there was harder than it appeared on the map, though it was often downhill. In the distance I could see the oasis, and it looked, well, just like an oasis. Towering date palms rising up off a rock-strewn slope wedged between denuded hills, a small, clear stream, its edges lush with vegetation, somehow flowing through a few hundred feet of rock before disappearing back into the earth. Coming back was harder than getting in and at a certain point you stop looking—for lizards or birds or anything—and focus on lifting first one leg, then the next, and on breathing. Up one slope, then down, up again. Suddenly the question: how much longer can I do this? In five years will I be able to climb 7,000 feet without having a heart attack? In ten years will I lose my balance jumping across rocks and fall, breaking a leg? There may be ten good years left, I think, or there may be two. It could all end tomorrow.

Exactly then, approaching from the other direction, heading for the oasis, came two people who, to judge by the look of them, had to be in their mid-eighties. Their movements, however, belied

their appearance. In each hand was one of those poles that look like ski poles, a slender walking stick really, and using these the octogenarians propelled themselves along rather rapidly. A good word for the way they moved would be striding. I stepped aside and they greeted me and waved as they whipped past on their way to the date palms and the water. "You will do this as long as you want to do it," I thought. It is in the nature of a question to contain its own answer.

Long-Lost

*Becoming the archeologist
of your own family*

Jocelyn Ruggiero

I'm flipping through a thirty-year-old community cookbook by the Saint Ann Society of St. Michael's Church in New Haven, Connecticut when a recipe for struffoli, the Italian pastry, catches my eye. Crispy on the outside and cakey on the inside, these marble sized balls of dough are first deeply fried in vegetable oil, then drenched in warm honey laced with tangerine peels. Every year at Christmas time, they are served piled high in a mountain of sticky goodness. And for me, struffoli are inextricably tied to my great Aunt Chris.

I tasted her struffoli just once, when I was very young. I sit on a green and gold velvet couch in the living room of another great aunt, from another side of my family. I place the struffoli in my mouth in bunches. They are sweet and syrupy. I know, because my father told me, that my Aunt Chris made them, and that they are special.

Born in New Haven to Italian immigrants, Christine Angelina Zito was one of seven children, growing up in her family's little house in the then-Italian neighborhood of New Haven known as Fair Haven Heights. Her sister Antoinette was my grandmother; she died in 1972, nine months before I was born.

Chris was the only unmarried daughter in the family and lived at home with her parents. She inherited their house after they died. Like many other uneducated working class Italian-Americans in New Haven at that time, she worked in factories: Gant Shirtmakers and later Calabro Cheese. One of rows and rows of women lined up at machines, a community of workers.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Aunt Chris took a city bus to my grandparents' house once a week and she and my grandmother would spend the day together, shopping and doing errands downtown. My uncle Joey remembers Aunt Chris always laughing and making jokes. He would lie awake in his room, evading his nap while

his mother and Aunt Chris were out, because he knew his aunt was sure to bring him home a candy bar after their day out. Aunt Chris and my grandmother also cooked together. Uncle Joey watched them spreading a sheet over the dining room table, upon which they would roll out the long rows of dough for struffoli. She also made struffoli in the house on Farren Avenue with my great grandmother, Maddalena. Like my father, my Uncle Joey loved my Aunt Chris' struffoli. He recalled: "It was Christmas Eve, 1962, your dad and I were coming home from Grandma and Grandpa's and Aunt Chris' house. We were in Gramps's new 1963 Caddy on Chapel Street. I was holding a sacred bowl of struffoli! The light turned red and the road was icy... we rear-ended a car and there was struffolis stuck all over the dashboard and windshield!"

By the time I was born in 1973, Aunt Chris's existence was very different. Her mother Maddalena died in 1965, her father Vincenzo and then her beloved sister Annette in April 1972. New Haven also changed drastically during those years. The devastating urban renewal led by Mayor Richard Lee in the 1960s resulted in the demolition of old neighborhoods, the insertion of miles of highway across residential communities, and the displacement of more than 22,000 people, many of whom relocated to the suburbs surrounding the city. Manufacturing plants left. And *downtown* was no longer the golden destination it used to be. The small neighborhood of Fair Haven Heights that Aunt Chris, along with many others, called home, changed entirely, along with the rest of the city. Old family businesses closed. Young people moved away. People started driving more cars and stopped taking city buses.

I recall Aunt Chris coming to our house in the country outside New Haven only once when I was very little. She sat at our dining room table, her back to the china cabinet, facing the entrance to the kitchen where I stood. She was heavy and hearty, and she laughed. She called me "honey" in her low, caramel voice. I admired her red nail polish.

My mother tells me this didn't happen. That Aunt Chris was too

nervous to leave New Haven I wonder if it matters what the truth is. She either came to our house once, or she never came at all. Either way, she wasn't really a part of our lives. And, for whatever reason, that side of my father's family was fractured, with no matriarch, and no web of cousins. No big holiday gatherings. For me, the heart of my family was my grandfather's side of the family. Aunt Chris was on the periphery of my life.

Aunt Chris would regularly talk to my father "long distance." I'd eavesdrop from the hallway outside the kitchen while he stood by the mustard-yellow wall phone, laughing with her through the long curly cord as she told fresh but harmless jokes. My father always told me about her struffoli, long after she stopped making them. For me, they were a golden food made during a golden era that preceded me.

At some point, Aunt Chris fell on a city bus and injured her leg so badly that she could no longer work. She accepted a paltry settlement from the city and lived in poverty the rest of her life. Asking for more than what she was offered was unthinkable to her.

When I was in elementary and high school, we occasionally visited her duplex house in New Haven. She lived upstairs and her sister Arlene and niece lived downstairs as tenants. She didn't charge them enough rent to get by. Aunt Chris never invited us upstairs to her floor and she wouldn't let us up when we tried. She always came downstairs to her sister's. She sat and visited and drank a small glass of Foxon Park strawberry soda. She was friendly, but somewhat ill at ease. She was stiff when I hugged her goodbye. She was, as my mother says, "odd."

Aunt Chris sent me Hallmark cards on holidays, her pen underlining certain words in the card she felt were important, signing with old-fashioned careful cursive. No matter how little she had, she included a small check on my birthday and once sent me a rosary and a small plastic bottle of holy water from Lourdes.

After her sister, my Aunt Arlene, died, she was alone in the house with her niece downstairs, and my cousin was inexplicably angry with her for the rent she charged, measly as it was. Her younger

brother Gaetano (“Guy”) kept an eye on her, but Aunt Chris was increasingly isolated.

When I was just out of college, living in New York City, auditioning for plays and flinging myself at my new life, I would sometimes call Aunt Chris to chat. She urged me to get onto one of the soap operas she watched on Channel 8 every afternoon. She demurred when I suggested that I come and visit her.

After my parents’ divorce while I was in college, my father slowly annulled his relationship with me, and with that annulment, eroded the part of my history that was fabricated from his stories. In 2001, he briefly emerged to let me know that Uncle Guy had found Aunt Chris days after she had fallen onto the floor in her apartment. The roof of her house was in such disrepair that the ceiling inside her kitchen was crumbling. I took the train and went to visit her in the convalescent home. Her hair was gray and she looked very tired. She smiled at me while I chattered, but didn’t say much. I talked about the old stories my father used to tell, about her trips downtown and her struffoli. I rolled her compression stockings up her legs for her, and put an ornament I had brought of a tiny red cardinal on the mirror facing her. I propped up an 8 x 10 photo of my father as a little boy where she could see him and then I hugged and kissed her goodbye. She didn’t embrace me back.

Soon after, I called the floor nurse to see how she was, and she told me Aunt Chris had died the week before. My father had not called to tell me. I cried angry tears for her, and for me, in my Little Italy apartment, heartbroken that I had not said goodbye, and not paid my respects.

I’ve engaged in a kind of archeology lately, trying to piece together memories and stories about Aunt Chris’s life. I left an unanswered voicemail for someone with the same last name, whose number I found in the phonebook. I spoke to the Greater New Haven Labor History Association and W.E.B. Du Bois Library at UMass to find records of Aunt Chris’s time at Gant, unsuccessfully. When I called Calabro to see if they had any records of Aunt Chris’ employ-

ment, the person I spoke to laughed at the idea. I searched for her obituary, but there wasn't one. I went to New Haven City Hall and paid \$20 for a copy of her death certificate and saw that she had died finally of colon cancer, and that she was buried through Mar-tesca's, a funeral home both sides of my Italian family have used for more than fifty years. I called its third-generation owner Neil, who told me Aunt Chris had a small service at St. Rose's Church, in the Fair Haven neighborhood, and was buried in a family plot. He gave me the location of her grave on St. Theresa Avenue at St. Lawrence Cemetery in New Haven. When I visited, her resting place was near her parents, her grave unmarked.

I haven't been able to find people who can tell me about her. My father is gone, now totally estranged from his former life and family, with a new wife and small children, none of whom will visit the house on Farren Avenue, know my Aunt Chris, nor, I suspect, hear stories about her struffoli. I've lost then any photos of her my father might have, as well as his stories, now locked away forever

I have only two photos of Aunt Chris, both with her family. In a box buried somewhere in my basement, I have some Hallmark cards with her handwriting. And somehow, I have her struffoli. My memory of her struffoli is formed by an alchemy that combines my memories, my father's memories, my uncle's fifty-year-old stories, my imagination and my research.

Struffoli originated in the Naples region of Italy in the 17th century. Nuns made them each year at Christmas as an expression of gratitude for the patrons who supported them. Each December, the hands of these women reached out through the bars of their convent to the open hands outside to offer their gift, created in the warmth, seclusion, and camaraderie of their kitchens.

I made struffoli myself for the first time last year. I rolled the dough over my kitchen table into long ropes, cutting it into tiny slices, then rolled the dough into small balls. I discovered that it is a time-consuming task to undertake alone and asked a friend to help me. We made the struffoli, talking and laughing, and I could see that

it is meant to be made with others. I imagined when Aunt Chris did the same with her mother and her sister. And then after they died, alone in her second floor apartment, and, eventually, not at all.

I place a handful of the struffoli in my mouth and feel a communion with Aunt Chris, a woman I didn't really know, a woman who died very much alone and is—almost—forgotten.

Appetite

Margie Chardiet

August. A heat like an iron. Beyond the screens, filthy
from the war of hours, the flowers singe at their edges.

My mother seeking jobs again. How many born into
this hollow of day, how many come home slamming

doors? On the corner a big dog pulls a woman
into the road. The clouds look elsewhere, unkempt

and glowering. There's the way a choir moves as a single
organism. There's the deep dirt and its silent song

of blackness. What is it you said once, before I learned
not to hear? Tell me everything again or I can't go on.

At least I know about the cool promise of sink. Cold
water on the wrists. Which page is good for a laugh.

Just past the shallow porch a bee is wasted after guzzling
the cosmos. Flies like something swimming, bumps

the concrete, rises, sinks again, and out route 34 a hawk
dead on the shoulder, one wing stuck up like a sail.

The Formulary

Brian Dietrich

For starters—you feel like a squatter in your own skin.

Something feels *wrong*. Have you ever tried to brush the coat of a dog against the grain? And the word *unnatural* may have come to mind. Perhaps, *coarse*. Have you ever heard a loud scream and a thud in the adjoining apartment and opted *not* to call the police? When was the last time you looked up the word *indentured*? That's a little bit how your life feels like these days.

There are rules that you've outlined and detailed and tried to abide by in order to appease the deities, known or otherwise nameless. You go to work every cement-slow day, without fail, and you take pride in doing a job well, where there is an important distinction from actually taking pride in your job. For arguments sake, let's say you're a pharmacist. Now, you're not some pill-slinging donkey clocking the midnight shift at a CVS mortared into the middle of a large strip mall. Nor are you a researcher, some white-coat genius tinkering around with sugar pills and sickle-cell cures that look identical, playing your version of three-card monty with a test panel of doomed souls who spend their time managing pain episodes in the ER. Nope, none of that's for you. You happen to work in the heart of a small Massachusetts town founded by some original-school Europeans that crossed the Atlantic and thinned their ranks just so they could worship their deity in peace. Just so they wouldn't be persecuted. Think about that. How often do you even bother going to church anymore? How often do you skip just to catch that extra hour of sleep? How much do you even believe in God anymore?

Probably not enough to cross an ocean.

You run the town's drugstore, what those Europeans may have called an apothecary. What some of your more eccentric customers still call it. You work in a free-standing brick building painted white with a fading mural on the north-facing wall. You've actually tried to track down the mural's artist, from years back, to commission some

touch-up work, only to find out he'd hung himself in the basement of a bakery in Spokane. So no touch-up work by the original artist to the mural, which is of an old-timey clipper ship running parallel to a sandy shore. You've let the mural fall into a state of disrepair and you manage your tepid-guilt about it ever since.

You live and work in Clarkston, MA, an odd-shaped growth off the Berkshires, and when it comes to prescribing drugs, you're the only game in town. Unless you count mail order. Or the Internet. Or the strip mall wonder stores off the highway of the neighboring town where the nocturnal employees of the 24/7 Rx counters promise with their bleary eyes that no questions will be asked. So aside from those options, the citizens of Clarkston, MA depend on you to keep your walkway shoveled, door wide open, and shelves stocked with the best medicine science has to offer. The name of the store that you own and run, indecently, is Clarkston Pharmacy. No one has ever accused you of being clever.

You work the exact same shift, for years, from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., Monday through Saturday, closing up shop on Sunday so you can sleep through church. So you can worship at the altar of Foxboro. So you can stare at the walls. Take your pick. Each work day, you allot a half hour for lunch, generally in the back office, where you invariably eat a cold cheese sandwich of sharp cheddar on rye and a Coke. Though you find the redness of the Coke can jarring. The white script pretentious. You have a protégé of sorts, Timmy, who also has degrees in chemistry and pharmacology, just like you—though you suspect Timmy isn't long for Clarkston, starting to exhibit that small-town itch to move on. You've seen it before. You've experienced it before. And you've let the years go by saddled with your own inertia. Even if it wasn't always like that.

Have you ever zoned out while driving a familiar route, perhaps your commute or a drive to the in-laws, and weren't able to remember exactly how you got from point A to point B? You don't recall what you saw? Where did that distance and time really go? You tell

yourself you went on autopilot. Leveraged muscle-memory. Found your coping mechanism.

Are you starting to get the picture here?

One day behind the counter of the pharmacy you own, about a year ago, you concluded that you're the kind of person who would be willing to go to prison, to maybe even die, so long as it was for something that simply felt worthy of such a sacrifice. *Worthy*, not being the same thing as right or wrong, good or bad. The point being, you needed a change, which isn't to say you had any idea how to correctly go about it. Remember, no one has ever called you clever. You did know that you didn't want to hurt anybody, that much you were sure of—you've had that golden rule hardwired into your upbringing, by parents who didn't even believe in bug zappers or humane mousetraps. But at the same time, *do no harm* can be a tough maxim to work by, let alone live by, when you consider much of the world a zero-sum game. When you consider the trust the town has put in you as their pharmacist. Remember those parameters you try to abide by, well, they're itching to take a major blow if you let your cool detachment devolve any further.

Do you remember where you were when you made the first critical decision? You should. It was critical. You were in your newish house, pacing around the floor plan as though looking for doors you'd never opened before. Looking for rooms you'd never entered before. You'd been in that house for well over two years and you still called it *new*. It still felt new to you. Looked new. It even smelled new with the lingering waft of varnish that wouldn't abate. Before it was the place you called home, it was a plot of land that you hired a team of architects and builders to construct a house on that would accommodate your long-term plans. Back then, your long-term plans centered on some of the brighter aspects of the human condition—when words like *excitement* and *hope* weren't yet buried in cellar of your mind.

Not so much these days.

So this grand house that you've lived in for two-plus years has never really felt like a *home* to you anyway. And it didn't feel like a home that Sunday morning when you roamed around listlessly, wishing there was a light bulb to change or some hanging ferns to water. But you don't believe in the responsibility of organic houseplants. And all your lights were in perfect working order. You may recall, you were in the walk-in pantry when the doorbell rang. You were debating whether it was comical or tragic having so many dried goods for just one person, particularly for someone who mainly subsists on takeout and cheese sandwiches. That pantry was so damn big you could have rented it out as a studio apartment in NYC. You probably decided it was more tragic than comical.

Remember, the doorbell was ringing.

You answered the door and a man you've seen at the pharmacy before is standing there, holding a pair of dirty work gloves, wearing a tattered Celtics hat that casts a small shadow over his chip-of-mica eyes. You remember his name, it comes to you, Ray Greengrass, he's actually a regular at the pharmacy due to his problems with cholesterol that stems from both genetics and poor nutritional habits—the unwillingness to switch from burgers to salads. You haven't the foggiest what burger-boy is doing at your front door, not that you mind, it's been a slow morning and you were minutes away from picking stray popcorn kernels from the back of your microwave. So you smile and listen to what Ray Greengrass has to say. And as it turns out, he's delivering a friendly sales pitch, as Ray happened to notice your property is a bit under-attended and he's wondering if you have a guy, that's how he puts it—*a guy*. Truth is, you used to work on the property yourself but have grown disinterested over the past few months. Maybe closer to a year. And yes, Ray Greengrass, of all things, grew up to be a landscaper—you can't make this stuff up!

You invite Ray into your house, where it occurs to you that you hadn't a visitor of any kind in weeks, and even that was a contractor, who as you think about it, never returned your last call to quote prices on new marble countertops and backsplashes for the kitchen.

You and Ray take a seat in the family room, where he turns down your offer for French-pressed coffee, citing his ulcer, though overly compliments you on your high ceilings as though you sired and nurtured them into the world. You wonder why Ray isn't on over-the-counter medication for this ulcer of his. Ray is positive the room you're sitting in must have tremendous airflow. You tell him it has escaped your attention thus far. Then, oddly enough, you break into an apology for the unkempt nature of your property, the way the lawn is way overdue for a cut and grossly peppered with yellow patches of crabgrass. You apologize for the unchecked weeds that are choking away the sunlight and nutrients that the proper shrubs and rosebushes need. You apologize for the whole mess of your property as though you feel you've personally insulted Ray's sensibilities of proper lawn care and maintenance.

Have you ever been caught sneaking a smoke by someone you've known to survive lung cancer? Your apologies feel something like that.

Ray is caught a bit off guard by the profuse apologies and is probably wishing for that cup of coffee, ulcer be damned, just to give him a distraction from your steady gaze. He's probably wishing he just drove right by your house and didn't have the bright idea as to grow his landscaping business, one client at a time, grassroots-style, no pun intended. The two of you have gone quiet and there isn't so much as a ticking clock to fill the void. You don't believe in the responsibility of spring-operated clocks. Every time piece in your house is electric.

And in that silence, in the company of this stranger, your rebellious little idea comes to be.

You get up from your chair and sit next to Ray on the couch. You confide in him that despite appearances, money has been tight lately due to the fact that your mother in Corpus Christi has ESRD and is on a three-times-a-week dialysis regimen and you wire a considerable amount of your money to her to defray the cost until she's eligible to be Medicare-primary. You tell Ray that she's not well

enough to work and COBRA insurance only covers so much and none of this stops a bank from wanting its monthly payment. Ray dips his head in a form of condolence, where he can almost see his reflection in your thirty-thousand dollar imported hardwood floors of Brazilian cherry. The kind of floors you have to have professionally sanded and shined every two years.

You tell Ray that your mother isn't long for this world.

Then you propose a trade of sorts, what those original-school Europeans may have called a barter. You ask Ray to tend to your property once a month and in return, you'll provide his cholesterol medication free of charge. Ray takes a moment to reflect on this offer and can't help but look a touch befuddled. *How?* he eventually asks. Not the landscaping bit, the part about the free drugs. You explain to him that pharmaceutical companies are always dropping free supplies and inventory your way, in hopes of promoting more business and expanding into new member markets. You tell Ray that it's at the discretion of the pharmacist how these samples should be allocated. You say there is absolutely nothing illegal about it. You remind him that the pharmacy belongs to you, the sole proprietor. You explain to Ray that he could save hundreds, if not thousands, on co-pays and out-of-pocket expenses and all it's really going to cost him is a couple of hours on a random Sunday to keep the property looking *curb-worthy*. That, and to be honest, you don't have high expectations when it comes to lawn care anyway.

It doesn't take Ray long to agree on the proposal. You actually shake hands like two business men striking an accord.

So that's how it began. You invented a sick mother and prattled on to your new, best buddy about some kidney illness and pharmacopeia-jargon and ended up with the best looking property in the entire township. In fact, as you continued to keep up your end of the bargain, and Ray kept receiving his Tricor on schedule, you noticed just how serious he was treating the arrangement. You may not have cared that much as to the state of your property, but Ray did. It was

evident in the way the azaleas looked. How perfectly manicured the crawling ivy was. The calibrations to your irrigation system. That must have been around the time Ray got around to crunching the numbers and realized how much money he was going to save over the course of his lifetime if he did right by you. Ray was a businessman after all; he owned that small landscaping company, so he was well-versed in the concept of keeping the golden goose satisfied.

The only thing that Ray didn't know was that there were no free samples protecting his blood vessels from dangerous plaque buildup. And if there were, certainly not enough to cover the dosages he required. *You* were paying for his medication straight-up, replenishing the coffers of the business with your own money, careful to keep the pharmacy's balance sheet on the up-and-up and reconciled to the penny. It was, after all, your business. So in the end, whether it was a fictitious mother with renal disease or a burger-eating landscaper from Taxachusetts, you were out a few grand each year. Either way. The money wasn't the issue at hand.

It grew from there.

People would come into your pharmacy for their arthritis medication and fish-oil pills. For their beta blockers and cough suppressants. The manager of the local grocery store, Tedward Adams, would swing by for his nicotine gum or patches or whatever smoking cessation tool de jour he was attempting that week to kick the habit. Tedward Adams, the town grocer, Ted to his friends. The thing about Ted was that he survived the first Gulf War where he achieved the rank of specialist and actually received a Purple Heart for breaking his arm during military conflict on his second tour of the Middle East. Ted would tell you it was more of a skimmerish, but that's just him being modest. He'd joined the army as a non-smoker but the general boredom of wartime turned him into a pack-a-day-man. *The boredom of wartime.* These were Ted's words.

Ted's about your age, give or take a year, and you've thrown

darts with him on occasion in the local bar that catered to the pub-dart crowd. He'd always win and you'd share a joke that he'd missed his calling as a sniper for Uncle Sam, which always garnered a chuckle. Eventually, you'd have to decide whether Ted could be trusted to participate in your silly little scheme. It wasn't like you were giving away Pez candy. Even if these people *did* have scripts from actual doctors. It wasn't like you were necessarily stealing because the product was getting paid for one way or the other, but you also weren't asking how the other side of the equation was making good on the stuff you wanted. And that's an important distinction to understand, seeing as how the reciprocity you asked for in return was always based on want, not need. If you ever needed something, you paid for it, easily. But if you wanted something, like a suit altered or your car simonized, well, that was a different story. So you had to find people who could accommodate these wants who could also be trusted, who could put skin in the game and not rat you out to varying governing boards of medicine. Or worse, the Clarkston Chamber of Commerce. Eventually, you make your decision and speak with Ted outside the pharmacy for a few minutes and soon enough your weekly groceries, which are modest at best, are being delivered to your house every Saturday morning by the seventeen-year-old clerk named Jackie, who you tip generously because you happen to know his mom is HIV-positive due to a tainted blood transfusion from back in the day before they knew how to check for such things. Now Ted feels much more comfortable about quitting smoking because he's not spending thousands of dollars a year to shake the proverbial monkey off his back. And you don't have to traipse down those aisles of the grocery store anymore, stocking that pantry like it's the end of days.

You and Ted still play darts when the stars align, only now you notice how much closer the games are. How you even seem to manage the occasional victory. This is what Ted would call a, *soldiers-coincidence*.

Months go by.

You want to dissect a typical week now that those months have gone by? You want to take an inventory of all the progress you've made? Well, here it goes. You wake up, bright and early on a Monday morning and walk to work because it's autumn and the pharmacy is only 1.4 miles from your house. You stop in at Roasters, the Clarkston coffee shop, and trade glances with the barista who's scrubbing down a counter while foaming milk for a latte. Both tasks are temporarily abandoned to serve you a large coffee, black with an Equal and a *have a blessed day*. No line, no waiting, no register, no payment. We'll be seeing you tomorrow!

That costs you some birth-control medication.

You work your shift at the pharmacy, without fail, sometimes in front of the computer for hours at a time if Timmy is manning the counter. You pour over screens of inventory and account records for anyone who may be delinquent on receivables in excess of thirty days. Over the past few months, the pharmacy's inventory and financials have grown, noticeably. It's getting tougher to balance all the math with your outdated accounting software and hand-scratched notes. It occurs to you that a true accountant may be required. But not just any accountant; one who will be willing to swap services for handfuls of Kepra to keep their seizure disorder in check. Or erectile medication for obvious reasons. You're not too worried. You'll find somebody that knows how to keep a secret, that knows a good thing when they hear it. You just prefer they have completed their CPA exams.

You're fully aware just how tenuous this thing is becoming, how it could fall apart at any time. That there are now so many people involved, so many moving parts. But you try to frame it as a team effort. If everyone pulls their weight, things will work out for the best.

However. Have you ever built a house of playing cards? Have you ever even bothered to try? And if you have, were you ever really concerned with it falling down? Probably not. Because the truth is,

you don't stop building *until* it falls down.

Anyway.

You eat your cold cheese sandwich and sugar-bomb can of Coke in the back office, all compliments of Ted Adams, who is still keeping you flush with free home delivery of perishables and toiletries. You got Timmy dealing with the customers and you wonder how hip he is to what's been going on in the pharmacy over the past few months. You've been doing your best to keep him in the dark, uninvolved, to insulate him from something that may be considered less than ethical, if not nefarious, depending on your moral standards. Timmy's twenty-four years old and seems pretty clueless to you regarding the comings-and-goings of the business, more concerned with his failing fantasy football lineup and whether he should pursue a full-fledged relationship with a woman seven years his senior, who's taught him a thing or two in the back parking lot of a Portuguese wine bar some three towns over. How do you know all of this? Well, you've traded Valtrex with the very same woman for some gossip and maintenance on your home router system. What can you say? Small world.

Once it's 6 p.m. on Monday and your shift is over, you head to the gym where your membership has been comped in perpetuity provided the manager receives the most potent muscle-building supplements that can be legally prescribed. Nothing illegal—you're a pharmacist, not a drug dealer. So you tell yourself. And since you've entered into the manager's life, he can now dead-lift twenty more pounds and has noticeably less joint pain. He affectionately calls you Chico for reasons unknown.

After the gym, you probably go home and order a pizza and watch Monday night football because you're not clever enough to think of anything else to do. Or maybe you just really love pizza and football. You have this souped-up cable package that broadcasts every out-of-market game, including the ones abroad. The hook-up didn't cost you a thing, just some Ambien. The pizza you order has extra peppers on it and is delivered by an acne-riddled teenager of questionable intelligence who may have already hit his apex of

professional achievements. He consistently butchers the amount of change you're owed. Which is irrelevant because you invariably give him all the change back as a tip, regardless of the denomination of currency you're paying with. You also drop the occasional tube of Retin-A on him, gratis.

You pay for your pizza because you haven't struck a deal with the pizza shop owner; apparently she lives a medication-free lifestyle.

The rest of the week doesn't actually feel so much different from that Monday. Maybe you drive to work if the weather is bad. You haven't paid for an oil change or gas in months. Your car has never run better. The mechanics are an absolute delight when they're getting their baggies of Nexium every other Friday afternoon. Maybe on a lark, you don't feel like your usual lunch, so you frequent a local restaurant and order off the menu simply because you can. The busboy fills your water glass in record time. *Because you fill his diabetes medication.* The waitress will treat you like you're the only soul in the establishment. *Because her soul is dependent on anti-anxiety pills.* The chef meets with you personally to discuss the preferred temperature of your salmon. *Diabetes also.* The bill is ultimately waived since the owner is into you for prescription-strength deodorant and you help yourself to a mint-flavored toothpick and head back to the salt mines.

Have you ever wondered what it would be like to be picked first in gym class? To get that promotion at work? To be the unanimous homecoming queen? To get your kids to go to bed after they're asked only once? All of this is something like that.

Imagine a growing number of townsfolk becoming dependent on you for their free medication. Imagine everybody trying to keep the same secret for fear of butchering the cash cow, slaying the golden goose. And there you are, still trying to abide those boring, old parameters—doing no harm and working your shifts and keeping the pharmacy whole and providing Timmy with plausible deniability. You haven't used an ATM in weeks. You barely need cash any-

more. You have an awful lot of best friends now. You're still looking for that accountant. You still suck at pub darts. And despite all this, you're still pacing around those Brazilian cherry wood floors most weekend mornings, looking for that door that's never been opened, debating with yourself whether you're actually helping the citizens of Clarkston, MA. Debating whether it's still about you or is now about them. Wondering if this will turn out to be a cautionary-tale or praised as gospel.

In either case, it's not enough. It never is.

Things devolve.

Eventually, a weekend comes around where you spend a Friday night in a holding cell for fighting with a drunken sheet-metal worker over some perceived sleight. You haven't thrown a punch since your undergraduate days. But you instigated this fight. The deputy on duty owes you for quite a few doses of penicillin to clear up a smattering of the clap from a recent guys-trip he took to Iceland, to the Reykjavik club scene. He self-diagnosed himself on WebMD and preferred to address the burning sensation during urination sans wife and primary care provider. He was looking into back-channel solutions and *your* name came up. You figured if the cop was going to approach *you*, the smartest play was to go along with it. And it eventually paid off as the deputy booted the sheet-metal worker to the curb advising him to forget any of this happened.

The deputy offers to drive you home. But you decline. You opt to stay in the holding cell overnight. You choose the eight-by-ten space. You were kind of arrested, after all. So you tell the deputy you want to keep up appearances.

You leave the next morning with a new experience under your belt, though perhaps not the kind of thing you'd look to repeat any time soon. The sheet-metal worker chipped one of your bicuspid and you'll need to see a dentist at some point. You leave the jailhouse and the early morning air feels like an ice bath meant to tamp down a fever. The sun comes down in splotches as though it were a rash

on the Earth's surface. You're a bit unsteady. After a night of sleeping on a metal, rollaway bed, your neck and back feel twice their age. Your legs are exponentially heavier, sluggish. A cab takes you home and the thought of sleeping in your own bed isn't an unwelcome proposition. You're almost tempted to smile at the simplicity of the notion. The comfort in it. Then you get home and the fog starts lifting but there's no one there to greet you and no messages on the machine and no clocks to wind so you decide instead to sleep *under* your bed on those hardwood floors you had custom installed. After a few hours of that nonsense, when your back is throbbing and you should probably empty your bladder, you curl up against the bookcase in your home office and find yourself in a reflective mood. You've got the blinds drawn and only some slits of light penetrate the darkness of the room. Your house is quiet and still, like some forgotten mausoleum. These are optimal conditions for self-retrospection. You decide that it's pretty ridiculous to pick a fight with a guy in a Home Depot. Even if you're not clever, it still smacks too much of unoriginality. If you continue to pursue that thread, what would be next? Would you frequent a prostitute and not pay her? Hide in the woods and scare teenagers chugging beer around poorly constructed bonfires? Drive to Delaware and hire homeless people to act as your roving, satellite bodyguards in some sports book? This is what happens when you stray from the parameters. This is what happens when you lack creativity.

Eventually, after you've punished yourself enough, you lay down on your king-sized bed blanketed in sheets with a thread count as never-ending as pi.

You fall asleep.

Time continues on like this, though without the fisticuffs. You expand your network and incorporate an accountant and dentist into the mix. You get your books in order. You get the tooth fixed. That house of cards is growing larger and larger, but amazingly, the secret remains intact, no one's revoked your license and thrown you

before some disciplinary committee. It's hard to explain, to reconcile. You just have to conclude that no one is interested in ruining this thing that's working to their advantage.

It all feels very American to you.

So you stick to your schedule and your parameters and the Golden Rule and binge-watch more television than one person should. You've become a bit of a hermit, a recluse. Even Timmy seems a bit worried for you, going so far as to invite you out to knock back a few beers, something he's never suggested before in the interest of professional boundaries. Or because he's gearing up to leave the pharmacy. Or maybe he's just never really liked you. In any case, you politely decline. But interestingly enough, Timmy presses you, taking more liberty than he's shown in the past. He wants to know what you've been up to. How things are going? Why he hasn't seen you bopping around town over the past few weeks, aside from at the pharmacy? He reminds you that a few months ago you were quite the man about town. He truly wants to know. But you want to preserve that deniability you've cultivated for him; you don't want him paying for your mistakes. So you just tell him you've been busy, preoccupied. But it's clear he's not buying it and isn't going to relent until you offer up some elaboration. So you think to yourself. And you tell him the first lie that pops into your head. You tell him you've taken an interest in modern sculpture and that's where all your free time's been going. He looks at you suspiciously, raises an eyebrow, questions you about it. You tell him you've converted your basement into a quasi-studio and just recently learned how to properly handle an acetylene torch. Timmy looks genuinely surprised, impressed. He says he'd love to see some of your work sometime. You thank him for his interest, but tell him you're not ready for that. You're just getting started. But maybe, once you can perfect the art of working with vacuum tubing. All of this finally seems to satisfy Timmy, sate his curiosity, so he leaves you alone. And you're vaguely impressed with the ingenuity of your lie. Perhaps you're not entirely un-clever. Then you wonder what it would be like if it wasn't a lie.

So that night you began your stint as an amateur sculptor of modern art.

The first thing you realize about turning this lie into truth is that you'll need parts, all sorts of parts that will lend different textures to the things you want to create. It's not like you were going to learn how to chisel down a chunk of marble into Michelangelo's *David*. You wanted this to be *modern*. So you need the kind of parts and materials that one would typically purchase with cash, check or credit.

However, months and months of bartering have left you mostly averse to using your billfold to pay for stuff. In fact, aside from your mortgage payment and property tax bill, which are mostly for show anyway, you haven't been paying for too much around the town of Clarkson. So you start to ask around. All kinds of people owe you all kinds of favors and, honestly, they're more than happy to help out where they can, provided their supply of medication doesn't run dry. Besides, it's not like you're asking for anything expensive. In fact, most of what you're soliciting is worthless junk. So your guy at the phone company hooks you up with some spools of curly cord. Ted Adams, over at the grocery store, gives you all the thin, wooden produce crates you'll ever need. The junkyard manager becomes invaluable, most recently laying some refurbished rebar on you. Your electrician gives you some sautering wire. Lends you an old sautering iron. You score some PVC piping from a droopy-eyed plumber battling ulcerative colitis. Decorative glass and ornamental bobbles from an arthritic antiques dealer. More light bulbs of varying shapes and colors from the hardware store owner than you'd ever possibly need. Bolts of fabric and sewing materials from the menopausal dress-shop manager. Are you getting the idea yet? You basically get your hands on whatever new, used or damaged materials you can barter with prescription medication.

So really, who's getting the better end of the deal in this equation?

After a few weeks of gathering these resources your basement has transformed from an under-utilized rec room into a pseudo-junkyard filled with materials and tools like ceramic saws and hydraulic nail-guns. On your lunch breaks back at the pharmacy, between your bites of cheese sandwich and sips of Coke, you sketch out ideas of what you want your sculptures to look like. You map them out, not wanting to dive into this endeavor unprepared; you want the effort of forethought to guide your hands through this process. You start to look forward to 6 p.m. so you can get home and commence bashing and melting stuff in your basement. You open windows for ventilation. Add additional lighting for visibility. Station fire extinguishers within striking distance. One of those evenings, you teach yourself, with the help of some online videos, how to safely use a blowtorch behind the protection of a heavy welding mask. On that day, maybe for the first time ever, that house you live in actually felt like *home*. Stripping off the hot mask. Taking the cool shower once your building session is over. Something is clicking; somehow you're forming a kinship with the house—through, of all places, the basement.

So you keep going, you stay at it, building and making mistakes and rebuilding and nicking up your hands and generally making it up as you go aside from those crude sketches and online videos. Despite your zealousness, you take your time. You're not trying to break any speed records, and besides, you're enjoying this time in the basement and haven't really anything to run off to anyway. Now the smell of bubbling, burning plastic seems forever lodged in your nostrils and you can feel the literal grit of manual labor lodged under your fingernails. You can see why it would appeal to some people. You're not going to quit your day job any time soon to work with your hands, but those hours in the basement building the dexterity and finger strength into your hands continues to mean more and more. You keep at it. Until one day you've reached the point of constructing a fully operational swinging joint, an elbow, from a piece of rain-gutter that pivots off a brass joint that's nailed into an old

coffee table leg. You use the parts from an old microwave-carousel to allow a head to turn from left to right and back again. One of your statue's knees are mostly the remnants of an old pulley system from some ancient gym equipment. You continue to develop and refine these mechanics, which requires trial and error, which is fine, since it's not perfection you're striving for. Your life has been governed by the principles of chemistry for as long as you can remember. Now all you care about is physics. You care about torque and mathematical ratios. About drills bits and crescent wrenches. You don't care that as the statues take form, they're able to move their parts in ways a human could never achieve. That their clothespin fingers can rotate three-hundred and sixty degrees or have the properties of double-jointedness throughout varying body quadrants. That their heads can rotate like owls and ankles can fold into themselves.

You're not re-creating man in the image of God after all. This is something different.

After weeks and weeks of scrapping these statues together, after weeks of breathing in noxious fumes and catching your thumb under the business-end of a ball-peen hammer, you're finally satisfied with their construction. They've been built soundly and possess a legitimate builder's integrity. Perhaps more importantly, they're beautiful in your estimation. They are beautiful in your eyes. But you admit that something is lacking. You've missed something that leaves them, somehow, incomplete. Something your sketches didn't account for. It doesn't take long to figure out what the oversight is. But in the vein of expediency, you also admit to yourself you need the expertise of someone else. The previous patience you'd worked under has evaporated under the close proximity to the project's completion. The proverbial finish line. You need to involve a certified electrician. Fortunately, you already have that relationship in place. He's the guy with all the sautering equipment and technical know-how. And yes, your electrician's name is Jacob Goodspark.

So one day you invite Jacob down into your basement and explain to him that you want your statues hooked up to a power

source. You want them *juiced*. You tell him you want them to shine. And you quickly see the confusion in his eyes. Or is it revulsion? You show him that you've retro-fitted the room for bulbs and lights and coils of wiring that need to run through their bodies and carry an electrical current to illuminate the statues. That you'll want to tap into the house's power-supply. *Your home*. That maybe a small battery, perhaps from a lawnmower, can go where the kidneys would normally be to provide a redundant power source. Jacob stares at you for what feels like a long time until he finally says, *I thought you were a pharmacist*. You tell him not to get bogged down with labels and get cracking on lighting these puppies up. Which he does without fail. He's got too much free anti-fungal medication riding on this relationship to let you down, even if he is clearly creeped out by the assignment. So over the course of a few weeks, during his spare time, Jacob comes over and wires the statues with a pluggable, energy-source backup and complimentary battery reserves. He bundles the wires with tie-wraps and lays them through the arms and legs and chest like a circulatory system, taking care to enclose them cleanly and eliminating any slack that could get caught in one of the many moving parts. It is very evident that Jacob takes great pride in what he does, in what you've asked him to do, even if he doesn't really understand what you're on about. He even vacuums the basement when he's done. When the job has been completed to your satisfaction, you send Jacob Goodspark on his way, with a hearty thanks and a case of hard-to-procure craft beer the local liquor distributor dropped on you a few weeks back. Plus the anti-fungal meds.

Before Jacob leaves for good, you tell him to forget whatever it is he thinks he's seen in this basement. Which, from what you can tell, he's happy to oblige.

So now you charge the statues up and in the darkness of your basement, the windows now spray-painted black and the lights turned off, you watch them twinkle into existence. The icicle-lights you've used as hair. The big, red bulbs that burn from their chest cavity, meant to resemble a heart. The tiny filaments that glow where

eyes would be, locked into the sockets. All of these lights churning and oscillating at different intensities, illuminating their personalities in unique ways, much as their individual mechanical movements do. This is what was missing, what your schematics lacked. The construction gave them form. But the light gave them life. You sit back, pleased, your spine flush to the cement wall of your basement, fiddling with a pair of needle-nose pliers, watching your four creations hum with electricity, learning the patterns of their twinkle-twinkle lights and staring deeply into the haze of those burning, red bulbs semi-hidden behind the patchwork of sheet metal and make-shift ribcages. You spend the entire first night with them in the basement, falling asleep on and off against that cold concrete, awash in their glow. Watching them while awake. Them watching you while you sleep.

Or so you imagine.

We should take a moment to clear the air.

So what exactly have you been waiting for? Did you think the pharmacy-pyramid scheme of yours was going to topple, that the house of cards would fall? Have you been waiting to get busted? Maybe this will happen and maybe it won't. How about the money? You must have asked yourself how you've been funding this enterprise. That has to be one of the most persistent questions of this entire endeavor. Well, set your mind at ease, because the money is never going to run out, ever. You could supply Clarkston with free medication indefinitely and it still wouldn't put a dent off the interest payments you receive from the bulk you inherited when the bloodline above you hit a tragic snag. When you were bequeathed the kind of wealth that compounds faster than the Treasury can print new currency. This was more than a few years ago on the West Coast, and you needed to start over with your degree in chemistry and windfall that was forever tainted because you didn't want the bloodline to sever. You didn't need or want the money at that cost. At any cost. But it happened just the same.

Massachusetts seemed as good as any place to start over.

Your first instinct is to be swayed by the money. To blaze a different trail than the one you took. Don't fall prey to that notion. Those four sculptures in your basement don't mean anything less to you than if you were flat broke, the eldest of seven children that survived from a polio-ridden family that had ties to the Teamsters and communist sympathies. The money is the lowest common denominator—it's a crude tool, at best.

The question is, do you want to know what happens next? Or has knowledge of this wealth instantly hardened your heart? Or maybe, just maybe, you're still holding out for hope? For that happy ending?

No promises.

You injured yourself. You broke your ankle when you fell off a ladder trying to remove a stray branch that got caught up in your roof's satellite dish that's been obsolete since you got the premium digital package. You were feeling lazy and bored and maybe a bit despondent that day and perhaps that had something to do with your foot slipping from the fourteenth step of the ladder. Or maybe that's just what happens when you mix ladders with gravity. So you fell and broke your ankle and crushed your cell phone under the weight of your crumpled body, twisting in pain on a bed of wet, mucky leaves. Your house is built on the kind of property where you'd need a bullhorn for someone to hear your cries for help. You were on your own. So you crawled and hobbled back into the house and called the police, who sent an ambulance to squire you into the emergency room of the local hospital. You're treated very well and provided almost concierge-like attention, though you suspect the lipotropics you supply the admitting nurse has something to do with that. You're ultimately told it was a clean break and are quite lucky not to have landed on your head, that from that height, your *accident* could have been fatal. You'd like to feel more gratitude, but the pain from the fall is pretty excruciating and you're not-so-patiently waiting for the

Vicodin to kick in. The Vicodin they reluctantly gave you. Then they boxed up your foot in a cast and sent you on your way with a pair of those weightless, aluminum crutches and some scripts for the pain. You end up calling Timmy to give you a ride home from the hospital because you really can't think of anybody else to ask. The first thing Timmy says when he sees you is, *dude, you've got to be more careful*. Apparently, Timmy is now comfortable calling you *dude* once you're infirm. He also asks about your modern art projects. You fall asleep sitting shotgun in his Acura coup.

You spend the next morning or so hobbling around your house, getting used to the crutches and being an invalid and it feels weird not being at work, but you figure you'd better take a day or two off to convalesce and Timmy can handle the place in your absence. So you gimp around your big, empty house, trying to navigate stairs and take a shower with a garbage bag around your cast. You still eat your cheese sandwich, though you toast it in a pan. You drink a glass of Coke. You stare at the empty plate and lament not developing more hobbies as a younger man. You make it down into the basement and hang out with your lifeless sculptures, positioned in the exact same place you left them in the day before.

As if you were expecting otherwise?

Then you pop a Vicodin for your ankle pain.

You start moving your statues upstairs, which won't be easy because you're half-crippled and there's enough metal in each one to weigh at least thirty to forty pounds. With all the moving parts and general awkwardness of their construction, it's a small miracle you can get the four of them up without breaking your other ankle. But you eventually do get them out of the basement, not without a considerable amount of time and effort, complimentary pain, so you swallow two pills with a glass of orange juice with extra pulp and take a nap. When you wake up, you set your sculptures in the family room, putting them on the loveseat and in the rocker and even propping the smallest one Indian-style atop an antique-looking ottoman you got from Restoration Hardware two years back. You plug them

all into the room's outlets and they blink and glow anew. You sit on the couch, next to the one sculpture that you imagine would have soft hands and a stern, maternal glow about her. If it were alive. If it were a *she*. You stare into its chest cavity, where the red bulb is, where the heart isn't. You look at all four of them. You sigh and go to the fridge and get that carton of orange juice and proceed to finish off the entire bottle of Vicodin and you wonder what it will be like. Then you fall asleep and the last thing you remember is that your ankle feels, oddly enough, great.

So there you have it.

Perhaps this is what you've been waiting for? If you weren't going to get caught and the money was never going to run out, perhaps it was just a waiting game until you punched your own ticket? Maybe this was the only logical conclusion to your rebellious, little scheme. The only way to escape your *parameters*. But did you really think you were going to get off the hook that easy? You can forget that notion, pill-pusher. You didn't die that day. You barely scratched the surface. Because about ten minutes after you fell asleep and the pill bottle slipped from your hand, Ray-fucking-Greengrass showed up at your door to do some touch-up work on the property. He saw your car in the driveway and figured you were home recouping, as news of your ladder fall had spread across town. He figured he'd stop in to pay his respects and fire up the weed whacker to clear out some perimeter overgrowth. Imagine his surprise when he looked through the oversized bay windows that flood your family room with natural light to see you slumped on the floor surrounded by what looked like a bunch of flashing robots. Or were they large Transformers toys? Either way, cast around your ankle, empty pill bottle, not moving an Earthly inch.

Ray calls 911 on his cell, and you're back in an ambulance, spirited away to have your stomach pumped in the same hospital where you got your ankle wrapped. This time you're assigned a case worker and clearly won't be given anything to manage the pain, ankle or otherwise.

Before your initial psych evaluation, you ask your case worker to call Timmy and inform him he'll have to mind the pharmacy for a few more days.

So you spend a few days in bed or shuffling around the hospital

in your threadbare gown, your emperors' clothes. In your cotton slippers. Well, slipper—you've still got that cast. Those crutches. Everyone's got their eyes glued on you, not that you can really blame them. The literature is overwhelming. Those that attempt suicide are still vulnerable in the following days, the *if-you-don't-succeed-at-first* crowd. The ones that aren't cries for help. It's in those immediate days after the first attempt that the seed of life or death will be planted. Not dissimilar to the importance of finding a missing child within the first forty-eight hours, so holds true for the individual whose neck didn't snap or lungs succumb to the carbon monoxide.

You end up doing a lot of talking with strangers, doctors, nurses, your case worker. They all ask you a million questions and the truth is you're not particularly interested in answering any of them. You tell them you need to get home, there are clocks to wind, houseplants to water. That your robots are probably still plugged in. This kind of talk doesn't help your argument to leave, since your kind of being held at their discretion. You really can't believe the pills didn't get the job done and Greengrass just *had* to show up exactly when he did to manicure your property. The words *dumb luck* seem like an understatement. You end up having a few random visitors over the days as news gets out: Timmy, Greengrass, fellow conspirators in the pharmacy-pyramid scheme. They all want to know the same thing. *Why?* Some are too polite to ask, constrained by New England manners. Others aren't. You don't offer any guidance. Timmy brings you up to speed with how the Bruins and Patriots are doing. He tells you a lot of people have been coming by looking for you, though aside from that, the pharmacy is doing fine. He tries to cheer you up. They all do. They all have their different methods. But at this point, you've had enough of the questions and the boredom and not being

at work. That's actually one of the things you're starting to miss, the routine of work, the townsfolk at your counter.

Enough days finally pass where the medical personnel pretty much have no choice but to release you back into society on your own recognizance. They can't watch you forever; they can't babysit and hide your belt and shoelaces for the remainder of your adult life. You've told them what they wanted to hear, mostly—only lying when you needed to, only being your fake-self when you had to be. You tried to be honest, but you wanted out of that place. You wanted to put the embarrassment and the pound of flesh in the rearview mirror. You knew you weren't going to try a stunt like that again. Even if those few days of close supervision hadn't changed your heart completely, you figured you were still on this planet for some reason. It wasn't like you had on rose-colored glasses and the hospital food tasted like home cooking, but you were ready to go home and put on a pair of jeans, to lie on the couch and read about patent expirations and shifting drug tiers from the periodicals you still subscribe to. It was time to sleep in a bed that didn't have collapsible metal rails. It was time to watch your digital cable. And to throw the expiring eggs out of your refrigerator.

So they finally released you from the hospital.

This time, you took an Uber home.

And that first night back home is kind of weird. Your sculptures are still in the family room, though they'd been unplugged. Some furniture is askew, presumably from Greengrass rushing through your unlocked front door and the paramedics rushing you out. You clean up around the room, plug the statues back in and watch them glow fresh off their hibernation. You haven't eaten in a while and it occurs to you you're not remotely hungry. You treat that as a bad sign. You're supposed to call your caseworker in the morning. You know she'll ask what you had for dinner. So you'll have to lie about that. Another bad sign. You turn off all the lights in your downstairs and sit very still in the family room with the statues blinking around you. You don't bother to retrieve the days of accumulated mail. You

don't even go upstairs to check the phone messages on your landline you still keep out of nostalgia. You just sit on the couch in the dark, wearing those jeans you were so excited about, thinking about snowflakes and poison apple seeds. You think about the billions of tumors that lie dormant in the nooks and crannies of your species. You think about the things that can't be undone. Too many bad signs. But you do enjoy the way your robots twinkle. It's pitch dark outside, the moon obscured by blankets of clouds, and pitch dark inside with the exception of your creations.

It's so quiet in your house, that if you listen very, very carefully, you can hear the cardiac muscle in your heart keeping you alive.

This goes on for an hour until your legs fall asleep. Until your mouth turns to cotton. Until you're roused from your trance by a speck of light you can see through those oversized, bay windows — something that may be at the base of the long driveway. Actually, it looks like it's on the road leading towards the base of your driveway. Soon enough, there appear to be a dozen specks of light behind the first one, gently bobbing, soft and alive, but moving with a definitive purpose. In no time there are dozens of them, maybe over a hundred, and you've shaken your legs loose, pins and needles subsiding, and have your nose pressed to the window's glass to get a better look at exactly what's happening out there. You can start to make out the shapes of human bodies, people, carrying some kind of light, some kind of fire as they approach your giant house at a steady clip. You rub at your eyes and now there may be two hundred people advancing on your property with what looks like torches and it's not really making much sense to you at the moment. You hobble into the bathroom and splash some cold water on your face, returning to the windows to see nothing has changed. You're not dreaming this, not imagining this. There's no one's opinion to ask of in the room. To confirm what you're seeing. You look to your twinkling sculptures. Your statues. Your robots.

Your monsters.

They're coming for them.

The townsfolk think you've built a house full of monstrosities and they're coming to take them away. You tried to kill yourself and they all think those *things* have something to do with it. Enough people have seen them at this point: Goodspark, Greengrass, the paramedics. Word has gotten out. You spoke about them in the hospital. You said it was a hobby. But now they think you're a crazy person and this mob has come to make things right. They can't afford to lose you and the pharmacological value you bring to the community. They're not ready for the house of cards to topple. So they're going to do what's best for you and incinerate this modern art of yours.

You know you can't allow that to happen.

As those hundreds of torches are getting closer.

You look to the *monstrosities* that occupy your family room and know you're willing to fight to keep things as they are, that their place is here, with you. They are not the problem. If anything, they've been more of the solution than you've given them credit for. And they're not going anywhere. So you go into the kitchen and get a giant, vegetable-chopping knife that you've probably never used on so much as a carrot. You feel its weight and balance in your clenched hand. You figure it's you and your knife against hundreds of people advancing on your house, and you're still on those crutches. For the first time in your life, you wish you owned a gun. That you were a gun owner. You go back to the window to see the lead figure getting close to your door, your vision now half-obscured by panic and rage. By disbelief. You squeeze your fingers around the hilt of the knife. You think about how this has been a really weird year for you. How nothing has gone according to the loose-knit plans you kept in the back of your mind. It's all happening fast, but you think and think and think how you've gone from the town pharmacist to pariah in record time.

Those lights are starting to clog your driveway, clustering near your front door.

Your heart's beating fast, that trusty cardiac muscle, and you have to admit to yourself you're scared. Legitimately scared. You

run the serrated edge of the knife across your knuckles, gently, the hand attached to the arm you'd throw a haymaker with. You'll stab somebody with your other arm. You'll use your crutches in the fracas that's about to ensue, perhaps as spears until they're ripped away from you. You look to your statues and at the very least, are comforted to know who you're fighting for. The worthiness of the sacrifice. Until you look back at the window, ready for people to break through or batter your front door down, only to see Ray Greengrass tapping on your window, the lead figure, holding some kind of large prayer candle, vigil candle. He's motioning for you to open the front door. He's wearing the world's most benevolent smile.

That's Greengrass for you, always stopping in unannounced.

You quickly drop the knife and kick it under the couch.

Since the lights are off in your place maybe Ray can't see you so well, but there's no missing your four robots awash in their white and neon lights, illuminating the room with just enough visibility. Ray clearly sees you and continues to tap on the window and is pointing to the dozens of people filling up behind him, all of them holding some kind of candle or lantern or heavy-duty flashlight. You take a step closer to the window and are able to make out some familiar faces in the crowd; the guy who pumps your gas and the woman who shepherds the school kids across the busy intersection each morning. There's a town councilman and your cable repairman. Tedward Adams and that burly fellow that reads your water meter every month. They're all outside your house, bottlenecked in your driveway, standing on your well-manicured lawn, a phalanx in front of your big, wooden door. All of their faces are aglow in the candle light, in the soft yellow light, peaceful and benign. While your face is lit blue then red then pink then white, cut from different angles and different intervals, the oscillating patterns from the four sculptures. It's not hard to imagine how you may look to the townsfolk on the other side of your window. You're on your crutches, shadow and light running amok on your recently weathered face. Perhaps you've got it all wrong. They haven't come for your modern art. You're the

monster they've come for.

None of this is making sense to you.

But Greengrass is persistent, tapping on the window, mouthing something, saying something that is hard to hear over the din of the crowd and the thick glass in your windowpanes. You're certainly not ready to open that front door. To pay whatever check the townsfolk have congregated for. So you press your ear to the glass and strain to hear what Greengrass is talking about, something to the effect of, *we figured it out, we know what you've been doing*. You take this as a bad sign. You look at him in a confused sort of way; you put your ear back to the glass and really concentrate on what he's saying. *You've been paying for all our medication, we started talking to each other, there were never any free samples*. Oh, so they've figure that part out. *You don't need to be afraid of us, or anything*.

It feels like Greengrass is trying to talk you off a ledge and you have to double check to ensure you've dropped the knife, that it's out of sight. You notice that one of your robots is making a clinking noise you've never heard before. Moving parts. Moving juice. You look to the crowd and it's pretty clear that everybody outside has been a part of your reverse pyramid scheme. That they're the ones that have benefited greatly from the barter system you implemented and now they're outside your house because what was once a secret is no more. All of those claimants of pills and scripts and bronchial-dilators have banded together to peaceably besiege your house under the cloak of a makeshift vigil. They're here at your doorstep after your hospitalization because that first night back home is the most important, the toughest to get through. *You've done enough for us, more than we could have ever asked*. At least, you think that's why they're here. You think that's what Greengrass is saying. You suppose you can open the door and find out. Greengrass keeps tapping on the window. The robots keeping blinking and humming. You even notice Timmy a few rows back in the crowd. He's holding his cell phone up, ablaze with a digital torch. He's looking a bit tired from all the shifts he's been covering at the pharmacy. He's with that woman

who's seven years his senior. Your front lawn is trampled, though radiant in all the candlelight. Your statues twinkle and hold their respective places in the bosom of your family room.

Come on outside, the community is here for you. It occurs to you you'll need to give Timmy a raise. And you need to remember to order more pill-splitters. You figure you could flick the lights on downstairs, but they can see you just fine. They can see you as you are. The *real* you. You walk over to the statue you've imagined possessing maternal-instincts and run your fingers over the slightly warm metal of its face. This was more than a pastime to you, more than a hobby. *She* means something to you. You walk over to the other, larger statue, the one who you imagine taught you how to throw a baseball. And you take its hand into yours, those fingers of clothespins and broken plier pieces and appliance tubing and you shake its hand as though it were sending you off to college. *He* is more than inanimate. Then you let the crutches fall to the floor, you keep your weight on your good ankle. And you pick up the two, smaller statues and nestle their weight under the crooks of your arms. You feel their warmth. *They* are all that is good in this world. That clinking noise seems to have disappeared. Or maybe you've just stopped trying to hear things that aren't really there. You're in your family room. In your home, no longer your house. Greengrass continues to mouth something, but you don't bother to press your ear to the glass, it's obvious now. In fact, it's the most obvious thing in the world; you just wish you weren't such a slow learner. You may have spared yourself some pain. But you know that's not true either, the pain is necessary and not to be begrudged. But you do find it comical that it took your landscaper to convince you just how okay everything was going to be. And standing in your home, surrounded by your loved ones, inside and out, mechanical and flesh, you believe him.

Four Poems

Magdalena Zurawski

The Tiny Aches

Sometimes things hurt like a dream
in the flesh. You are seeking a huge
pair of butterflies

who you know
will only come later. 4am keeps ringing. Its spidery snare and all the stars are

your own
headache cemented in our most ancient fears. Even love
emerges as just
a plush yawn, a hydroponic mood of lingering
limbs. It chews the warm light
slowly,

as if you might
not be here. Its idiot words refuse to reveal
their intent.

You wake muffled.
Is there any tenderness on deck?

The present is not enough, will never be
enough. The future,
artificial and polite, promises you a locomotive
heading west. You feel it coming
through the patio beneath your feet.

You will arrive, someone tells you. There will be a tree-lined belonging. You will finally
shed the tiny aches of your birth. Someone

else sees the doubt in your face and assures you
every little flower
is the craft of someone you haven't yet met. You nod, lift a leg
as if preparing to board, though
you hardly believe it.

Cool Ark for Clark

These pleasures of the breath-husk
are merely for frolic's sake. Have
them on toast! Earth is doing

backflips on a leash. Your car
heaves, but I listen only
to your heart. Yes—the mind

shakes the treetops and the water
glass. You can hurl comets if you
open the senses, but stay casual.

Keep the green window plants,
pickled newspapers, and a table
for two near the waxed

genitals. We have enrolled in a good
college, so take no guff. Let your spirits

blow your nose into the brain where
a world revolves around a fine bacterium.

Life For Mike

Shit flows downstream
on big pills and
your Pal's a loony
on time-released spirit.

He's the width
of a wolf all animated
in gray along
a highway. Traffic's
a mode of worry
so worry.

Your breath hits
the outskirts of Pensacola while
California bangs in
your shirt. Your
heaven is windy and
there's no more wine.

Call for help.
Where is there a sign
willing to understand?

As Per Gus

they shove
tomorrow's deli clerk
into position
each distant star
clear as mud

Coming Through

*A Boston museumgoer's art
of survival*

Colin Fleming

There is a room at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, in the second floor of the American Wing that is comprised entirely of Winslow Homer canvases. Half of them are Civil War scenes—mostly men between battle, gearing up for the next one—and half concern the sea.

The former have a dustiness to them, a prevailing brownness, whereas the latter feature blues that trend to black, for Homer preferred to depict the sea at night, or at dusk, or with a storm coming on.

There is one exception at the MFA, a panel he painted for his brother's boat, depicting men, out in the sun, catching mackerel by the bucket. You'd want something happy like this for your boat, not a reminder of your mortality or, what I think Winslow Homer really specialized in, reminders of our emotional mortality.

When you go through a lot, and you try to keep going, you learn that there are all kinds of ways to die which won't actually remove you, physically, from this planet. It is cold comfort to know that enduring and pressing on and fighting harder to live than ever before, without anything changing for the better, is still a worthier way to go than inventing some narrative of falsehoods that you might try and accept to make existing easier.

This is where faith, I suppose, comes into it. Faith isn't a belief in a man in the sky. It's not bolstered by a catechism you chant out in the night. Faith is going through something that would break most people, continuing on, trying to evolve, letting nothing stop you in that march onward, even if your friends and family flake away because what you're enduring is too upsetting to them, too much of a reminder of what they might not be able to go through, and still having some shred of belief that doing all of this will be worth it in the end.

That, to me, is faith. Nothing else is.

There are—or can be, anyway—a lot of days, months, years, where it seems that the gale will never let up. You can be armed with thousands of reasons for why it won't, couldn't. And you find a way to put your head down, keep walking against the wind, because you know you are doing what any person, even a person in the sky, were there ever such a person—and who fucking knows—could not see as anything but right, on the moral up and up, and because, well...

Maybe.

Faith is what you put in a word like “maybe.” The further that “maybe” is from “certainly,” and the harder the winds blow against you and the harder it is to put your head down and walk against it, the more faith you need to keep going.

I see this notion of faith crystalized in a wall of three Winslow Homer canvases in a room of the American Wing at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, where the echoes reverberate every time I stop from my walking for a moment to behold them.

For starters, on the left there is a painting from 1885 called *The Fog Warning*. A lone fisherman rows a dory, laden down with his catch: two giant halibut. Big suckers, like mini-tuna. But the seas are choppy and roiling, and the clouds are, too; ragged and rain-filled, one aligns itself, diagonally, with the fisherman as a wave pushes him skyward. He is looking over his shoulder at this cloud. Things are not portending well. The seas are getting higher, you can practically hear the white-tipped waves breaking, and you know what the fisherman is thinking: *Do I dump these fish because they are weighing me down, or do I row like mad for home and hope I make it back with them? Fish like these ain't easy to come by. I should fight for them.*

You can strip the notion of its fishing contingency and extend it to touch on the question: *do I try and do the right thing and have faith, knowing that life goes so much easier for people who tend not to, or do I find something else I can live to, exist to, as a settling rather than a striving?* Do you exist, or do you live? Do you try and live even if it is that much harder than existing? Do you go on hoping

that you will do what most people without that courage and character cannot? Eventually, should the right things come to pass. Do you have that kind of faith? Should you? Is it wise, or stupid? Are you a fool to try and make it back in with the fish?

A lot of writers say they learned to write from other writers.

I didn't learn from a single one. I learned from music. Records. Beatles songs. How sound abetted sense. *Revolver* was a novel to me, and I'd explore its various parts, how it was assembled, how it told individual stories within a collective narrative framework, a many-ness stemming from a oneness, if you will.

And I learned from looking at paintings. From all angles. At the side, crouched down low, looking up into the foreground, from across the room, from inches away with the sensors going off and a museum staffer giving a tsk-tsk look as I nodded and backed away, giving my best *my bad* look of mild contrition.

When life has beaten the bag out of you, I've found that there are several ways to keep going. Or that I have used to keep going, anyway. One of them is creating. Maybe you need to be the kind of person who can create, whether that is the watercolors you try your hand at, or your needlework, the figures you whittle out of wood— if anyone even whittles anymore.

Me, I'd write, and I had a routine, which I also think you need. Maybe not a strict routine, but some regularity, things you turn to often.

On Sunday mornings, I'd run a few miles, then turn up at the diner down the street from my hellish shoe box. I'd have on my red track bottoms, maroon Gloucester high school Fishermen sweat-shirt, purple-ish winter cap bearing the name of the British rock band the Vaccines. My rocket ensemble of less-than-sartorially-splendid-Sabbaths.

And covered in sweat, too, but this was the sort of place where that really didn't matter, at six in the a.m., when it was mostly just old men discussing how no one could ever have seen the wonders of

the 1967 Red Sox coming. We're talking hardcore Boston here.

I'd flip through the sports page and then the comics. I had to look at the same strips each Sunday. *Adam@home* on the back, then *Mother Goose and Grim* inside on the right hand page, moving up to the *Family Circus*, which is so daft and bathetic, but a sort of homily of hope if you are down low enough, and conclude with *Arlo and Janis* at the top of the left hand page.

I once dated a girl I didn't much care for who remarked, "*Arlo and Janis* has really lost its edge over the years." I wasn't doing any of my subsequent routines back then, but the line stuck with me. She'd read the strip so much that she could chart the demise of its potency? *Arlo and Janis* ever had an edge? Was this something lay people thought, too, or something that you'd only mull over if you were a professional cartoonist yourself? Need one be an expert on the lower branches of art? A week-in, week-out inquirer into these matters, like some hall monitor of the funny pages?

As the men in the café nattered away about the impossible Dream Sox, I'd try to read *Arlo and Janis* through that girl's lens, but it made me sad as the strip is ultimately about two people living life through each other, sharpening up their own individual identities through such processes. A cartoon roadmap for what you're supposed to do, in a way. What I hoped to do. What I wasn't doing. What I feared I'd not have a chance to do, though I knew that later in the day, after the internal dilemmas and cartoon consternation of the diner were behind me, I'd be back at the museum, to ponder some more.

And to work on my writing, my creating, my version of the whittling, but whittling at my core.

But first: a stop at the New England Aquarium, where I was also a member. I loved it there as a kid, and as a man of the sea—in my mind, anyway—I loved it more as an adult.

A giant tank in the center of the New England Aquarium goes from the bottom floor to the top, with a ramp coiled around it so you

can perambulate from the surface—which the sea turtles like—to the craggy, coral-lined bottoms.

In this tank lives a moray eel whom I have dubbed Murray. I like moray eels. I admire their teeth, that they will take no bullshit, that they have a look of ultimate Piscean determination on their svelte faces. Angular faces. If fish made film noir, you'd want to cast a moray like Murray as your protagonist.

He's also elusive as fuck, and I'd not allow myself to leave the Aquarium until I'd spotted Murray in the big tank. My Waldo, you might say, who stood for so much more.

Sure, I'd have to go from the top to the bottom like six times on some visits, swearing under my breath as I did so, but it'd always end with "there you are, you mad fucker, you," (what skill he possesses for contorting himself into corral crannies) sometimes to the chagrin of a stroller-pushing parent, but a man's soul was at stake here. Or the energies required to keep himself going, anyway, to now press on to the Museum of Fine Arts where I would write some more in my head.

All I was doing was creating. Engineering gambits in my mind that came with a flourish of whimsy, wit, and yet which also bore the cold touch of the Reaper, of laughing into the abyss, sizing up the abyss, dreaming dreams and making ideas that would allow one, perhaps, to overleap that very abyss. Some day. Ideally with someone. Necessarily with someone, I suppose. Yes.

Three miles later, I'd be in the American Wing of the MFA, getting too close to a Sargent painting, setting off the sensor, seeing how he wrote with two brushstrokes, two strong twists of the wrist that moved the coloristic narrative from point A to B.

Definitively, swiftly, both economically and expansively. That is what you fucking want. That is how you communicate. Brushstrokes.

What you learn when you look at enough paintings, hear enough Schubert piano sonatas, whatever it may be, is that brushstrokes are not the stuff of brushes. Not exclusively. They are the true emotions, those that are scored into you, etched so deeply that

they go through you, come out the other side of your personage, hang in your personal ether, like a nimbus of your insides radiating around your skin, and which therefore enter the orbit of others, when you get up close enough to them, so that the emotions go into them, too.

You don't write when you write. When you truly write. You paint. And that has nothing to do with heaps of description. It has to do with where you have the balls to dip your brush. I'd say, too, it has something to do with what your wrist can do, as that was clearly the case with someone like Sargent, but that sounds like a masturbation double entendre.

Hmmm. So maybe it is. Maybe a lot starts with such a process, in a metaphorical sense, that it becomes a kind of practice for the real thing: real connections, real blending, real trust.

Sometimes I'd walk those corridors of the American Wing

listening to my iPod. I had the Rolling Stones' *Let It Bleed* on there. The title track is my favorite Stones cut and I'd be struck how well it synched up with what I was seeing on the walls, and what was germinating in my head, a soup of confusion, pain, nascent ideas, burgeoning art, desires of the heart, the flesh, transferences of meanings in which an eel was no longer an eel, a girl no longer a girl, a comic strip a beacon, a couple of eggs a kick in the ass not to drink away a morning, all of it a push to remain alive.

You do what you need to do. You use whatever you can use. When you're about to plunge over the cliff, and you're still thinking maybe there is some iota of a reason to hang on, you don't question the kind of root you've managed to coil your fingers around. You grab and pull indiscriminately.

At the end of "Let It Bleed," a song with a simple blues structure that no one would mistake for a vanguard Stones work, Mick Jagger starts having what sounds like some meaningless risqué fun. The song is about finished, the lyric proper is done, and Jagger com-

mences doing his own thing, singing, again and again, over the coda:

Ahh, bleed it alright, bleed it alright
You can bleed all over me
Bleed it alright, bleed it alright, you can be my rider
You can cum all over me
Bleed it alright, baby, bleed it alright, bleed it alright,
You can cum all over me

I looked so hard at those paintings, which I'd approach with such alacrity that when I stopped to inspect one of them I could still hear the echo of my tread on the marble floor resonating. A last final beat prior to stopping. Like a heartbeat before you go, maybe. Only I wasn't going anywhere, just yet: I was here.

Those echoes were like echoes of the past, as the past was so often on my mind on these occasions. People tell you to leave it behind. Thanks. But what people too often fail to consider is that the past is alive as well, maybe more alive than all but a few of us are. We walk, it walks, and it is a skilled out-pacer, racing on to the future, even, which it can muck about with if you do not deal with it.

But as the last echo faded out, I'd turn up the Stones song in my earbuds, beholding what Sargent or Winslow Homer or Fitz Henry Lane or dear old Childe Hassam had done.

The movement of skilled wrists. The efficacy of the brush, the character required to dip it where it had been dipped. To find that making art, in large part, is a measure of character. Pulling at the root.

And then it would click, what Jagger was singing about, what all of these things had in common, what was coming into focus in my mind from that soup, that salmagundi of so many thoughts and feelings.

You can bleed all over me. You can cum all over me.

That "me" is the blank canvas. And if what you make is also

who you are, that blank canvas is also you. And if life is, as F. Scott Fitzgerald said, a series of blows from which one must always fight to come back again, it's also a challenge to be the blank canvas and get the sucker filled up right.

You can cum all over me, as it were. I trust you to. I trust me to, too. Just do it right. With trust. Openness.

Cum with character, you might say.

Anyway. It is Sunday morning now. And this is all still going on. Meaning, I have a few places to get to and will return posthaste. The cum awaits! No no no—that was wrong. You know what I mean.

I spend a lot of time at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.

I also spend a lot of time walking around, and making lists in my head. Lots of lists, which I revise: my favorite F. Scott Fitzgerald stories, my favorite backyard birds, top horror pictures of the 1930s, and, not too long ago, a list of things without which I would not be alive.

The first half dozen times I went, I wandered the galleries, learning the entire layout of the place, finding the shortcuts down corridors no one went down, making lists—which I saw as progress—of my favorite paintings.

Progress because I saw that my mind wanted to engage in this dialogue with me for longer than just the hellish here-and-now. It wanted it to be there in the future, too, because, knowing how I think, I could tell that a part of me wanted this to be a long-standing debate of decades, with a Winslow Homer seascape, at some point, leaping past a Georges Braque Cubist study, and then reversing once more as a Sargent watercolor surged past them both, for a time.

I'd sit on a couch, in a dim alcove, beneath a Sargent mural depicting Perseus holding the head of the Medusa, having just lopped that bad boy off.

The first time I woke up to see the Asian tourists pondering me, it took me about ten seconds to realize they thought I was some live exhibit. At a better point in my life, this would have embarrassed me.

But you know how it gets. You go so low, you almost laugh. Maybe you do laugh. Personally, I went all method acting that first time, pretending I was Brando. Gave a most exaggerated yawn—which made two of them clap—and then wiped the drool from my chin with what I viewed as a Shakespearian flourish, before emitting a lone and concluding “Fie!”

Upon which the Asian tourists scattered. I think I was a hit. Or maybe they just have really curious notions of art.

Fie, bitches.

That was what Sargent wrote in his notes as to what overarching feeling he wanted to convey with this portion of the mural, this particular scene.

Yes, of course I’m kidding.

I’m mostly kidding.

I kind of feel like I’m not kidding.

I was far more human than I’d ever come close to being by that point. I don’t know that you can get more human. When you want to die more than you thought possible, and yet you’re more alive than you’ve ever been, what are you? You’re not Leprechaun, lion, ghost, owl, woodland sprite, succubus, canard, Father Christmas, or an elemental. You’re pretty fucking human.

And I’d just be saying what happened to me, how I came to create some of what I created, and that would be the past—the past repairing itself in the manner that makes justice perpetually relevant, even seemingly after the fact, so far as calendars go. The present and the future would be far more bountiful. But justice still matters. Accountability still matters. Truth matters more than that still.

So that was my little thing, sitting under that part of the mural. Still is.

The Boston Museum of Fine Arts is a hamlet for me. It is a place where I feel safe, and where, at the same time, the past echoes, the “what might have beens” resound. It’s a place, too, that I’ve envisioned in my future, if faith ever pays off. Because I’d want to

share it with someone special to me. If they were someone right for me, it'd likely be a place right for them. Maybe for totally different reasons.

So it was a big deal when I took someone to the MFA. There was a time when I could go with anyone, kill an afternoon there. In theory. Discuss some paintings. Have lunch in one of the restaurants. Those times are no more, though. The place just means too much to me. No, if I go there with you, at this point, we are endeavoring to go somewhere together, in a larger sense: "the museum outside of the museum" sense. The "world outside life" sense. Which is also to say, "the world on our respective insides" sense. Those museums of heart and soul, with, I like to think, a Connection Wing, lined with the art that comes from two people really having given each other over to each other, and thus advancing as individuals in double-time.

Some years after I painted my "life stuff" canvas, if you will, after working long and hard to keep going, to do what I knew to be right, if not easy, to try to live rather than exist, to try so hard to have some degree of faith, I stood in front of Winslow Homer's *The Fog Warning* with a person who made me think that, fuck me, yes, it really is true, I should have had that faith all along.

But you know how it is. You confide. People have their own stuff. Sometimes they can't deal with it. You've maybe set yourself up for them to instead use what happened to you against you in their way, so that they can keep everything going outward, and not have to look inward and try and contend with what's stopping them from living and leaving them merely existing, and barely at that.

I think that's how some people can do what's both bad for someone else and bad for them at the same time. I read an article the other day about how most people in the middle class would be utterly screwed if they had an emergency and had to all of a sudden free up \$400. As a sort of adult *Oliver Twist*, I'm a long way from the middle class, but I think the same kind of idea applies to people at the emotional level. One more extraction, one more burden, one

more taxing of who they are and how fragile they are, would be one too many. So they do whatever they have to do, no matter how mendacious it might be, to safeguard against that. It's not survival of the fittest, I've learned. It's survival, in a way, of the sickest. Anti-life, pro-existence.

So that was hard. I'm a foul guy as well—in a good way, I hope—and we were all primed to test out together that bathroom near the Childe Hassam paintings, outside of which is a painting—hung on the tiny alcove wall—by Aldro T. Hibbard called *The Sentinels*, a copse of two cedars and three oaks stripped of their leaves in a snowy forest keeping vigil over the untrampled woodlands that recede into the background.

Bathroom buggery was not to be, no “let it bleed” moment, but when faith is rewarded, in these situations, everything becomes an extension of everything else. You realize that there's a lot of overlap between what Winslow Homer might have been doing, what the Stones and the echoes are doing, what two bodies covertly pressed up against each other are doing when they are two people who have elected to live rather than exist—to have the balls to dip the brush, to cum—and are now proceeding a hell of a lot faster in tandem against diminished winds.

I didn't go to the museum for a couple weeks after all of that, but eventually I returned to that wall of three Winslow Homer paintings. Next to *The Fog Warning* is a canvas called *Driftwood*, from 1911. It is the last painting Homer completed. You look at it, and you know he must have known it was going to be his last.

A man on a rocky shore has a coil of rope. He is approaching an enormous log—or maybe a ship's spar—that has been driven in by a storm. A good three fifths of the canvas is white sea foam. It surrounds the man, who may well be the fisherman from *The Fog Warning*. Same hat, same slicker. I like to think he's the same man, anyway.

If you've ever walked on the craggy New England coast when it is raining, you know how easily it is to slip, to wreck. Basically,

you're going down. The rocks have a layer of seaweed atop them, and I'm not sure anything is more slippery than that shit when it's wet. Ice is less slippery.

But this dude is out there, and he wants that wood. He's probably already wrecked a bunch of times in getting as far as he has. There he is, though, and he's only an arm's length away. It doesn't even seem to matter that the part of the wood we can see is four times bigger than the guy. Why? You know why. Because this is someone who has lived rather than existed. Someone who has faith. Someone who didn't dump the fish, just put his head down and rowed.

But it is one hell of a night he's picked to look for driftwood on. It's a hell of a night, too, in the painting to the right, the last of this triptych called *The Lookout*—"All's Well" from 1896.

You won't have seen a painting like this. I can't think of another one that uses this method of perspective, for we are on the boat, basically, right in the face of the title character such that we can all but feel his breath as he bellows his words that everything is good.

At least for now. The bell behind him is on a diagonal visual line, on account of the pitch and roll of the ship. We are at the top portion of a wave. If it's possible to get seasick from a painting, this is the one. Homer puts you right in the boat. Right in this life. The viewer, even if he or she is from Wyoming, is no more a lubber than this ancient New England mariner carrying out his duties for the latest time.

Duties. I think one can also feel duty bound to try and live, to hold on to faith, and sometimes that's a matter of finding places, as well as people (if you are so fortunate) to help you maintain that faith. Right now, one of the things I have for that purpose is a museum where I am sometimes mistaken for an exhibit.

I tend to think of those three Homer paintings as capturing some aspect of the same night. Three scenes from an autumnal New England storm. The fisherman just after dusk with a decision to make as to whether to give something up or try all the harder; that

same fellow imagining how well he could sally forth over the most slippery of rocks upon his latest return to shore; and a ship's watchman signaling that the storm has past, we are good for the night, we have come through.

In other words, it's time to take another hit of Dramamine and sail out again. I'm tired and due for a nap at the MFA for my fans. You can find me under the Sargent mural of Perseus holding the head of the gorgon. I'll leave out a little coffee can for tips.

Properties of Obligate Pearls

L.S. Johnson

You have to know what to look for. Younger, definitely—stones from the elderly are heavy and black, decades of layers dulling the luster. No one wants the weight of a grandmother's worries around their neck.

Take the young woman sitting across from me. I saw her in the supermarket, late on Friday night. She should have been out partying, or on a date; instead she was pushing a cart that was equal parts cat food, stew meat, and adult diapers. Everything about her spoke of exhaustion and embarrassment.

Even under her jacket I could glimpse the fullness of her torso, that hint of bloating directly beneath her sternum.

She was stooped and tired and looked older than she was; she was also lovely. That's part of it, too—you can get a decent stone from a lot of people, but sometimes they have this hint of beauty about them, like a smothered light. Those stones have a little extra luster, a greater range of hues, and that can make all the difference.

I followed her home that night; I came back the next morning, before dawn, and watched her go to work, then to the hospital, then hurry home again. The neighbors said she was both caring for a father and helping her brother with some kind of treatments. That, and the father was nutty about his cats, their little apartment was full of the beasts.

It was no wonder, then, that when I asked her to lunch she accepted with a robotic *sure*. She probably couldn't remember her last full night of sleep, much less have any instincts about going to lunch with a strange woman dressed in a suit.

"It's a particular kind of condition," I explain patiently, while she wolfs down her poached fish. "You have all the symptoms: bloodshot sclera, poor sleep, bloating and tenderness, yellowing fingernails, hair loss . . ."

"And you'll pay me 50,000 to take it out?" she asks between mouthfuls.

“If it’s indeed the right kind of tumor, yes. We’re desperate for specimens to study.” I smile then, sympathetically. “I know it’s not a great deal of money, and there’s always a slight risk with surgery . . .”

“No, no, I’m definitely interested.” She gulps down her wine and leaned in close, clearly buzzed. “It would make such a difference to us, you have no idea.”

Oh, I have an idea. I have more than an idea.

But I say nothing as it comes pouring out. How her mother died suddenly and her father subsequently deteriorated. How her brother had been helping until *he* got sick, and the treatments are working but they’re experimental, they’re not covered . . . Oh, she doesn’t mind doing so much, truly she doesn’t, only the cats—! Her father refuses to give them up but half of them don’t get along with the other half, they’re always making noise, sometimes she just wants to strangle them all . . . Meanwhile she was passed over for a raise for poor performance, and she doesn’t know where the money’s all going, she budgets down to the last cent and somehow she always comes up short . . .

Listening, I’ve learned, is a lot like meditation. You have to observe the litany without reacting to it. I used to react: I used to hold their hands and offer suggestions; I used to weep for them, with them.

I used to weep for myself.

But in the end, all our stories are the same unsolvable conundrum: money that doesn’t stretch far enough and the overwhelming needs of others. It’s the latter that’s key. People who have personal crises produce tumors without centers. It’s the obligations that make it happen, that somehow gunk up the fluids into something small, hard, and incredibly beautiful.

Obligate pearls.

She comes on her day off, having told the brother she needed to care for the father and vice versa. She dresses up for it; a lot of them do, as if their appearance will affect their payout. When the

tests come back positive she takes the gown we give her and then cries in the privacy of the operating room, sobs of relief that carry through the door. The money never really changes anything, though; having more of it only means it stretches a little further for a while. Budgets are like rubber bands—sooner or later they always snap back into the same tight, mean shape as before.

I've been doing this long enough now that I'm starting to get people coming back to me, but I've never tried a second extraction. Instinct tells me it'll be more like the granny pearls: dull, black things. Something about losing hope a second time.

The surgery goes smoothly enough, as well it should, considering how many times I've done it. The woman is healthy and Ana, my perpetually somber nurse, never misses a beat. Soon enough I've got a small lump of flesh in a tray and I'm sewing the woman back up while Ana washes the lump clean and pats it dry, like a piece of meat. Then she wheels the woman out into the adjacent room to wake up and starts putting together her recovery kit: painkillers, instructions on cleaning the sutures, who to call if something goes wrong (not me), and 50,000 in two fat envelopes. I used to handle the recoveries, but there was something about how they looked, after: a kind of hollow shock, though they never said anything other than to thank me. Easier to let Ana deal with it.

Only when I have the operating room to myself do I turn my attention to the tray. I fit the pick onto my thumb—it's a little apparatus of my own design, a few guitar picks fused together and the edge carefully shaped, then attached to a ring. With this I start digging into the tissue, without fear of scratching the stone inside. At last I feel that little click as the plastic touches its surface, and I start cutting away the outer layers until I can work the pearl free.

Before me sits three years of anxiety and grief, its surface shimmering opalescent beneath the fluorescent lights, its colors shifting from a powdery blue to a near-violet cast, the whole thing the size of a gumball. So much sadness. So much disappointment.

They say wearing one relieves you of your own sorrows; the

pearl continues to build layers through contact, siphoning off your fears and anxieties, your sorrow and grief. As always, I'm tempted to keep it and put the theory to the test. To sleep through the night again, to move through the day without that small fluttering panic in my belly? To not feel like everything, *everything* is eggshell-fragile, and my slightest mistake will shatter it all?

Oh, I'm tempted. But as always, the money wins out.

It's too late to sell the pearl tonight so I bring it home with me instead. Even on the short journey from my office, I could *feel* it, feel myself becoming a little more empty, as if I'd had a good cry on the bus back here.

Or am I just imagining it?

In what had been our bedroom, Dana is sitting propped up in bed watching the silent television, and I relax a little. The last nurse we had insisted on a regular bedtime, regardless of whether I was home or not, which always agitated him. He likes to wait up for me, likes to make sure I get home safely.

His face is grey with pain, and even as I kiss him I'm checking his levels, but they're right where they should be.

"Think I've built up my tolerance again," he wheezes.

I open up the drip a little before curling up in the bed next to him, wadding my coat to pad his bony shoulder. I can no longer remember how he felt before he got sick, save for flashes of a firm, muscular bicep, the pillow of a healthy belly. I'm losing him, little by little, moment by moment; it makes my stomach knot, and I try to focus instead on the screen before us where a woman is defiantly striding out of a house, flinging her wedding ring into the hydrangeas as she leaves.

"Was it a good one?"

I hold the pearl up before him. He touches it, stroking its smooth surface; it seems to turn a shade darker, though it's probably just a trick of the light. Still I wrap it in a tissue before slipping it back into my pocket.

"After I sell it," I tell him, "I'll see the doc about something stronger." Though I'm not sure what's left to try; I'm not sure there is anything left to try. But Dana nods without protesting, which tells me it must be bad.

"Do you want me to open it up more?"

"I'm all right," he says, though his jaw is rigid. Then, "your mother called, before. Left a message 'for my daughter Rachel.' Old bat's getting bolder."

"I'll talk to her."

"Like hell you will." He moves his hand over mine. "You do you, babe. Talking to her's brought you nothing but grief."

I say nothing, but I press closer to him, squeezing his hand as much as I dare with the IV.

"You're beautiful, Ray," he wheezes. "*We're* beautiful. Anyone says otherwise, send 'em to me."

My throat is pin-tight. If I start speaking now I'll just start crying, which will only upset him in turn. I reach for his other hand, closing my fingers over his. On the screen the woman is driving away as the credits roll, into open countryside bathed in sunlight. Dana can't bear to leave me alone and vulnerable; I can't bear to hurt him by telling him to go. So we linger here, spending every cent on painkillers and medications, prolonging the inevitable. There isn't a pearl big enough to take it all away. Not even my own.

My dealer calls herself Babette but Dana calls her Madame B;

she's a Madame kind of woman, the kind you can't imagine as anything but her polished middle-aged self, the kind you can't imagine owning a pair of sweatpants. *Pearls*, she told me when I started out, *are a woman's game. Men never know how to handle them right, just as a pearl from a man always fetches less than one from a woman. They lack a certain depth, a grief without name.*

Which is bullshit. I've sold her pearls from men before and lied about it, and she never remarked on some kind of missing mystical grief. But she knows her stones—and she's got the clientele to buy

them. As long as I've been doing this, she's had a near monopoly on the market.

She sizes up my latest now, loupe stuck in her eye, fingers stroking the surface. At last she nods with satisfaction. "A stunning one. I'll give you 300 for it."

"400," I say. She'll get 500 for it easy, perhaps more if she puts it in a fancy setting, or if she already has a buyer lined up. And she usually has a buyer lined up.

She makes a face at me but I fold my arms. I need the 400, and I'm her best source now. The others are all teams, one to choose the person, one to do the surgery; but there's something about doing it all yourself, about seeing the whole process through, from selection to open wound, from outer implication to inner truth.

"Very well," she sighs, "but you're robbing me." She digs into her desk drawer and starts laying out 100,000 bundles. "You're not paying out more, are you?" When I shake my head she exhales. "Good, because I think our little enterprise might truly be coming to an end, Ray. First that exposé, and now a group of psychiatrists has started putting out feelers—legal extractions with a guaranteed payment. Only for small ones, mind you, but it's only a matter of time. I hope you've been socking it away."

I feel suddenly as if I'm in a tunnel, everything hollow and echoing. Something must have shown on my face, because she asks more quietly, "No improvements, then?"

I swallow hard, and again. "No," I finally manage.

"You know it's true, about these." She holds the pearl up to the light. "That's why the shrinks are so keen. A client the other day told me the trick is to wear it below your breasts, where your own would grow? Do that for a night and you wake up feeling like you've wept for days. That empty feeling, like everything's been washed away."

"I don't think it would work for me," I say, rubbing beneath my breasts.

"I wasn't thinking about you," she says. Before I can reply she continues, "so how much will you want for yours? Dana's been ill for,

what, three, four years now? It's 400 easy, probably more, minus whatever you'd have to pay for the extraction of course. Sam's probably your best bet for that, his hands are good, it's just his eye that's shitty."

I can't think of what to say. Months of quiet panic, of everything feeling like eggshells, waiting to reach this precipice; yet now that it's come I feel utterly blindsided.

Madame B looks at the pearl, rolling it between her fingers. "I've been thinking I might keep yours, you know," she says. "For the personal connection."

"I can't see that you need one," I mutter; I'm still rubbing my torso, I have this urge to cover the spot with my hands, like a child.

But she only laughs, soft and bitter. "Oh my dear Ray," she says. "I've never met a person who didn't. I'm no exception; I'm the rule."

I lie in bed that night next to Dana who's sleeping at last, as peacefully as he can these days. His face exhausted in the dim light of the monitors, jaw still clenched with pain. The last painkiller we haven't yet tried. After this it's back to the beginning, going through the list again . . . and his meds are "temporarily unavailable," no one can tell us what that even means, we cannot waste a dose until they come in next week, and there will be new side effects now, and how much more of it all can he even take . . .

The pearl money all but gone now.

I press and press at my torso, teasing out the faint curve beneath my skin. Just the hint of a presence; I can't even see it save from certain angles. The shock when I first discovered it. So many times I'd been told *I never knew I had this* and thought it impossible; I figured they must feel something, they just didn't know what. But here I was utterly unaware of it.

What does my pearl look like? Whose sorrows will it feed on, when it ceases to feed on mine?

Beside me Dana mumbles, "If I wasn't here to look after you,

what would you do?"

I look at him but his eyes are closed, his breathing regular. Talking in his sleep. And I want to ask him, I want to awaken him and ask him if the question was rhetorical, or does he want me to answer?

"It's the nature of the game," Sam says expansively. "We knew this day would come, didn't we? It was just a matter of how long we could ride the gravy train for. I'll be damned if I'm going back to the hospital, though. Plenty of other work for a good surgeon, if you're not fussy about what you do."

We're sitting at lunch, at a restaurant he chose. It's chic and expensive and I'm eating a salad and drinking tap water. I've put my only dress on because I know the suits annoy Sam; as it is he can't keep from grimacing every time his eyes alight on my crewcut. I need him to help me, not be repulsed by me.

After all, he has the best hands in this business. Better than mine.

"Still, you've done all right for yourself, haven't you? Babette never shuts up about you." He cuts into his meat, raises it rare and dripping to his mouth, and chews thoughtfully. "She even thinks she can tell yours apart," he continues around his mouthful. "In society photos and the like. Always pointing them out to me, *that's one of Rachel's, you can tell by the size, by the glow they have.*"

I have to swallow my response; we both know full well Madame B would never use that name, not anymore. "I need to know if you'll do this for me," I say.

"What's to keep me from keeping yours?"

"I've already told Babette, and no one else will give you as much for it."

"Of course, of course. Just making sure you have a buyer, and I'll get my fee." He lays his cutlery down and taps at his wristband, eyeing the projected calendar. "So perhaps, say, Thursday morning—"

"End of the day," I interrupt. "As soon as possible."

"If we do it in the morning, you'll have time to recover and then

see her—”

“End of the day,” I repeat. “At my office. I’ll go home that night, and bring it to her in the morning. It’s how I do things.” When he looks at me with the grimace I sigh and explain, “I want to show Dana before I sell it.”

“Ah, of course. How is dear Dana?”

“He’s dying,” I say, and get up before he can say anything more.

There is nothing stranger than being on your own table. At last

seeing what the others saw, all those tired people, looking up with hope and trepidation. I am looking up with hope and trepidation. I don’t think Sam will do anything, but he’s always been far more cut-throat about it all—and while Madame B is powerful, she’s not here. If I die on the table, there’s nothing she can do about it.

I told Ana: if anything goes wrong, just go along with Sam until you can get away, then go to Madame B. Make her pay you something; this is as much her idea as mine, she can pay out and chase Sam for the pearl. Make her pay enough that Dana has a choice at least. About how to go forward, about how to end it all.

He won’t leave me because he thinks I need him and I can’t let him go because he needs me to need him and I need him to love me and I can’t bear to hurt him, I can’t—

but maybe I can take something away, enough to let us both do what must be done.

And when I awaken I’m utterly, utterly empty. I feel like I’ve

been hollowed out; I hardly feel anything at all. In the tray Sam holds out to me is a massive pearl as blue as twilight and as lustrous as silk and I think, *That’s the closest thing I’ll ever have to a soul. The damn thing is everything but my obligations.*

It’s late when I come home. Dana’s half-asleep, the television

flashing images of vacation paradises with a muted commentary, the glow painting his drawn face in sharp relief. I take a moment to look,

to really look at him, before I slip off my shoes and painfully ease myself onto the bed, nudging aside the tubes and wires that surround him like a nest.

He stirs, and I sense the effort it takes for him to turn his head, to lift his hand enough to touch my arm.

“That kind of a day,” he rasps.

I nod, careful to keep my bandages hidden. Instead I take his hand and nestle the pearl in it.

And there are things I had thought to say now. Stuff about how this pearl is different, stuff about how he doesn’t have to worry. Stuff about what will become of me once he’s gone, that everything will be okay.

Stuff about how he can let go now.

But all I can think of is the awful, aching emptiness in my belly, so I merely close his fingers over the pearl and press his fist to his sternum, just below his breasts.

“Nicest one yet,” he whispers. “Beautiful, like you.”

“Like us,” I say, but the words sound hollow.

It takes a while, but at last I feel it: his body softening against mine, the tension in his face easing. He sighs deeply, a shuddering breath, and I think he’s about to cry but he only relaxes more. I open up the drip completely and he sleeps at last, truly sleeps, and I doze as well, sliding in and out of awareness, and we’re no longer pressed together on the narrow bed but lying on a twilit beach, *Not a care in the world* the television whispers. Lying twined together in silky-soft sand, *Not a care in the world*, slowly sliding down, down into a cool, damp darkness that wraps around us like a shroud.

Something We Can All Enjoy Together

Olivia Parkes

Shit on the alpaca rug. Sadie cursed Porgy for dying on her and took it back immediately. You couldn't say she hadn't seen it coming – 21 years made the Corgi practically a vampire. Sweet Porgy. Sadie still parked sometimes next to the food truck on the corner where the gardeners bought lunch, just to inhale the warm tortilla smell that reminded her of the dog's feet. Losing Porgy had been worse than losing both boys to college and the long months when their beds were always neatly made, a thing she had asked for and never really wanted. Now Ethan, her eldest, was living at home again, and they had a new dog, but the arrangement had lost heart, like a remake of a favorite movie that only reminded Sadie how much she loved the original.

Ethan appeared suddenly at the edge of the rug, his iPhone held at arm's length and dropped low to take in Sadie, still stooped over the stain. It looked like rubbing had made it worse.

"Again?" he asked.

"Well it wasn't me," Sadie said.

"Dad's going to flip."

"Do you have to record this?"

"People want to see where I live."

"I thought they wanted to see *how* you live."

Ethan had some kind of wellness channel. He had followers. They watched him do yoga and prepare high-protein vegan meals. He'd been running the show from home since graduating in May. Sadie, who approved of healthy living, had been trying very hard to explain to Doug that this was a job befitting a graduate of an elite university. Of course she was happy to have her son back – Doug worked later and later now – but it would be nice if his quest for perfection permitted him to participate at meal times.

"Where is she anyway?" Ethan asked, pocketing the phone. Lola tended to disappear after defecating. Sometimes the only evi-

dence that they even had a new dog was the waste she left peppering the many rooms of the house, like clues in a mystery Sadie was tired of trying to solve.

“Yesterday I found her behind all the ski stuff in the downstairs closet. I thought it was locked,” Sadie said.

“That dog is dark, Mom.”

“She’s just confused. This is a big house. Can you check our bedroom? Your father’s convinced she goes up there to scoot right after.”

Doug had made it clear that he didn’t have time for potty problems — for *this literal shit*, he had taken some pleasure in saying. He didn’t often swear. He’d been promoted, Sadie didn’t entirely understand to what, but he kept saying he was the face of the company now. The face, apparently, wasn’t something he could take on and off, and even at home Doug seemed bigger and blander — the representative of broader interests.

The car keys tinkled in the majolica bowl in the hall. Then Doug was in the doorway, his face showing Sadie the scene: the middle-aged wife on her knees, her hand poised above a basin of soapy water, the young man sculpted at the edge of the carpet, his long hair swept back by a sweat band.

“Please tell me you’re washing the kid’s feet and this isn’t what I think it is.”

“I can’t figure it out,” Sadie said. “I took her out an hour ago, but she just wanted to get into next-door’s trash. Are they allowed to leave the bags out on the curb like that?”

“That dog is pathological, Sadie, you think a little fresh air will fix her?”

“Take your jacket off. We’ll talk about it over dinner. Or about something else.”

“Just make sure you wash your hands,” Doug said. “Everybody,” he repeated, as if addressing a much larger family, “remember to wash your hands.”

“I’m going to do a Vipassana sesh in the den,” Ethan said. “Go

ahead and eat without me.”

Later, when Doug had fallen asleep, Sadie crept downstairs into the kitchen. Lola snored like a blow dryer on the lowest setting next to the breakfast bar in Porgy’s old bed. She stroked the dog awake and studied her face, dark and puckered as an umeboshi plum. Her lower lip was stitched by a crooked underbite, her brow deeply wrinkled, possibly in concern for the eyes, which looked like they could come loose at any minute. Was her squashed face too squashed?

“We have no idea,” Doug had said before turning out the light, “what that dog comes from.” Sadie hadn’t considered this angle before, and it seemed impossibly wide. She thought of the houses she had passed on the way to the shelter, chipboard bungalows with peeling paint and patchy grass, a busted armchair out in the drive for everyone to see, a plastic Santa toppled on a roof in August. She imagined a lino strip kitchen penned off by a baby gate and Lola, or whatever they had called her, straining over the pages of last week’s TV guide.

Porgy had belonged to their life. Sweet custodian of the boys’ childhood: he aged in a rush when they both left home, as if it grieved him. The dog became stiffer, more cylindrical, a cork stopping up the past. And when he went it all seemed to rush out with him, years of fullness yielding to a dribble.

Briefly, in the days after Porgy died, things had assumed a familiar shape. Doug came home early and they remembered the way the dog climbed into your suitcase if you were trying to pack. Even Ethan seemed moved, or had at least submitted to Sadie’s teary hug before shredding the silence with his Nutribullet to prepare a thick green drink.

Sadie, looking for pictures of Porgy as a puppy, had come across a photo of herself pregnant with Ethan at twenty-three. It was an unflattering picture, thin lips hung crooked in a moony face. Ethan was an easy baby, a dream, and she had walked into the next child without having learned, perhaps, anything, other than how to anticipate need. Doug had wanted to have kids young – to be a

young dad, he said – and Sadie had wanted it too. But there had been another side to that coin, the one he was betting on – that he would emerge, honorably discharged from the duties of fatherhood with his best years ahead of him, poised for the high dive of his career. So here they were, halfway – fifty was half, right? The boys grown and Doug primed for the jump. And she was – she was what? She was up at six for back-to-back Pilates and Zumba on Wednesday mornings. She was in great shape.

Porgy had structured the day—feeding him, walking him. He had given purpose to the lawn-flanked streets around their house, a reason to nod at the neighbors. After he died Sadie felt suspect too long out of doors. You did not loiter in a gated community. Sadie spent more and more time looking at dog photos online. Videos of baby Corgis eating breakfast cereal or taking a bath gave way to rescue sites. The possibility of doing something good for the world worked like gravity on her discontent, which accreted steadily, collecting justification. Getting a rescue was certain to please Paul, her youngest, who, with each passing semester more stridently rejected the privileges of his upbringing, and had intimated in his last email that the drought in California was caused by the swimming pool she maintained but rarely used. Why it was her pool all of a sudden, Sadie had no idea. Sadie clicked and scrolled, reading the little paragraph sob stories that came with each animal, speaking some of their names aloud, even the most unconvincing, like T-Mac or The Rock.

She'd intended to discuss the idea with Doug over the long weekend when he had more time. But that Saturday he had packed her off alone again to the Chinese herbalist – something they supposedly did together, and Sadie snapped. The herbalist had developed a way of determining Doug's needs remotely, lifting his small dry hand and, with a twisted, grasping gesture, incanting once – *Doug*. But Sadie could not feel whatever this man felt, and she paid the extravagant bill in a kind of daze, clutching two large packets of capsules containing the herbs they each required for equilibrium. Instead of driving home Sadie drove to the shelter in Encino, and when she got

back she unloaded the kennel from the backseat like it was a crate of Napa Valley red, something they could all enjoy together.

Doug had not seen it that way. Lola, after some coaxing, emerged. The little dog shivered, squatted and strained, before depositing a tight dark coil at his feet and disappearing for several hours. Sadie didn't know what it was – anxiety, malevolence, or bowel disease – but it did not stop. She discovered the turds, snaked and dry, like dead lizards, or sculpted and immaculate as soft serve, in strange places. There had been one in the electric fireplace. Sadie was most tormented though, by the ones that eluded her, the ones Lola left for Doug to find. It was always Doug who found the final disgrace, who walked in from work to find the shit on the kitchen tiles, the shit on the yoga mat Ethan had left at the top of the stairs, rolled out like a prankish welcome.

Doug could only do his own business in absolute privacy. Even with Sadie, it was something never spoken of, a dark rite undertaken in silence. In the early days, they'd lived in an apartment around the corner from the office so that Doug could make it back for dinner with the kids, and he drove home sometimes after lunch just to avoid a co-worker seeing his shoes in the shared stalls. Last year, during a redesign of the executive floor, Doug had specified that his office be enlarged to include an ensuite bathroom, a chamber only he could access, with the exception of the cleaner, who he would tip at Christmas and never see.

And so the days descended, with the sun, into darkness. Each evening when the green outside darkened to blue and the shadows lengthened and merged, Sadie hunted. Lola seemed always to deliver the final blow just before Doug came in. Without fail he reared up, repulsed, he swore, and Sadie told him to calm down, stooping to remove the offending excrement with one of the green compost bags she had felt it an ethical necessity to use now that Ethan juiced every day. The dog, when Sadie found her, would sit quaking between them, her squashed face staring into the middle distance, reliving some trauma that they would never be able to access.

The strip lighting over the breakfast bar was set on low. Lola's tail wriggled cautiously as Sadie rubbed her tough, silky ears. "Why can't you be good?" she asked. The kitchen hummed its reassurances. Sadie often came down here if she couldn't sleep, to keep company with the appliances. Sometimes she defrosted half a bagel or made a slice of raisin toast. Bread tasted better when Ethan wasn't around. Sadie stood up. She leaned against the fridge, cool on her forehead and firm against her belly. She pressed a glass against the ice dispenser in its door. The two fingers of gin she poured made the cubes crackle and fizz.

Sadie could admit a mistake. It had been a mistake to surprise them. Doug still acted like she'd come home pregnant with another man's child. Ethan wanted nothing to do with it – the dog was an affront to his standards. Sadie had acted alone, and she was left alone to suffer the consequences. She was alone now, she realized, with Lola, a damaged pug who would never know her children, who would never learn to love them all as one ineffable organism – a family, as Porgy had. She cradled the dog with the too squashed face in her lap and wept.

Sadie drove east, leaving the balm of the sea behind. The traffic was unforgiving, set in a harsh line of disapproval. She crawled on, deeper into the city. The air squatted over double-parked streets, shimmering with heat and exhaust. She turned up the AC. The car was packed with economy and care, as if for a beach trip with the children, loaded with items to keep them safe and happy. The back-seat was piled with all of Porgy's old things—his blankets, beds, ball scoopers and pooper-scoopers. His toys, even the most beloved: a plush hotdog he'd once gutted, consuming its squeaky heart.

The women at the shelter were overwhelmed by her generosity. She gave them money, too, and the brand new toys Lola had never evinced the least interest in, but which Sadie thought she might turn to in a more austere environment. She handed Lola over last, wrapped in Porgy's old blanket.

On the way out Sadie walked the corridor of dogs. A yapping battery hurled against the wire. There were blue blind eyes and torn ears, poorly cropped tails curled in ugly exclamation above asterisked anuses. There were the ones that didn't come forward at all, slumped in the far corners of their cells. It was a litany of human wreckage – the damage done when people broke up or moved on, ran out of money or changed their minds, wherever they incompletely loved. A dark rivulet of pee snaked over the concrete. The light outside was blinding. Sadie dropped her sunglasses over her eyes and pushed the image from her mind, Lola swaddled like a baby for a doorstep—she would never have abandoned one of her own.

The traffic was slacker on the way back. You could not go picking up somebody else's mistakes to solve your own problems. Lola had been cast off, but not by them – she had fallen out of someone else's story. They had loved their Porgy. Sadie rolled the window down as she neared the coast, filling her lungs with briny petroleum air. She held her breath in the tunnel, focused on the window at the end that framed and then released the view of the sea. The water was crepey with sun, the beach subdivided messily with towels.

Sadie powered without warning across two lanes, enraging a Lexus, and squinted at the approaching parking lot. A sandwich board barred the entrance, LOT FULL. There were two more before the turn for home. LOT FULL, the second, LOT FULL, the third, and Sadie stifled a sound in her throat because she realized that she didn't have any cash for parking anyway, she had emptied her wallet at the shelter, and that the lots were full because it was Labor Day, and all the kids were out of school, scrambling in and out of the water while their parents guarded their carefully staked claims and shouted them back for sunscreen.

Sadie glanced in the rearview mirror and caught sight of the empty back seat, that old flash of fear like you'd forgotten the baby. She'd been almost embarrassed by the mountain of stuff she'd had for Porgy—had he even known it was his? Had Lola known she was

theirs, and had they themselves believed it? The question, suddenly, of who it all belonged to—and who to whatseemed to offer either infinite consolation or infinite loss, and zero indication of what to do next. She thought of Doug, cheerfully helping the boys build sand-castles at the beach, there at the edge of the rising tide, so they could enjoy the thrill and terror of watching, at the burnt end of an afternoon, their work subside and be washed away.

A Different Perestroika

*Down and out in 1990s
Moscow*

Andrew Yim

My year in Moscow began with tanks. Fed up with an incalcitrant, unruly and possibly seditious parliament, Yeltsin called soldiers in from the potato fields and autumn harvest to their machines. Under cover of night, they rolled down Leningrad Avenue, leaving deep tracks in the asphalt, to positions around the parliament.

At work the next morning, we left the editing room and our scientific manuscripts to gather around the TV and watch the show: puffs of smoke, dust, and airborne concrete as artillery pounded the parliament building, commuters sprinting below from subway to sidewalk between explosions. I called my Russian editor to arrange a meeting.

“I don’t leave my apartment when tanks are in the streets,” she stated.

“But there are no tanks in the subways,” I countered. She hung up abruptly.

While the tanks settled political scores in central Moscow, I returned to my manuscripts. In the lingo of my employer, I was a stylist, charged with reviewing, sentence by impenetrable sentence, English translations of Russian authored scientific articles. The journals of petrology and stratigraphy were my responsibility. Guided by a house style book, I checked every comma, dash, ellipse, and subjunctive, enforcing its severe scientific code.

It was a lucrative business, or so I’d heard. But I learned, after a few weeks of struggling with the befuddling intricacies of the hyphen and dash, that I neither liked nor had aptitude for the work. It was a bad match. With a monthly stipend of \$150 (plus a modest housing allowance), I didn’t have much incentive to care. The editing felt too much like high school chemistry, the necessary evil of a poorly compensated enterprise. Within a month or so, it was clear who had talent for the task and might move up the ranks to supervisor. I was a bench warmer, just like in little league, when I played right field in the last two innings per rules that everyone, even the

scrawniest and most uncoordinated, bat at least once per game. At least Charlie Brown got to pitch.

Underpaid and uninspired, I looked for other ways to pass the days. A coworker mentioned a soup kitchen that needed volunteers. I'm not sure what my motivations were—charity, altruism, boredom, or some combination of all three. A few days later, I took the subway two stops north and, after some searching, found the soup kitchen. Like so many spaces in Moscow, it was bland and anonymous, a good example of the Soviet architectural aesthetic, utilitarian with a brutish twist. Inside the dimly lit, dusty cafeteria, three-dozen or so pensioners sat in small groups, eating a soup, small salad, serving of grain, and piece of meat, the standard Russian meal. These were the darkest years of the post-perestroika implosion, when coffers ran dry (or were looted) and pensioners were left to fend for themselves.

At first I didn't know what to do. Three Russians in white coats and hats were cooking and serving, sort of like in my high school cafeteria. Sort of in the way so much of Russia can seem at first glance. Sort of until closer examination, when often something very different appeared. Like the difference between a donkey and a mule. Two young, courteous Africans—Ethiopians, I later learned—a man and a woman, sat behind a table at the entrance and handed out meal tickets to the pensioners as they arrived, checking their names off a list. Once seated, other Africans took the meal tickets, went to the kitchen, and brought back a lunch platter to the table.

It wasn't the soup kitchen that I imagined, the soup kitchen of American holidays, eager high schoolers or sports stars behind the counter or at the stove, serving up turkey dinners to the poor and destitute, a feel-good, Kodak moment for all. Most of the pensioners regarded us with a neutral acceptance, a thing to be endured for a greater cause. A few were overly grateful and even effusive. The other pensioners avoided their company.

Ugandans, chatty and even gregarious, were responsible for bringing trays of food to the pensioners. Keith, a Ugandan student

at the Patrice Lumumba University of People's Friendship, was the first to introduce himself. Located a stone's throw from my apartment, Patrice Lumumba's students were mostly foreigners, beneficiaries of the Soviets' grand plan to coax countries into alliance.

Keith was the son of a judge in Kampala, I later learned. His father was a severe man by his accounts, hard to please and with high expectations. Keith came to the soup kitchen through its sponsor, an Episcopalian church of which he was a member. Charity was not his sole motivation at the soup kitchen; the African students ate a lunch platter after the pensioners finished their lunch. The empty coffers of the Russian government affected the students as well. Stipends were often late, always insufficient. The pensioners and students were in the same boat, abandoned by a bankrupt state.

Through Keith I met Charles, Tom, and Djuma, also Ugandan students. Charles and Tom were veterans of the Ugandan army, their service compensated in part by scholarship to the University of People's Friendship. Djuma was, by nature and birth, the outsider. He came from a minority tribe in the north often at odds and in armed conflict with the central government. But in Russia ties of country trumped those of tribe.

The Ugandans were respectful of and at times affectionate with the pensioners. One babushka had taken a shine to Charles, who, with his compact, muscular frame, impish smile, and charm, was the dandy of the four. After her platter was cleared and her lunch friends had shuffled off, she would wait for Charles to sit for a chat. He usually obliged and so Charles and his babushka would commiserate on the weather, the price of bread, the too salty soup, and noisy neighbors.

In general, though, the pensioners left us to our devices, we to theirs. After a busy hour of serving, I often shared a cigarette—a new habit, part of my Moscow persona—with them. My vice loved company and there were few activities more conducive to small talk than sharing a smoke. Long draws allowed for silence, smoke, a distrac-

tion, and deep breaths, giving a relaxed rhythm to the conversation. Over Marlboros and Lucky Strikes, I bonded with Keith, Charles, Tom and Djuma.

Keith and Charles were buddies and quick wits, both first-class ironists with keen eyes for the devices, tricks, and predators of Moscow street life. They taught me how to shake hands the African way. First the shake, then the snap. As hands move back, index fingers engage, sliding with growing pressure against each other, leading to a snap at the end, an exclamation to the greeting. Once intuitive, the handshake had its own fluency, a quick, cursory snap between acquaintances passing on the street or a full snap on meeting a friend.

Tom enjoyed Keith's and Charles's easygoing company but was more self contained, more given to solitude than solidarity. He was taller and thinner than Keith and Charles, with sharp cheekbones and quick eyes that reminded me of Steven Biko, the South African civil rights leader. He was also, as far as I knew, stranded in Moscow. For reasons unknown to me, he wasn't a student, either cut off from his Ugandan scholarship or expelled from university. The soup kitchen provided his one reliable meal of the day.

When we met, Tom was working a few afternoons a week at the Moscow office of a refugee processing center run by an NGO funded by the UN Moscow Mission. The then-porous borders left by the Soviet Union's implosion made Moscow the newest transit point between war-stricken countries like Afghanistan and Somalia and the capitols of Western Europe. Groups of Somalis and Afghans were a not-uncommon sight on the streets. Tom worked the frontline of the processing center, troubleshooting the myriad and endless troubles and tribulations of the refugees.

In early winter, Tom was offered a job managing a refugee camp outside of Moscow. With its promise of full room and board and a modest salary, he took it without hesitation. The job required him to live about a half hour beyond city limits, where pre-fabricated twelve-story apartment buildings suddenly gave out to stands of pine

and birch. The camp was an old high school, its classrooms converted into rooms for families and other groups of refugees.

Soon after Tom started at that job, we met for beer and curry at a café run by entrepreneurial Indian students at the university. We talked mostly about his time at the camp. He had many roles: cook, teacher, sheriff, social worker, janitor. At the end of our meal, he invited me to the camp. Intrigued by Moscow's hidden corners, I accepted.

With a friend from work, I went by train to spend a night at the camp. Tom lived in an office, perhaps the principal's office in the former life of the building (May Day parades with red pioneer scarfs, after-school choir and volleyball, the chatter of children's Russian in the hallways during break). Tom's room was a sort of no-go zone for the refugees, the threshold a line of demarcation. As we sat making small talk over instant coffee and cheap cigarettes, a group of male refugees approached.

Tom stood to address the spokesman of the group, who was angry about a conflict between two other men earlier that day in the camp's cafeteria. The discussion of the incident grew heated and the man threatened to cross the threshold. Tom stepped forward and said enough was enough. Go back to your rooms. Let this nonsense go. A moment of silence and then the refugee turned around and walked away, followed by his small delegation. They get bored and so make trouble, Tom told us. They've nothing else to do with their time.

The women, Tom explained, kept themselves busy in the mornings teaching the children basic math and such. The afternoons were spent on cleaning, keeping the kids occupied, and other domestic tasks. The women collected the food from the cafeteria, brought it back to the rooms, and then re-engineered the rice, vegetables, and simple meats into more familiar and tasty dishes using their own spices.

Tom enjoyed the job, the flow of daily tasks needed to keep

the ship of refugees afloat until, family by family, then moved on to Western Europe. But he missed his Moscow friends, Swahili banter with Keith and Charles, and making his rounds at the dorms of Patrice Lumumba, keeping track of friends, acquaintances, confidants, and contacts.

For dinner, we walked through field and forest, jumping off the road onto snow banks when cars and trucks passed, to a café in town that served standard Russian food. After a few shots of vodka, Tom referred vaguely to his time as a soldier in Uganda and then talked of what he found most difficult in life. It wasn't the daily trials of the young African in Moscow, the cold, the ever inquisitive police, the uncertainty of shelter and food, the racist comments from kids and pensioners. It was the loss, the often-sudden absences, of friends and loved ones. A grief that began when he left his family for the army, growing with war, relocation, and then the constant churn of refugees and itinerant Africans, Russians, and many others in and out of his life.

We met in Moscow infrequently after that weekend, until, in mid-spring, Tom showed up at the soup kitchen. He was no longer working at the camp and was now sleeping in a dorm room at Patrice Lumumba. The work had grown tedious and the ornery, demanding company of the male refugees had worn him out.

"You get fed up with their nonsense," he said. "They get on your nerves, man, they really do."

By late spring, life for Charles and Keith became more difficult. Poor grades, poor attendance, and poor financial backing from the Ugandan government led the university to dismiss them. Their standing at the university had been tenuous even before their dismissal. They liked their beer and were familiar enough with the drunk tank at the local police station to be on a first-name basis with the Moscow cop—Misha—who patrolled the university beat. They even had a nickname for his baton, the *pozhalusta* stick. Pozhalusta: *you're welcome, much obliged*, the reflexive response to *thank you*. You want to get drunk and make a scene at my police station, whack.

Pozhalusta. In you go to the cell to sober up.

Charles and Keith pointed Misha out one evening as we sat on a polished granite embankment across the street from an oversized, Stalinesque plaza, in front of milk, bread, and produce stores. The embankment was a popular meeting point and gathering area during the long summer evenings. Students of all nationalities stopped to chat, shake hands with the snap of the finger, and then move on. Misha was a forgettable man: 5' 8", a little overweight, a permanent scowl on his face, and a mess of brown hair beneath his blue police cap. The baton hung from his belt comfortably, an oft-used and easily accessed tool of his trade. On this street, though, he was the outsider and the students, ever the other, were the insiders. Only his *pozhalusta* stick gave him status.

By late spring I was a regular for evening beers with Keith and Charles on the granite wall. We usually drank a bottle or two of fresh, sweet Russian beer, which went stale after more than 5 to 6 days on the shelf. A sticker on the side of the bottle indicated which day of the week it had been brewed. Then they introduced a new vice into our company, marijuana. I'd smoked some the summer between junior and senior years of college, when a co-worker at a day camp grew his own and shared the crop magnanimously. I was a giggly, happy stoner but the habit didn't stick.

One afternoon we went to my place to indulge. My mother had recently travelled with her church choir to Italy, which included a brief performance and audience with the pope. She sent me photos, one of which was a kind of confused, blurred, up-close shot of the pope's face and miter, taken as he walked by. The pope's determined yet calm expression sent us into spasms of gut-wrenching laughter. Now there's a man, look at him, you don't mess around with him, Charles said, and I laughed so hard it hurt. No, seriously, what a look on his face. That's the pope, man. The pope. We must have laughed for 30 minutes, just a glance at the photo sent us heaving and panting with laughter.

I didn't stop to question how Charles and Keith, poor and

destitute, relying on a pensioner's soup kitchen for food, had such a consistent and good supply of weed. In mid-summer, Keith and Charles stopped coming to the soup kitchen and evening beers at the granite wall. I asked around. No one knew where they were. Then, they called.

They needed a safe place for 24 hours, somewhere to lie low while they figured things out. Apparently, they had been dealing marijuana to the Patrice Lumumba community. Somehow they had screwed up, pissed off their supplier, and were scrambling to make amends.

Concerned and curious, I offered my apartment as a temporary hideout. I'd never harbored drug dealers on the run, but I figured they would be hungry. On the way to meet them at the metro station, I bought sausage, cheese, bread, chocolate, juice, vodka, and cigarettes. A modest spread of sugar, fat, nicotine, and alcohol to take the edge off.

They were ragged and a little spooked. "They are after us," Charles said with a spark of self-deprecating irony, as if he were a character in some British adventure movie he might have seen many years ago in Kampala. Back in the apartment, after a meal, a few shots of vodka, and a cup of coffee, Keith and Charles relaxed and told their story.

The marijuana they'd been selling was from a stash provided by some Georgians. Somehow—I never got the details—they were behind on payments. Now the Georgians were searching for them and the money. Keith had wired his father, the judge in Kampala, for money. They were anxiously waiting for him to wire back funds and so make amends with the Georgians.

"So you see, Andrew," Keith concluded, "We've got ourselves into a big fucking mess."

I took a photo of Keith and Charles that afternoon. I still have that picture. They sit in front of the kitchen door and a bamboo screen of a naked geisha kneeling down to pick a flower. They wear

matching green camouflage jackets and regard the camera with a mischievous, faux seriousness.

Somehow Keith and Charles managed to get out of their predicament and in a week's time were flush with money. They invited me out to a new restaurant to celebrate my birthday and gave gifts of good vodka and chocolate. They had honed their craft and now enjoyed a reliable revenue. They had the network, the contacts, and the product. I heard and saw little of them after my birthday dinner. Perhaps they earned enough money for tickets back to Uganda. Maybe they emigrated to Europe. Maybe they found a bad end in Moscow's drug trade.

Djuma carried around a small book in which he would, on occasion, jot down a thought or overheard sentence. He scavenged daily conversation for scraps and bits that might be used in his stories. He was an observer and I understood—his aversion to judgment, the acceptance of ambiguity, the joy of the mundane, the leaf that swirls in the wind across the courtyard.

I never read anything he wrote but saw the manuscript he toted around several times. He wrote with the support of a British woman at the British Council, a benevolent arm of the British Consulate whose library was a refuge for Djuma. Back at the kitchen he mentioned the assignments for a class she taught on writing. In our chatter, it irked me that they read and wrote so often on British writers. The imperialist notion still found expression in the liberal literary mind. I remember one discussion in which I asked him why African writers were always seen in contrast to the Europeans. African writers, I offered, didn't have to prove or justify themselves to the canon. They were African writers, in and of themselves. My own frustrations, the Oedipal impulse, after four years of literary criticism as an English minor, had found a cause in Djuma. I was as much an imperialist as his teacher at the British Council. One side encouraged compliance; the other, rebellion.

We mostly talked about his writing and Moscow life in general. There were no adventures to refugee camps or drug trafficking. A week or so before I returned to the United States at the end of my contract, I heard that Djuma had fallen out of a dorm window and broken his arm. Details were fuzzy. Perhaps too much drink and then an altercation. I was concerned but also caught up in the details of travel and my next job.

I had an early morning flight out of Sheremetyevo International and so ordered a taxi. Djuma called me earlier in the evening and we arranged to meet so he could accompany me to the airport. As I stood with luggage at the side of the quiet, empty boulevard, Djuma appeared. His left arm was in cast and sling and his right arm was cupped against his chest. Earlier in the evening, he had found a baby sparrow that had flown the nest too soon. It chirped and wiggled in his hand, nestling up against the warmth of his chest and heart.

He kept the bird in hand all the way to the airport. Its head would pop out from the top of his fist, beak open, waiting for insect or worm. In the terminal, Djuma waited as I checked in and then walked to customs. Unable to embrace or shake hands, we settled for kind words. Then I was gone, through security, back to New York. Djuma was left with a long bus ride back to the nearest metro station.

I read a complimentary copy of the *New York Times* as the plane taxied to take off. From habit, I turned to the sports pages, which featured a photo of football players in the scrum, a running back in full flight toward sure impact. I am a Giants fan but, for a moment, the photo was alien to me. It made no sense. I was an outsider, looking in, trying to make sense of hulking men in hard helmets, grappling with one another.

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