

New Haven Review

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Two Poems

Dolores Hayden

Packing the Parachute

*Georgia Ann “Tiny” Broadwick, parachute jumper
(1893-1978)*

Air circuses put the jump last—
sometimes a harness breaks
or a gust shoves you down hard
like a liquored-up husband.

Wilbur Wright shook my hand once,
he said, you’re awful small to do that.
I weigh eighty pounds, I’m four foot one,
I’ve landed in the chill blue of Lake Michigan
and the hot steam of a moving train.
Anything is easier than thirteen hour days
in a North Carolina cotton mill.

I married at twelve and had a baby, Verla.
Honey, that’s the way it was done down South.

I joined the Johnny J. Jones Carnival
in Jacksonville at fourteen,
all I ever wanted to do.

My mother raised Verla while I jumped
from a hot air balloon filled with gas.
I was The Doll Girl in white ruffles and a bonnet,
I dropped like a baby falling out of a bassinet.

On the Fourth of July, I stunted
with red, white, and blue chutes.
Faster than a firecracker,
I cut each set of cords,
fell free before opening the next,
landed on a trapeze sitting
next to the Stars and Stripes.

An airplane is much safer than a balloon.
Before I drop from a plane
cruising at seventy,
I pack every inch flat and dry,
silk like a coverlet,
rope like an umbilical cord,
my parachute is birth in a bundle, rebirth,
I've strapped it on my back
a thousand times.

Watch me fall
watch me
watch

before the chute snaps open.

Flying Lesson: Air Mail, 1920

Schedules, contracts,
sketches, letters,
air mail pays three bucks
a pound: locked canvas sacks
provide a living,
don't let them weigh
more than your life.

Strap the skinny
scrolling strip map
to your knee board:
climb north from Bellafonte
through a gap in the ridge,
cross the switchback
on Rattlesnake Mountain.

Pick up the west branch
of the Susquehanna River
at Snow Shoe—look sharp,
five small houses.

After Clearfield, follow
the white gravel road
to Du Bois, south of town
sits a piece of flat pasture
you can land on in a pinch.

Night mail: if you
climb above fog,
the moon and stars
give directions,
streetlights glow

beneath the clouds
to hint at locations,
still, you need a hole
in the fog to land.

Zero, zero,
no ceiling,
no visibility.

Ten minutes' fuel.
Five.
Four.
Three.

Death is calling collect.

Climb the cowlings,
bend your knees,
hurl yourself
head first
into the fog.

Watch out for the ship
gliding down
without you.

Away from its path,
jerk the cord,
release the silk.
Cross your ankles
to avoid wires.

Earth pulls you back,
hard and particular.

Polar Bear

Tom Toro

*The end of the world began with us
and shows no signs of ending.*

—Italo Calvino

How long had it been since Jacob had stopped moving?

Outside the door of his apartment, just a few feet from where he stood, a neighbor, Ms. Chandler, was listening. The doorknob jiggled tentatively. From the corner of an eye Jacob watched it, not stirring, not breathing a word. Then he heard baffled footsteps retreat down the carpeted hallway.

Against his chest his baby breathed humidly. She gurgled and stirred but soon relaxed astride Jacob's forearm like a cowboy nodding off in the saddle. With a bit more effort than it probably should have required, he rolled his eyes toward the coat closet, then across a water-damaged patch of plaster half-hidden by an antique oval mirror, and finally he glimpsed in the blurry meniscus of his peripheral vision Rebecca's side of the bedroom. A diamond patch of sunlight lay upon her pillow. It slowly climbed the headboard and dilated across a framed print of a Chagall, it stretched tall and slim as if reaching for the ceiling fan, only to vanish by the time the building's front door banged shut and those unmistakable, rapid footsteps were crossing the foyer, ascending the staircase.

Rebecca burst inside and gave a surprised *oh!* upon coming face-to-face with Jacob. She laughed gamely, as if he'd been waiting in coquettish ambush. But her smile dropped when he didn't do anything except stare wide-eyed and breathe through his half-open mouth. Sensing that whatever was going on here must be, at a minimum, embarrassing, Rebecca squeezed past and locked the door behind her. Jacob couldn't provide an explanation. He couldn't answer her rapid-fire questions or give any reassurance as Rebecca pried a snoozing Lily loose from his unbending grip. Immediately

paramedics were jamming the doorway. They seemed to be discussing Jacob's medical history (uneventful besides a broken finger in third grade), his allergies (a minor one to dust), and anything else Rebecca could think of that might have triggered her husband's... *situation*. Ms. Chandler appeared bearing coffee cake. She minced cautiously around Jacob, wearing a look of perplexed horror. The way his eyes followed her must have been unbearable; Ms. Chandler fled. Next the EMTs took turns, singly and in pairs, trying to hoist Jacob onto a gurney. But he remained as intractable as ever. Since his vital signs were healthy and there didn't appear to be an injury of any kind, they departed, flummoxed, making vague speculations about self-hypnosis.

Rebecca retreated with Lily to an area of the apartment that Jacob couldn't see. Quiet fell. He imagined his wife breastfeeding at the breakfast nook. He hoped that by chance she would skim this morning's newspaper, the article about melting Arctic glaciers that Jacob had intended to clip out, because it was where his predicament had originated somehow: in the climate calamity, manmade, irreversible—

"Boo!" Rebecca shouted directly behind him. Jacob didn't bat an eyelash. Moments later her hands were touching his stony limbs and exploring, kneading, searching for any sign of softening. Rebecca hugged Jacob's waist and lifted with all her might. Only the faintest rush of air escaped his lungs, and it carried upon it a phrase—

"...polar bear..."

—which came out sounding like the death rattle of a ventriloquist's dummy.

Why, why was he doing this to her? *Why now?* Rebecca implored, her eyes vainly masking hurt and mistrust, her torso swiveling constantly to keep Lily pacified. They vanished once again. Jacob listened closely. In the silence he could suss out the furtive noises of papers rustling in his office niche, the desk drawers being rifled through. But Rebecca must not have found anything incriminating because she reappeared in front of him wearing a scowl and tugging

at the canvas grocery bags that dangled from Jacob's fist. He wanted to let go. He pictured how ridiculous he must look, standing there like a freeze-frame of a dutiful husband going to run errands. It was pathetic. Rebecca turned away to gather herself, and for an instant Jacob almost believed that when she moved he'd move: that the rhythm of their marriage would recommence after a skipped beat.

All alone now for the first time since he'd strangely ground to a halt, Jacob came to a decision (alarmed to find that even his thoughts were growing sluggish—the alarm itself registering only after a troublesome delay) that he would quit this absurd nonsense. He missed his wife and child. He wanted to surprise Rebecca by being back to normal when they returned from Whole Foods, so he tried his damndest to unglue his feet from the ground. He strained with immeasurable psychic force like a man running motionless in a nightmare. Jacob could almost feel himself tip forward—did the floorboards groan questioningly? His love for Rebecca, his love for Lily urged him on; he threw the full weight of that love and devotion and manly responsibility up against the impasse. And yet it was useless. There wasn't a single action he could imagine taking that would make things better.

During the endless night Jacob gazed sideways at Rebecca while she cried silently in bed, her figure blotted by the unfocused slope of his own nose and faintly illuminated by the reading lamp that had been left burning on his nightstand.

The next morning Rebecca placed a cup of ice water nearby—directly in Jacob's line of sight but barely out of reach—and told him that she was going to fetch her parents from the airport.

The Davids were nice folks. They downplayed the situation and treated Jacob like someone with a run-of-the-mill handicap, making accommodations for his disability but not directly addressing it. Over a light brunch of hummus and pita they talked politics, sipping herbal tea while perched in chairs crammed knee to knee in the narrow corridor, as if Jacob might join the conversation at any moment. When it came time to check in to their hotel, Mr. David hugged his

son-in-law goodbye, while, in the subtlest manner conceivable, using all of his strength to try to pry Jacob loose. The old man exited wearing a pained smirk and with purplish-blue veins throbbing on his damp forehead.

The following week a marriage counselor visited. Rebecca had taken an indefinite leave of absence from work—or maybe she'd quit altogether? From what Jacob was able to glean, their finances were in disarray and this dowdy person seated next to him was a friend of a friend. Rebecca excused herself to go to the bathroom. Awkwardly Jacob and the marriage counselor, Dr. Anne, looked askance at one another for a long minute, transmitting silent messages of unfathomable meaning. Then Dr. Anne got right up in Jacob's face and accused him of being a closeted reactionary, whispering that despite everything he and Rebecca had agreed on philosophically, Jacob was balking at being a stay-at-home dad. The nontraditional gender role had short-circuited his nervous system, hadn't it? *Hadn't it?*

It was roughly during the period of these counseling sessions—around the time when Rebecca made a discovery on Jacob's behalf, while role-playing, that he'd always resented her leadership qualities; or else when Dr. Anne was suddenly replaced by Dr. Chris, who made advances toward Rebecca that were clearly orchestrated by the two of them to spark Jacob's jealousy and spur him to act—that he began to notice his perception of things was slipping. Being static, facing these same unchanging walls day after day, lodged in what can best be described as a diorama of his former self, Jacob grew increasingly remote from the progress of things around him. The business of living had accepted his resignation. Only willful denial and sheer force of habit caused his family to maintain the pretense of interaction, offering Jacob stray clues about unfolding events, plans, crises. His own parents visited. All at once they were standing before him like emissaries from a parallel dimension. It was inconceivable that they hadn't come to see Jacob sooner than this, so he guessed they must have, perhaps countless times, and somehow he wasn't surprised when they disappeared again without warning.

One day a tremor shook the building. Fellow tenants flocked to their apartment to scrutinize Jacob head to toe for any hint of alteration. Perhaps the violent upheaval of the very earth itself was the last hope to jolt him free? All it did do, however, was crack the building's foundation. The structure was condemned. Hard-hatted men took measurements of Jacob and then the ceiling flew away with a loud crash and an eruption of dusty sunlight. He was lassoed around his groin and torso; the straps cinched tight; a hydraulic crane grunted overhead. It stalled momentarily, choking and sputtering. Nobody breathed a word. Down on the street corner Rebecca was waiting in the shade of a moving truck, a napping Lily hidden by her stroller's canopy, and it would have been difficult to say what she truly felt when at last the tension broke and Jacob came rising out of the building's shell like a Greek statue excavated from a ruin, his canvas grocery bags flapping in the breeze.

Their trip out to the countryside was, for him, a sort of vague reminiscence. The scheme to buy a ranch house, to pool both families' resources and live together under one roof, the Davids, the Maplethorpes, going back to the land—it had been settled in Jacob's presence as a potential remedy. He remembered it all and yet somehow he didn't; he had listened to the life-changing decisions passively and now he was riding strapped to the bed of a tractor-trailer, observing the dirt road spool out lonesomely behind.

They set him on the front lawn beneath a magnificent oak tree. Chattering sparrows flew out from a tumbledown barn. Low grassy hills surrounded the winding valley in the distance. From this well-chosen angle Jacob could observe his kinfolk bustling back-and-forth as they carried their belongings into the ranch house, and then, during the months that followed, he watched their earnest attempts to fashion a pastoral idyll. A newly dug well provided cool water that dripped from pea trellises and hand-washed linen. A clothesline wrapped around Jacob's forehead like a strand of thought missing its cartoon balloon. Whenever Rebecca happened to glance at him during her chores she forced a tired grin. Morning and evening the

smell of baking wafted through the richly pollinated air; in milder weather when they ate out on the veranda there was always a place at the table reserved for Jacob. But after a little while the old sheep-dog who must have come with the property was allowed to sleep on his empty chair.

Left exposed to the elements, Jacob's clothes disintegrated. He looked surprisingly hale for a human barnacle. Lily, now walking upright on her bandy legs, made a game of stacking pebbles and acorns around Jacob's feet, as if in her child's wisdom she understood that from this spot he would never be uprooted. More and more they drifted back to the city. Errands and supply runs happened with greater frequency. Soon these forays evolved into day trips, long weekends, visits to good neighborhoods in reputable school districts. Imperceptibly the tide turned; the rural homestead became a getaway for swift summer months and every-other holiday, and then it was more like a site of filial pilgrimage. Jacob: the granite angel watching over his own undug grave.

Rebecca hosed him down for the last time. With a dish rag she dried him thoroughly and then embraced Jacob, out of genuine fondness or else some sense of obligation to the past. Lily gave him a hug, too, after being cajoled, but she scurried away frightened and jumped into the minivan where a bearded stranger was waiting patiently.

During a violent storm (though it's impossible to say which season this was) a lightning bolt split the regal oak tree. Charred limbs lay scattered around Jacob, where they rotted. He experienced only the results of things now; the movement of time was a formless fog that blew in amongst hesitant shapes, made tangible by their stillness. It could have been many years into the future when he noticed that another person was standing across the valley. Whoever she was, she looked to be caught in the act of reading. Yellow leaves clung to her knotty hair. Wild herbs grew between her unshifting feet. Like weird mushrooms that sprouted overnight, more and more people began

cropping up. Under grayish skies, torrential showers, punishing heat, they remained stationed together. Wolves and bobcats ate a few of the outliers, but they probably found their tough meat unappetizing—and somehow this reminded Jacob of earlier days, of lost impressions: the fang marks that he'd received on his calves, the musky bear who'd rubbed against him luxuriantly, the doe and her fawns who'd often come to lie down in his shadow for shade. He sought with uncertain and wavering senses the faces of Rebecca and Lily amongst the multiplying, static tribe. But Jacob was amazed to find himself peering across the surface of a brackish lake. Human forms stood like pylons in the shallows. Out deeper they vanished up to their chins. Seagulls flew in from the west, circled above triumphantly, cawing blandishments to their new coastline. Almost without knowing it, Jacob felt the water lap his ankles.

Inflicted

Living with Lyme disease

Ruth Heil

When he and I first met, I figured Bill had Parkinson's disease.

Every so often, he would remove one of his hands from his front pocket to gesture. The trembling would cease only after at least two of his fingers returned to his hip, and his eyes said, "I wonder if she noticed."

I did not ask questions and stuck to the topic at hand. The woodland surrounding us remained silent as we stood in a cold, ice-scented midst. Bill tried to explain the nuances of the excavation project he had completed in November, but Justin, his congenial adult son, did most of the talking. When the tour in my backyard was over, Bill stayed quiet, reserved, as if he were embarrassed or sad, like a soldier who had done everything right but was still losing the war.

Regardless, small talk prevailed. It was deer season, and the topic of illegal hunting came up. The two remembered a scene during their work: "The gun was over there (Justin pointed east), we were here (he pointed at the ground), and the buck was there (to the west). We tried to shush it away, for its sake and ours."

I scanned the tall cedars and responded, "This park is the reason we bought this place. It's posted 'recreation area,' but every neighbor I met so far has warned me about the shooting that goes on. I'm not against hunting, but they should respect a safety zone."

The men glanced at each other and shook their heads in agreement.

"Although, I have to admit," I continued, "the woods are overrun with deer, and I'm really worried about Lyme."

Suddenly Bill's armor fell off. I had hit the source of the tremors and apprehension: Lyme disease.

"This is much better than it was," Bill said, stretching his fingers flat out in front him, forcing his hand steady. "Before, I couldn't get off the couch."

“It’s true,” Justin said.

For the next forty-five minutes, I endured the dreary cold without hesitation as a story of woe poured from this hearty, weathered, middle-aged man, an outdoor warrior brought down by a tick, a pinhead-sized foe.

He told of misdiagnosis, undiagnosis, and years of growing devastation. No longer was this an infection in his veins, it was a storm throughout his body. He was, by all accounts, disabled. He relied upon Justin to explain to him the procedures he alone had developed while building the family business.

“I just couldn’t think,” Bill said.

After depleting the local doctor referrals, medical universities, and alternative health centers, he finally found a “Lyme-aware doctor.” “He’s helped me a lot,” Bill said. But the relief in his voice faded quickly when, a moment later, he said, “My insurance doesn’t cover it. They don’t recognize chronic Lyme disease. They won’t approve my treatment, which is really just massive doses of antibiotics. I should be getting them intravenously, but I can’t afford it. The oral doses are still costing me tens of thousands of dollars, and my recovery will be slower this way. It’s what I have to do; I’m not going back to that couch.”

He finished, “Were it not for Justin, I’d have lost the business.”

As the two climbed into their truck, I tried to bid a farewell of hope and encouragement, but I frankly didn’t know what to say. This man was living my worst nightmare.

I’ve always considered Lyme disease an assault on a love for nature. It’s as if, during a time when we desperately need to be outdoors, Satan has invented a plausible reason to hide inside. Lying in the tall grass, resting on a fallen log, relaxing by a babbling stream, wandering through a foliage cathedral: these iconic and healthful retreats are now taboo inside an ever-growing geographic boundary.

The disease escaped its namesake town decades ago. In 2013, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) made head-

lines when it released a new national estimate of annual diagnoses: 300,000 people, 10 times worse than previous reports indicated, and 100 times greater than the population of Lyme, Connecticut.

Still, its treatment remains mystifyingly controversial. Patients continue to endure skepticism from doctors who miss the initial diagnosis and fail to make them better. Great expense goes into treating symptoms as if the source were some other cardiac, neurological, gastrointestinal, or psychiatric disorder.

Of the patients who have been diagnosed and treated within Infectious Disease Society of America's guidelines, many still suffer with serious, long-term ailments. They must prove to the healers to which they turn that they are not lying, that they are being crippled, that they need further treatment, and that the source could be Lyme.

The condition is commonly called chronic Lyme disease, but the CDC prefers instead post-treatment Lyme disease syndrome (PTLDS), a name that suggests a secondary, autoimmune disease rather than a failure to knock out the first infection. And while leaders fight over labels, the victims pray for release from torture. Horrifically out-of-touch is the CDC's statement, posted on its website, "patients with PTLDS almost always get better with time." Of all the long-term sufferers I have interviewed, none have gotten better with time. Many have just given up.

But the fundamental problem is not a lack of caring. Trickery is to blame. The bacteria leave the bloodstream and hide in all corners of the body, where they mutate into other problems. Without an ability to detect the *Borrelia burgdorferi* spirochete that causes Lyme, tests scan for the presence (or lack) of reactive antibodies. Various strains of bacteria are known to exist, as are potential co-infections with a list of other concerning, deer-tick-transmitted diseases. As with many autoimmune reactions, symptoms in one person may differ from those in another. And while there is agreement that treating Lyme in its early stage is crucial for returning good health, there is a lack of consensus on how to do that.

The results of persistence however are pretty consistent: nerve

damage, mental damage, reputation damage, hope damage, and one's quality of life destroyed.

My hope rests on ecologists such as Dr. Richard S. Ostfeld at the Cary Institute of Ecosystem Studies in New York, who are laboriously studying the source. For instance, they have determined that the chipmunk, shrew, and white-footed mouse are the real vectors for the disease, not deer. The more they learn, the better armed we become. Also increasing is the number of Lyme-focused advocates, such as the Lyme Disease Association, who teach the facts to the public and the decision-makers.

But, sadly, prevention campaigns read like advertisements for diethyltoluamide (DEET). A 2007 national water survey detected the insect repellent in 75% of streams tested in 30 states. Meanwhile, homeowners treat their yards with tick-killing pesticides, which also eliminate nature's tick-killing predators.

Lyme first came to my world when, 12 years ago, my brother was stricken. Beyond the fact that I loved him, he might as well have been me. He was an avid hiker with a strong immune system and a penchant for good hygiene. My fortune told, I pushed aside the fear and moved to my dream-come-true woodland retreat anyway, even with its failed septic system. In the second spring here I found deer ticks everywhere—walking across the patio table, hanging on the screen door, climbing up my neck, embedded in my back and then my pubic hairline. So small, each nymph could be mistaken for an ingrown hair. I was being attacked by a hungry army of pepper flakes with legs. By summer it happened: I found a bull's eye rash, the telltale sign of the disease.

My discovery of the erythema migrans caused physical ailments that day, all related to stress. Conceptualizing derailed health had a bigger impact on my well-being than the malady itself.

Questions flowed like flood waters: After my current antibiotic treatment regime runs out, won't I just get bitten and infected again? What shall replace my therapeutic walk outside, the one that could

cripple me for life?

Is this the penance we must pay for abusing the earth? And how long for this world are we, now that the most independent humans, the ones with the skills to survive in the wilderness, have become dependent on the medicine of strangers, medicine they are reluctant to give? Who is going to restore our trust in the doctors? What's in store for a society that has yet another excuse to disconnect from the natural world?

The last I heard from Bill he was back to light duty but now had Rocky Mountain spotted fever, one of those other concerning tick-delivered diseases.

I am questioning. I am trembling. And I wonder if anyone's noticed.

Mitsu

Jenna Le

At my first job, an office assistant
named Mitsu, a woman draped
loosely in dowdy clothes always
brushing the cotton shoulders
of her drab blouse, worked:
I later learned
she had a son in college,
so she must've been middle-aged,
but her face was enamel-
smooth, its appearance of apricot-
glossy youth well-preserved,
so I treated her informally,
with the casual city manners
I saved for folks my own age. Mitsu
had come down in the world,
gossips murmured: in the country
she immigrated from,
she had sat like a well-fluffed chicken
on a nest of wealth
and family prestige, which all got lost
some years ago, after which she wed
a fat rich American
and moved to Boston. Very lucky for her
it worked out that way,
people said. Mitsu spoke
English imperfectly, so I,
who had been born in the U.S.
and spoke English with no flaw,
viewed her with a speck
of condescension in my eye. Within months
of meeting Mitsu, I began to spin

elaborate fantasies
about her in my mind: I pictured
how I would one day be her savior,
I pictured her
being reduced to tears
by a haughty client, an elderly racist
who'd berate her for her foreign
speech and dress, and I pictured
myself sweeping onto the scene, so puffed
with righteous rage
that without fear of consequences
I'd vocally defend
the wailing Mitsu, demand the racist
apologize to her forthwith,
then hug her and console her while she cried.
Each time I saw Mitsu at work, my brain
added new elements
to this heroic daydream
until it was vivid
as something that really happened.
And then one morning, I showed up at the office
and Mitsu wasn't there:
the secretary told me
in a chummy confidential whisper
that, due to some careless act I had committed
and for which Mitsu had been blamed,
the boss had yelled at Mitsu
and she had left the premises
last night softly weeping.

As Abraham to Isaac

Elizabeth Edelglass

Abe didn't want Misha to grow up so fast. Be a boy a little longer, what's the hurry? As if it's so easy to be a man, as if it's fun? But with no school, what else for him to do but work alongside Abe at the sewing machine?

And now the baby was coming. And the midwife already gone, one of those possibly not coming back. And the orders for Jews to stay in their houses, soldiers goose-stepping past their windows day and night. Abe heard, even in his sleep, the crack of boot steps. Every now and then a different crack, something worse than boots. Sometimes, a scream.

Today, no screams, not outside and also not inside, where who could have guessed Abe would have welcomed a scream, wanted a scream, prayed for a scream. With his Manya on the bed, Manya who never screamed like the other wives, not when Misha was born, not when the twins came. And not screaming now, but moaning, her face red with pain and something more, writhing on the damp bedding, gripping her belly with both hands, holding tight to the child inside.

"Nit itst," she groaned. "Not now. Not today." A child shouldn't come into this world, not right now, maybe later, some other day, some better day.

But a child doesn't know to listen.

So Abe sent the twins upstairs with heels of bread and cheese and, for toys, wooden spools from his sewing table, empty spools he had plenty. But every time he looked up, there the twins were on the landing, not playing, but watching. He had to shake a hand, send them back to their room. Should he move a bureau to block their bedroom door? Which was worse, let them see or lock them in like prison? Manya would never forgive him if he locked them in. Not now. Not today. Not with prison a word that hung in the air outside, threatened to seep under the door like smoke. Prison or something worse.

And Misha? “Boil water,” Abe said. “Mama’s soup pot. Stoke the fire.” And Misha did as he was told. Misha, not yet Bar Mitzvah, dragging the heavy pot from the pump to the stove, stronger than Abe remembered, or maybe arms get strong as needed.

When Misha was coming, Manya had walked the floor with the midwife. So strong she was, that first time, too strong to scream. Or maybe too scared barely to whisper, her voice stuck in her throat. The midwife had hushed and soothed, sent Abe for wood for the stove, never mind they had already enough wood for ten days, ten babies. By the time Abe had returned, there was Manya, stooping, pushing down with both hands on top of her belly, gloriously naked below her shirtwaist. The midwife reached between Manya’s legs, her hands easing, touching, stretching, manipulating. And, God forbid, it was as if the midwife was stroking between Abe’s legs. The sight of it. When Manya pushed, Abe had to push too, could not hold back, had to run outside, ripping at buttons, swollen, bursting, pumping seed into the dirt. Thank God he wasn’t Catholic like the Poles in town. He’d have had to run straight to confession. Lucky Jew, instead of looking on a punishing priest, he got to kiss his Manya and look on the innocent face of his son, wrinkled, like an old man already wise.

With the twins, not so easy, but the midwife knew what to do. Manya on the bed that time, like now, too weak to walk the floor, too weak to scream. Two days moaning, whimpering. The midwife again with the hands, stroking and prodding every inch of Manya’s belly. How she knew there were two in there? By the feel of it, here a hand, there a knee. And that belly, so huge and white and frightening, no wonder the midwife sent Misha down the street to Rivka the baker’s wife. Don’t tell anyone, Abe would have liked also to go, like a scared little boy, let Rivka take care of him too. But he stayed, stoked the fire, boiled the water, handed over clean bed linen as

needed, new sheets Abe had stitched and Manya herself had washed and bleached and pressed, then folded and stacked in joyous preparation.

After two days, Manya stopped moaning, which Abe had thought was good. Finally, a rest. Two days nobody had slept. But the midwife was suddenly wide awake and all urgent business, once again with her hands between Manya's legs, this time not just to catch. This time reaching in, actually in, where once Abe had wanted only to be, to stay, his private place, now the midwife's place, her fingers, her hand, her wrist. And Abe not swollen this time, but shriveled like one of Manya's dried plums, if a plum could feel fright. Then came the water and the blood and the girl and the boy.

Yetta and Yisroel, but not yet, bad luck to name a baby just born. For the girl would come later a quick prayer in shul and a name. For the boy, a bris on the eighth day. Before that, no guarantee the baby would live. But on the eighth day it was safe, and Reb Shmuel the moyl would cut the boy's foreskin and give him a name, like every Jewish son and father and grandfather all the way back to Abraham the Patriarch.

The midwife didn't need names, cooed at the babies, *Mamaleh*, *Tataleh*, gave Manya and the babies a soothing bath with a cloth dipped in warm water—finally some use for that water Abe had been heating for two days in Manya's big pot. Then she dressed the babies in cotton gowns stitched by Abe himself, with hand-rolled hems as fine as linen hankies for the Tzar, and set one babe on each of Manya's breasts, the boy on the left and the girl on the right. The girl, soon to be Yetta, with her startling fringe of red hair peeking out from her swaddling blanket, no need to open diapers to tell this girl from her brother.

At last, the midwife took that pot back into the kitchen where she washed out Manya's blood and the babies' mucousy membrane, scrubbed and boiled and scrubbed again, and put up to cook a fat chicken for some soup. Her fingers proved as deft with dough as

with the secret skin of mothers, kneading and stretching to form meat-stuffed kreplakh, dumplings shaped round for the circle of life, you'd think she was making Rosh Hashanah soup. And while this holiday soup simmered on the stove, filling the air with its nourishing smell, Manya held one tiny head in each hand and guided two open mouths to suckle, nourishment only she could give. A miracle.

Where was the midwife now, when Abe needed her? Where was a miracle now?

Twice Abe had seen, and he knew Manya was not doing it right this time. Arching backward instead of bending forward, grasping and pulling up on her belly with both hands from below, when she should be pushing down from above. “*Nit*,” she insisted through clenched teeth. “No, no, no.”

Even when the water gushed out onto the bed, a sign, Abe knew, that soon would follow the baby, she refused to take off her skirt, her undergarments. Not from modesty, Abe understood, despite young Misha’s wide, watchful eyes. Manya crossed her legs tight and held on. As if keeping her underpants on would keep this child safe.

But it could not be done.

“Quick, Mishky, a clean sheet,” Abe shouted as the fluid continued to gush and soak. Together, he and Misha rolled Manya to one side then the other, stripped off the wet sheet beneath her, lay down the clean and dry, not new this time, but Abe had patched and laundered, Manya having refused any part in these preparations.

“My scissors,” Abe demanded, and Misha ran to fetch them from the sewing table. Then Abe was cutting off Manya’s skirt, her underwear, and already he could see the head bulging between her legs. The red hair, like Yetta’s, slick and dark but undeniably red against a tender pink scalp, thanks God, must be another sweet baby girl.

“Push, Manya, push.” But she refused to help. Closed her eyes and gritted her teeth. Might have refused to breathe if she could.

Never mind determined mother and inept father. This baby would come on its own. On his own. Another boy in Abe's surprised hands. A strong boy, opening his mouth to give a lusty geshrei.

"Here, boil," Abe said, thrusting the scissors into Misha's hands. "Hurry." And then he was cutting the cord with the clean, hot blades, then pushing on Manya's belly the way he'd seen the midwife do, pushing and catching the bloody mess that came after. Then it was Misha, poor Misha, dipping dishcloths into the pot for Abe to clean the baby, to clean Manya. Misha, his shirttails untucked and spattered with blood, watching Abe wipe Manya's face, Manya's bottom, parts of his mama that a boy should never have to see.

The last thing that needed to be done, Abe had never seen firsthand. The father was always sent straight outside after the birth, as if an entire forest of wood must be chopped for a baby, some things a man should not see. That's when the midwife would scald a sharp sewing needle, measure a length of strong silk thread—maybe, for Manya, needle and thread from Abe's own sewing table—then stitch up the new mother's torn flesh down there, as easy as Abe might tat together a torn lace collar. He'd never seen it done, but he didn't have to see to know. First time after childbirth when he tried to be together with his Manya, then he saw, with his fingers if not with his eyes, the midwife's fine needlework. Abe also was handy with a needle, but not like that. He pulled down Manya's nightgown, covered up the flesh that needed mending. Would be all right. Would have to be all right.

One more time Misha helped. They rolled Manya this way and that, pulling out the soiled bedclothes, spreading and tucking the last clean sheet. She would not look at Abe, would not look at Misha, hardly looked at the baby, guiding its mouth to her nipple by instinct, the way a mother knows. Now Misha looked away, never mind all he had seen and done today, still a boy suddenly embarrassed by the sight of suckling at the breast.

"So go," Abe said, "bring the children." And Misha charged up

the stairs. How easily he carried down the twins, Yetta with one thin arm around his neck, Yisroel sucking a thumb, not even holding on. They knew Misha would not drop them. A good strong boy.

This time, Abe had been hoping for a girl.

A boy needs a bris in eight days. But Reb Shmuel the moyl was like the midwife, one of the gone. Reb Shmuel had circumcised Misha and then Yisroel. Each time, a big party, friends and relatives and even the hungry young learners from shul. Abe had bought herring and schnapps. Manya's mother and sisters had baked pastries rich with butter and cream. For Misha, Abe's father held the baby as Reb Shmuel brandished his knife for the ritual cutting. Manya's father had to wait until Yisroel for his turn to hold. For a bris, everyone knew, the father's father came first, that invisible thread of covenant tethering son to father to father to father, through all the generations of Jews.

This time, there wouldn't be a party, not with Jews forbidden to walk the streets, and besides, who was left? Grandparents gone with the gone. Aunts run off to the forest with the last of the young learners, prayer books scattered on study tables in the empty shul, cake pans abandoned in kitchens, fires left smoldering in ovens. Abe might have taken Manya and the children to the forest, too, if they hadn't been waiting for this baby, trapped by waiting for this baby. Now the baby was here. And the bris was a commandment, could not be skipped or postponed. Who would take a knife to this nameless little one's penis eight days from now?

Abe's hands trembled just to think about it. They shook at his sides. Those hands so steady near the flying needle of any sewing machine. Give those hands a scissors, they would cut the fabric for a pair of trousers in one cut, never once needing to fix a mistake. With a baby, no mistakes allowed. It was supposed to be a mitzvah to cut your own son, ever since God commanded Abraham to circumcise his son Isaac. Of course later, that same God commanded Abraham to take a knife to Isaac's neck, then changed His mind. A test. Life isn't hard enough, a father needs such a test?

It was dark out, long past supertime, and the twins were whining what's to eat. Manya needed red meat, on account of the blood she had lost, but there hadn't been meat for weeks, her soup pot still red from her own blood, no chicken on hand for a soup. Where was the midwife when soup was needed? Where were her hearty stuffed kreplakh to fill empty stomachs? "Just because you dream of kreplakh," Manya would tell him, if she were talking to him, not closing her eyes and turning away, "it don't mean you got kreplakh." Manya didn't believe in wasting time on dreams.

There were some eggs Abe could boil for supper in another pot, a small pot, a clean pot, except he could not face any more boiling water, not today. He would pour everyone a glass of milk, slice more bread and the last of the cheese. Just yesterday, Manya had baked this bread, moving about this kitchen as if her time would never come, making for her family a miracle out of spelt when the flour bin yawned empty.

Abe pulled a bread knife from the dairy drawer, felt the weight of it in his hand, and wondered. Which knife would he use for the bris? Meat or dairy? What would God have to say about this, God and His rules about keeping kosher? Such a question, Abe must be crazy. What father would ask such a question, and what God would require it?

But what choice did he have? The miracle of spelt into bread was yesterday's miracle; today, no miracle of soup and kreplakh, and also no miracle coming in eight days. Reb Shmuel the moyl was not coming back. It would be up to Abe.

Eight days from now, Abe would pick the sharpest, finest blade he could find, hone it on the stone he used to sharpen his sewing scissors, boil it in Manya's soup pot like today. And then he would say the prayers, the blessings, and give his new son a name, make him a Jew, as Abraham to Isaac.

No Lay of the Land

*Writing in South Africa
after apartheid*

Leon de Kock

What does it mean to be a “postapartheid” writer? The customary sense of South African writing, especially in the United States, tends to concentrate on classic examples of resistance to racial injustice, with names like Alan Paton, Es’kia Mphahlele, Athol Fugard, Nadine Gordimer, André Brink, Lewis Nkosi, Antjie Krog, and J.M. Coetzee coming most readily to mind. In the years since South Africa’s “silent” revolution in 1994, however, the lines have become harder to see as a political and moral battleground that was once infamously familiar refracted into a scene of seemingly lesser micro-struggles under the still-grand, emblematic banner of “liberation.” However, Nelson Mandela’s “bloodless” revolution, in the view of most independent experts today, was far more a symbolic victory than a material one, with black elites reaping huge financial benefits at the cost of the vast majority of ordinary (and mostly black) South Africans. The average black citizen of the nominally free South Africa, today, 21 years after the end of apartheid, remains pitifully poor despite the many constitutional gains of democracy, with real unemployment rates estimated at over 35 percent (youth unemployment is reliably estimated at more than 50 percent). This is especially evident under the crony regime of the all-but-disgraced current president, Jacob Zuma, who has spent a large part of his late political career evading trial for corruption, and whose government is seen as nothing if not pragmatic in its elite-enrichment strategies under the cover of the African National Congress’s powerfully symbolic liberation currency.

For citizens, intellectuals, writers and observers alike, it has been a somewhat rough ride. It’s as if the country lost its heroic master-narrative of resistance as freedom was gained, but, at the same time, somehow not properly achieved. In a real sense, this twist in the tale—and the issue of why, where, and how it came about—is in fact the real question, the *actual* story, for postapart-

heid writers. However, like the student protests in the country in the second half of 2015 against rising university fees—a remarkable upsurge of what noted commentator Achille Mbembe calls the “politics of impatience”—it is a tale, or a set of tales, that don’t quite make headlines with quite the same force as apartheid and the liberation struggle once did.

This loss of focus has created an interesting situation in South African writing. The legions of writers that have emerged (and those who have continued to write) after South Africa’s Mandela “miracle” of 1994 have proved to be difficult to sum up under any easy-to-hand categorization. The early years of the new democracy witnessed heady optimism of a kind that is well summed up in novelist André Brink’s rousing call, made on the brink of political liberation in 1993, for “a reimagination of history.” The recently deceased Brink, a veteran of resistance against apartheid, urged creative artists “to grapple, exuberantly and adventurously, with the limits of the possible.” In saying this, Brink was echoing a similar appeal by author and scholar Njabulo Ndebele, who famously urged writers to “rediscover the ordinary” and to break from the overly stark depictions of “struggle” literature.

Sadly, however, such early-transition buoyancy did not last very long. Following the honeymoon years of 1994–1998, during which the universally beloved Nelson Mandela served as president, troubling currents began to emerge, such as a widely perceived return to exclusionary racial discourse in the governance of Mandela’s successor, Thabo Mbeki, not to mention Mbeki’s disastrous AIDS-denialism, said to have caused the deaths of at least 350,000 people. This coincided with growing public perceptions of an overall failure to deliver on the election promise of “a better life for all,” as the new government showed it was simply unable to make good on its once-socialist charter. This was after the Mandela administration, widely thought to have been run by Mbeki behind the scenes, bought into hard-nosed macroeconomic policies, in sync with the neoliberal zeitgeist across the developed and developing worlds. It has to be added

that the government had no real choice in the matter: globalized “markets”—or the “world economy”—would brook no alternative, and South Africa desperately needed “economic growth” for the sake of jobs, or so the story went. On the ground, however, the mainly black poor remained trapped in the shacks and shackles of poverty.

In addition, elite-enrichment scandals became a hallmark of the new dispensation. After Mandela stepped down in 1998, wave upon wave of government scandals began cresting, starting with an enormous arms deal running into hundreds of millions of dollars in which heavy bribes and injudicious spending were the order of the day. The scandal-besieged Mbeki government was followed by a dispiriting consolidation of patrimonialism and crony-governance under current president Jacob Zuma, whose “Nkandlagate” blemish is only one such “bad spot” in a morass of governmental malpractice on every level, as frenetically reported every day in the country’s nongovernmental media. “Nkandlagate” has seen hundreds of thousands of taxpayer dollars spent on Zuma’s private homestead in rural KwaZulu Natal. The other large area in which the country seems to have lost the plot has been an epidemic of crime so marked that leading nonfiction writer Jonny Steinberg was moved to write about a “phenomenology of crime” taking hold inside the country.

In the face of such demoralizing trends, writers increasingly found it hard to follow Brink’s prompt to “reimagine history” in any upbeat manner. To do as Brink suggested, namely to “grapple exuberantly and adventurously with the limits of the possible” began to seem less urgent as a newer and more pressing imperative emerged: to account for the somewhat anticlimactic, and socially destructive, *failure* of the once-rejoiced democratic miracle. It has been a severe disillusionment, a bad hangover, for citizens, writers and libertarians alike, and it still comes as something of a shock to read the following summation of affairs by Mbembe, written in 2013 for the Johannesburg *Mail & Guardian*: “South Africa has entered a new period of its history: a post-Machiavellian moment when private accumulation no longer happens through outright dispossession

but through the capture and appropriation of public resources, the modulation of brutality and the instrumentalisation of disorder.”

Even if this analysis is only half true—and it is the kind of thing all manner of observers have been saying for quite a while now, from all quarters in the “rainbow nation”—the shock of it remains disorienting. How did it happen that a revolution once described as a “miracle,” with such unusually excellent prospects, could so decisively have gone off the rails? And why did the so-called “new” South Africa so quickly yield to the grubby politics of exclusionary self-enrichment? The force of disillusionment in the South African case derives from the high degree of hope invested in a country that had, by 1994, become a global allegory for the politics of race. If South Africa could pull through, then it would set a testing example for the rest of the world, not least the United States. But writers in both South Africa and the United States now face the relative loss of such optimism, with events in the troubled zone of “race relations” still looking as grim as ever, especially after the Freddie Gray event in Baltimore, along with similar instances of racial malpractice by police in places like Ferguson, Missouri, and Manhattan, New York, where former tennis professional James Blake was unceremoniously brought to the ground by a policeman in full view of the public after being taken for a common criminal. The Baltimore, Ferguson and Manhattan debacles are isolated examples mirroring the much worse event of the Marikana killings in 2012 in the North West Province of South Africa, where the supposedly reformed national police force, acting on orders from the highest political levels, shot dead 34 protesting platinum miners, dirt-poor underground laborers who were seeking an improvement in wages as low as \$400 a month. Many of the murdered, it now turns out in the wake of an official hearing, and from investigative journalism by the likes of Pulitzer-prize-winning photojournalist Greg Marinovich, were executed at close range while quite possibly begging for their lives.

In the event, postapartheid South African writers have increasingly turned to a mode of writing that I describe, in my forthcoming

book *Losing the Plot: Crime, Reality, and Fiction in Postapartheid Writing* (Witwatersrand University Press), as “social detection.” These acts of investigative writing are quests to work out what’s actually going on, and how it is that things have turned out so badly, in an “out there” that has become occulted by competing frames of legitimation, warring perceptions, and the lack of anything like the moral and ethical common ground available to observers in the time of apartheid. Writers and scholars, as much as trade unionists and workers, had made sacrifices, staying in the country to fight the “good fight,” and now suddenly it was as if the whole thing had been a bad joke all along. Some writers turned within, as many poets did, taking the lease of “freedom” to write about love and sex and the textures of “ordinary” life, while others began to chronicle the dirt and grit of urban existence in the “global south,” charting African destinies more widely now that the much-imagined “Azania” had in fact come about (except it was still called “South Africa”) and was no better or worse than the rest of Africa or the world. Transnationally minded academics began seeking even broader connections between “global south” and India, South America and the antipodes, while nonfiction authors like Steinberg began looking for stories of displacement and reconnection both inside and outside the once “beloved country,” from Liberia to New York to Somalia and back to Johannesburg and Cape Town. A new wave of crime writers and speculative fiction innovators such as Mike Nicol, Deon Meyer, Roger Smith, and Lauren Beukes sought answers for dystopian outcomes in a newly entangled global scene in which destinies were strung across cities everywhere in the “connected” world. The post-millennium hangover was certainly not confined to any one place, and the “exceptionalism” (famously “outed” by scholar Mahmood Mamdani) that apartheid had once conferred on South Africa was now really gone for good.

South African writers found themselves folded into the more general rot of a neoliberal world order of hyper-capitalism, but were also finding an almighty stink at home, where the urge towards un-

seemly consumption had taken root precisely in the place where political virtue had once seemed to reside—not only in the cadres of the African National Congress, now running the show, but everywhere else, too. The scramble for position, wealth, goods and privilege was the new contagion, and suddenly writers had more crime plots and reality mash-ups than they knew what to do with.

Apart from the more obvious examples of crime writers such as Meyer and Nicol, and the many works of “true crime” nonfiction, there is the exhilarating work of Ivan Vladisavic, recording the jarring surfaces of Johannesburg in *A Portrait with Keys* (nonfiction) and *The Exploded View* (fiction); Lauren Beukes, locating media-era criminality in altered states of identity among newly cornered (and conditioned) individuals in Cape Town (*Moxyland*), Johannesburg (*Zoo City*), Chicago (*The Shining Girls*), and Detroit (*Broken Monsters*); Henrietta Rose-Innes, taking the pulse of ideas, ecological conditions and postapartheid subjects in distressed times (*Nineveh*; *The Green Lion*); the late K. Sello Duiker, filling in the intimate details of a pathological public sphere (*Thirteen Cents* and *The Quiet Violence of Dreams*); the late Phaswane Mpe doing much the same (*Welcome to Our Hillbrow*); not to mention Kgebetle Moele (*Room 207*), Marlene van Niekerk (*Triomf*; *Agaat*), Ingrid Winterbach (*The Road of Excess*; *It Might Get Loud*), Zoë Wicomb (*David’s Story*; *Playing in the Light*; *October*) Etienne van Heerden (*30 Nights in Amsterdam*; *In Love’s Place*), and still many others. Many of them find in the country’s cities the residues of a criminal past fuelling the bonfires of entirely new vanities, grotesquely enlarged by the release of uncontainable energies. The forces of want and need, entitlement and redress, left to their own devices, have telling effects: a world of disorder, a merry mess in which he who best instrumentalizes the discord wins.

It’s no surprise, then, that the new wave of literature after the end of apartheid often leans toward *social detection*, a kind of forensic probing of the social machine to establish just how and why the promise of the Mandela miracle went off the rails. Many writers have

resorted to genre writing—crime fiction in particular— the signature cases being Beukes, Mike Nicol and Deon Meyer. In the 1980s and 1990s, Nicol wrote postmodern novels (*This Day and Age*; *Horseman*; *The Ibis Tapestry*) but he now turns out thrillers that depict South Africa, not unconvincingly, as a motley noir gangland, each individual out for him- or herself (especially in his “Payback Trilogy”). More professedly “serious” writers tend to work from the basis that little can be taken for granted, and any conclusions reached must be based on ascertainable clues within a wide-ranging investigation. Perhaps the best proponent of this “conjectural paradigm” (following Carlo Ginzburg) is Jonny Steinberg, who in 2013 received a Windham Campbell prize at Yale for his scintillating nonfiction oeuvre, including works such as *Midlands*, *The Number*, *Sizwe’s Test*, *Little Liberia*, and his recent tour de force, *A Man of Good Hope*. These books are all written in a narrative voice that is exactly analytical—skeptical of the many “stories” that South Africans tell themselves—and yet searchingly compassionate. Steinberg, in a talk at Yale, described the process of writing about his home country as an act of “coordination between deaf people,” and his narratives probe how it is that the beloved country remains marked by rebarbative South Africans re-engaging in conflict along various racial and ethnic frontiers.

In keeping with the imperative to account for the fate of the wayward postapartheid experiment, currently trending authors such as Steinberg, Imraan Coovadia, Jacob Dlamini and Mark Gevisser, whom I discuss below, all find reason to be suspicious of any master-metric in the acts of detection they perform, finding in the imprints of an erratic and errant world telling complicities, complications, paradoxes and unexpected ruptures. Postapartheid writers, then, must be alert to a finer grain of complexity than ever before. They must look outwards, at the actual conditions in a world that requires less “discursive” meta-footwork à la J.M. Coetzee, and more written-up evidence about what the hell’s going on out there.

Ascertaining the lay of the land, in its finest grain, is exactly what Jonny Steinberg is up to in his first big nonfiction book, *Midlands*, a work that heralded a younger-generation postapartheid brand of writer who would make it his task to discover what was “really” occurring in several areas of the country’s supposedly new life. In *Midlands*, Steinberg’s subject is the ugly “epidemic” of farm murders, with their immoderately sadistic, “revenge”-style slaughters of farmers, both Afrikaners (“boers”) and English-speaking descendants of colonial settlers. These white farmers remain on the land, and they continue to lord it over their black serfs. Economic dependency among the rural peasant class, *Midlands* shows, is as robust as ever. *Midlands* probes the consequences of this amid accelerated postapartheid expectations. It is a book that deserves attention because, in nonfiction mode, it sets the tone of much social detection, establishing the basis for an inductive, evidential, and conjecturally stringent quality of voice. This occurs amid a palpable sense of unease, in spite of the postapartheid script of revolutionary progress. *Midlands* enjoyed a successful reception—it snatched up South Africa’s premier Alan Paton award, an event that almost instantly turned Steinberg into a key postapartheid writer, setting up a career that culminated in the prestigious Yale prize. Despite the evidential bias of *Midlands*, Steinberg’s narrative is styled in novelistic, conversational nonfiction, using a register that is both sharply probing and considerate of its reader’s hunger for clarity as it investigates the conditions behind a single South African farm murder.

Steinberg reluctantly suspends the mythography of “rainbowism” as he seeks to understand reversion rather than breakthrough—reversion to conditions in which frequent acts of killing on isolated farms communicate an anxiety about failed “new” beginnings, a disorienting loss of plot. In the event, it does not take very much reading of *Midlands* before one bumps into the oldest South African trope, the frontier: “[Peter] Mitchell was killed, not just figuratively, but quite literally, on the southern midlands’ racial frontier, the dust road on which he died a boundary between the white-owned commercial

farmlands to the west and the derelict common land of a dying black peasantry to the east.” Mitchell’s murderers, who had shot the twenty-eight-year-old scion of a settler family on his father Arthur’s farm, did so “in order to push the boundary back,” writes Steinberg. This was a campaign the killers’ “forebears had begun in the closing years of the nineteenth century, and which their great-grandchildren believed it their destiny, as the generation to witness apartheid’s demise, to finish.” Steinberg describes how he quickly saw that his initial intention to write a book about multiple farm murders would not be possible. He would either have to write the story of this one murder fully or leave it completely alone, so complicated did its details and implications appear:

I initially thought I was to write about an event from the recent past, but it soon became clear to me that much of the story lay in the immediate future, and I would do well to hang around and record it. This was a silent frontier battle, the combatants groping hungrily for the whispers and lies that drifted in from the other side. It was clear from the start that Peter Mitchell would not be the only one to die on that border, that I had arrived at the beginning of a deadly endgame. And I knew that the story of his and subsequent deaths would illuminate a great deal about the early days of post-apartheid South Africa.

Here a nonfiction account that promises to yield insight about what newness lies beyond the threshold of the transition seems instead to take its reader back/forward into what art historian Hal Foster calls a “future anterior”—to the brink again. A jolt such as this is a surprisingly persistent feature of postapartheid writing of all kinds. It is a future-anterior disorientation that pops up all over the place. So what, if anything, is different, or new, in a book such as *Midlands*?

A new occasion calls for a revised register, something Steinberg puts together quite meticulously. The occasion for writing, at the most basic level, is the advent of postapartheid, along with a fero-

cious curiosity about the very question, and real nature, of the “transition.” What does it mean? Is it real? Has it led to anything beyond the “threshold” implicit in the very term “transition,” the idea of a “limit” and a “beyond,” or are these notions themselves a collective fiction? The more immediate pretext for writing is the widely reported surge in farmer slayings that look, on the surface, like a form of retribution for the ills of apartheid, often involving arbitrary cruelty. Steinberg writes:

[T]he motive for the vast majority of attacks appears to be robbery; the perpetrators flee the scene of the crime with guns, cars and money. And yet, so many attacks are accompanied by seemingly gratuitous violence, the violence itself performed with such ceremony and drama, that the infliction of painful death appears to be the primary motive. “Farm murders,” as South Africans have come to call them, occupy a strange and ambiguous space; they tamper with the boundary between acquisitive crime and racial hatred[. . .] Now [soon after Mandela’s inauguration], the dispatches from farming districts appeared to be telling us something all too real. Perhaps the goodwill of the Mandela period was illusory? Perhaps there were a host of unsettled scores we had brushed under the carpet? Maybe, for once, the countryside was way ahead of us, bringing a grim portent of life after the honeymoon.

Steinberg wants to know what is behind these murders, a matter that was becoming a luridly perverse “new South Africa” spectacle.

For the isiZulu-speaking black citizens and the white South Africans in the Midlands area of KwaZulu Natal, the story’s locale, the stakes are very high. It is as though postapartheid has not changed the game, as it was supposed to, but merely accelerated the moves, shifted the positions on the board, altered the roles of players, and upped the reward money while failing to pay out equal start-up amounts. Suddenly it is all or nothing, and now that the political game has been decided the new finishing line is the power conferred by wealth or, often, mere survival. Participants who used to be pliable suddenly

play dirty; players often change sides without declaring their motives; the rulebook has been rewritten in the language of fairness but the enforcement of these rules is all but impossible; indeed, enforcement becomes openly partisan along racial lines while private reckoning seeks to “balance” the scales of competing interests, confirming the hypothesis that law and disorder in the postcolony are parasitically co-dependent.

Can such a condition truly be called a “transition” to democracy? Political power has changed hands, but economic might on the whole has emphatically not, apart from conspicuous black-elite enrichment. White people in the Midlands area remain sturdily wealthy; they continue to own the land and its riches. Black people are either unemployed (the great majority), wage-earners on white farms (a fortunate few), or small-time entrepreneurs with political connections (a tiny handful, making up a ragged local elite). The condition of postapartheid, in Steinberg’s analysis, is felt not in the euphoria and material advancement of enfranchisement but in the urgency of frustration about *delayed* economic liberty for the majority of the population. These are people who on the whole remain indigent, despite having an ANC president and a bill of rights. So, on the black side of this pumped-up, higher-stakes racial frontier, indignation and hostility are running hotter than ever before in the country’s history—leading in this case to the killing at the center of the story—while on the white side there is a level of fear and insecurity about the rule of law that supersedes earlier versions of “black peril.” All parties appear to feel *a lot worse* than they did before—they are jointly and severally rattled, but with a new sense of entitlement, each in their own way seeking to rely on the provisions of an immaculately promulgated but waywardly (and inefficiently) enforced diktat of fair play. This “equal chances” regime has turned out to be well-nigh unenforceable, a fact that is clear to everyone—hence the accelerated desperation on all sides.

As *Midlands* shows, the murder and robbery unit in the area under the spotlight in Steinberg’s book is both under-resourced and

demoralized. White detectives, such as *Midlands's* Louis Wessels, belong to squads that were “shattered by the demise of apartheid” because “[t]he cause that animated the unit’s work—already somewhat misty—was defeated, and vanished from the face of the earth.” To add to the misery, democratic South Africa “was a rough country to police.” There were many towns assigned to individuals such as Wessels where a detective who goes to interview a suspect “is not sure whether he will come out alive.” And why bother to investigate? Steinberg writes: “So much mortal danger, so much fear—in the service of a political order from which men like Wessels are so thoroughly estranged.” Steinberg shows how, in the rivalry following the Mitchell murder, the black parties up against their white accusers regard the (largely white) local murder and robbery squad as being on the “white side,” while whites see the (entirely black) local police station as being on the “black side.” In Steinberg’s narrative, the Mitchell family comes to view the new constitutional dispensation, with its openness to claims and counter-claims on every level, including that of local policing, as “an edifice behind which the criminals, the savages and the killers of this country took refuge.”

Such resurgent barricading is not confined to the matter of policing. Reflecting on the discourse of Colin Waugh, a local farmer, the author notes that “[Waugh] had blurred the distinction between racial difference and a military frontier.” But that is not all. “Later,” Steinberg writes, “when I tried to enter Izita in my white skin, I discovered that [Waugh’s] ‘opposition’ had done the same.” Here one sees how the hallowed discourse of diversity at the heart of the constitutional democracy—of pluralism or rainbowism in its idealized sense—is mangled in the hands of not only those who conceive of and administer the law, but also those who are subject to it. Side-taking, antagonism and misperception, all age-old South African frontier characteristics, are here re-cast, resituated within the game according to the rulebook of constitutional democracy. But politics, according to Elias Sithole, a black stalwart of the struggle with whom

Steinberg comes into contact during his search for clues, is corrupt to the core:

And so what is the ANC now, that noble organisation in the name of which people died horrible deaths? The ANC in Izita is run by a bunch of small-time, crooked businessmen who couldn't give a damn about their constituencies. They want to make money, and to keep making it they need power, and that is why they get involved in politics. Politics has become the playground of the corrupt. It is no more than that. He shook his head in disgust.

The narrative quest to find out what is actually going on beyond the transition, or where the "transit" in "transition" has actually taken the constitutional democracy, increasingly results in the discovery of little more than a familiar, but now incredulous, taste of bile. In Sithole's view, "Things are getting worse, in fact."

The farmers are building these game reserves and taking over miles of land they have never used before. They don't trust the police any longer so they create their own private police forces. [. . .] You are a prisoner in the white man's countryside, and now there is no prospect of anything different. It is you against him for the rest of time. So when he marches onto your land and tells you he is going to interview your future son-in-law and decide whether he can live in your house, you take matters into your own hands, because nobody else is going to.

In response, Steinberg asks: "You kill his son?" Sithole replies: "Yes. It has come to that."

Here, then, is a deadly counterpoint to any sense of a relatively seamless "transition" from apartheid to postapartheid. For the people in the Sarahdale/Izita region, such as Sithole and Mitchell, the frontier under postapartheid has reached a state characterized by Steinberg as "an endgame [. . .] one that was bound to end with

the spilling of more blood on the border between Izita and the Sarahdale farms.” It is a curious return to the frontier, “post-apartheid South Africa’s racial frontier,” as Steinberg himself puts it, repeating the phrase “racial frontier” another five times in his book as if to say: keep remembering that we are still in this game, not beyond it, and that it is now endgame time.

Yale Ph.D. graduate and former New Haven resident Imraan

Coovadia, now acknowledged as one of South Africa’s leading fiction writers, deals smartly with the demands of social detection in his most recent novel, *Tales of the Metric System* (2014). This work is notable because it creates a plotted whole that is an ensemble of historical periods both before and after apartheid, beginning with the introduction of the metric system in South Africa in the early 1970s—a decidedly republican rejection of British pounds and ounces—and closing with the opening game of the 2010 soccer World Cup in the showy Soccer City stadium in Soweto, the famous black residential area outside Johannesburg. In so doing, Coovadia yields to the predominance of the actual in postapartheid writing, allowing relatively settled historical markers to dictate plot, which he then creatively re-arranges. In the process, Coovadia also introduces the theme of quantification, valuation and weighting as a way of accounting for the present as well as the past. In particular, *Tales of the Metric System* implicitly asks: how does one take the measure of the past, and how does one gauge the present, given that metrics themselves can be made to be interchangeable, reversible, adaptive and pragmatic, not to mention strategic in a self-interested way. In this manner, Coovadia troubles the idea of a relatively seamless transition from apartheid to freedom, insisting instead on a longer view.

And the long view, as in Jacob Dlamini’s outstanding nonfiction books *Native Nostalgia* and *Askari*, makes a mess of trajectories and verities. Just as Dlamini disarranged many prevailing assumptions in *Native Nostalgia* by presenting, in memoiristic form, a version of “township” (in US parlance, “ghetto”) life that was worthy of “nostal-

gia”—rather than the usual depiction of dehumanization—so Coovadia also puts to the test the more commonplace, even if politically correct, measure of things. Both these writers contribute to what New York University critic Mark Sanders, writing about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of the mid- to late 1990s, calls the “ambiguities of witnessing.” Detection may be the dominant impulse, but it was always going to be less than straightforward.

Coovadia, following in Dlamini’s steps, goes back to the townships, but in imagined stories founded upon the very real data of widely witnessed and reported conditions. Coovadia seeks a link that endures across time and space, from apartheid to postapartheid, and finds a common mettle, an (in)constant value, in the country’s near-universal disposition towards theft. It is an inspired, if discouraging, narrative move because it allows Coovadia to structure his historical cameos around a negative “universal” that, in one sense, suggests the existence of a decidedly pathological public sphere both before and after the “transition,” but, in other senses, troubles the *measure* of such behavior. This is because “theft” can be both noble and ignoble, big and small, of great or little consequence; so much depends on who is “stealing” from whom, and how. Coovadia (who likes citing Charles Dickens in his spirited public talks) introduces, for example, a distastefully Scrooge-like black man under apartheid who steals compulsively from powerless people and hordes his ill-gotten gains, in the process collaborating with the hated apartheid system. And yet accounting for this man’s deeds turns out to be an intricate business.

Shabangu is a spit-and-shine amalgam of shame, kleptomania, repressed homosexuality, pride and cowardice, among other disparate qualities. His idiosyncratic figuration speaks to a range of complicities that play havoc with any easy summations of the state of South Africa, before and after apartheid. The structure of Coovadia’s book, conjoining 10 different days, spread across four decades, with the transition precisely in the middle, also confounds the forward-march, “shoulder to the wheel of history” illusions that turned 1994

into the supposed start of an unsustainable myth of progress. And yet Coovadia avoids simply resorting to such a narrative's opposite, a dour tale of descent, or a dystopia without remit. This can be seen in the way he handles the theft leitmotif, presenting stealing as a behavior that cuts across every stratum, period, class and political inclination, suggesting a "history" that is thoroughly steeped in dodgy connivance.

The township on the eastern side of Johannesburg in which Shabangu lives goes by the name of Tembisa. Here, Shabangu "was hoarding the remainder of his days. But to what purpose? He had forgotten how to measure his own life." Shabangu's reckoning occurs after he witnesses a "necklacing" in 1990—a mob-led burning to death of an individual suspected of being a spy, or a thief, by means of a gasoline-drenched tire set alight after being positioned around the victim's neck. In the novel, Shabelo, the young boy thus ritually murdered, turns out to be innocent. He serves as a ritual sacrifice for the sins of people like Shabangu, who is indeed a spy-collaborator and a rampant thief, routinely betraying the trust set in him as a local locksmith by pilfering as he changes his clients' locks. Ironically, the woman who sets the martyr Shabelo on fire—like the chanting crowd egging her on, going on nothing but hearsay and suspicion—sweetly ministers to the distressed Shabangu in her father's house only minutes after this shattering event. This petit-bourgeois woman, called Esther, tries out her nurse-training routines on Shabangu following his fainting spell at the scene of the necklacing. Both Shabangu and Esther have gravely miscalculated the odds in their complicity in the theft of an innocent young man's life, but they cannot see this with any clarity in the heady turbulence of the moment, despite Shabangu suffering a terrible sense of dread about his own complicities. The world that Coovadia captures, in narrative retrospect, is full of such irregular measures and mixed odds, along with characters that present thoroughly paradoxical measures of virtue and vice. In this way, Coovadia effectively strips not only the present, but also the past, of any semblance of straightforward

measurement.

Towards the end of *Metric System*, Coovadia manages to import, via the unbalancing effects of the unrelenting trickery that is theft, a whimsical sense of somewhat slant love into his youngest generation of characters. It is 11 June, 2010, a day that for South Africans (and Africans at large) brought the bursting-with-pride opening game of the 2010 World Cup, when South Africa faced Mexico in Soccer City, Soweto. A Cape Town city-slicker called Sherman, who operates a racket in which people's cellphones are stolen on the streets of Cape Town and then sold back to them, is drawn into a relationship with Shanti, one of his casual, everyday victims. Shanti happens to be the niece of Uncle Ashok, a *roman à clef* version of convicted postapartheid crook Schabir Shaik, who is believed to have brokered shady deals for current president Jacob Zuma; Shanti is therefore indirectly complicit in the culture of theft, too. This unlikely union between young South African millennials, one black and one Indian, seems to flower despite, and in the midst of, the country's merry materialism, its inclination towards appropriation and shady dealings. It is as if Coovadia is suggesting that the younger generations no longer share the burden of the terrible measure of things past, the reckonings with high ideals that have suffered such ignominious defeat. Such a change of attitude accounts to some extent for the juxtaposition at the end of *Metric System* of the youngest and the oldest of the generations featured in the story, the latter failing to achieve an exalted vision of an "ideal world," and the young characters managing to rescue some sense of makeshift love—or, at the very least, joy—despite the country's many, earlier defeats in "measuring up."

Following the event in which Shanti buys her own cellphone back from pickpocket Sherman, a stylish and friendly thief if ever there was one, she invites him over to her parents' nouveau-riche residential palace in a wealthy suburb of Cape Town. Unbelievably, and yet perhaps also predictably, once arrived and installed as a guest, Sherman pickpockets her Uncle Logan's phone while enjoying

her family's Cuban-cigar hospitality. One cannot but observe that Sherman is a small-time crook when measured against Uncle Askok, the Schaik character who made a killing in a notorious arms deal, postapartheid's first major corruption scandal. When Shanti hears from her Uncle Logan that his phone has gone missing, she knows what to do. She pulls Sherman aside and takes him up to her room, where the following exchange occurs:

—I meant, did you take my Uncle Logan's telephone?

—Yes, I did, chicken. But only to prove that I had the talent. It's waiting for him downstairs on the kitchen table.

—Am I going to find out that you took anything else?

—Nothing except your heart. Or do I have that already?

Here, theft is converted from the sinister activity that it is in the stories of Mr Shabangu, becoming instead a trial of "talent." Sherman's generation appears to have adopted casual theft as the only way to "get even," and to get on in the world. Such thematic treatment prompts one to ask: isn't this the way it's always been, what bandit capitalism has in fact taught us to do? At one stage, Sherman says to Shanti: "In the end everybody makes money except ordinary people like me and you. We must also have the chance to make money. We also have the right to have our fun." And how else to make money but to do what the country's leaders and leading citizens are perceived to be doing—take it, steal it, finagle it, one way or another.

It is as if Coovadia is here registering that, despite the corrupted general metric of plunder that rules an otherwise disparate citizenry, the younger generations will find less oppressive and more—dare one say it?—*loving*, or at least joyful, ways to engage in taking things from each other. In a society of unequal accumulation in which leaders, not to mention leading citizens, espouse and defend sophisticated forms of thievery, who is to say that people on the street should not find a certain joy in aping such behavior, modifying

it and scaling it down, or up, depending on one's means, talent, and opportunities?

Yale graduate Mark Gevisser, in *Lost and Found in Johannesburg*, a nonfiction investigation into the cartography of Johannesburg, finds himself dealing with a rather more sinister form of South African theft: a “home invasion” in which three black men break into the Johannesburg apartment of two female friends, Bea and Katie, whom Gevisser is visiting. The invaders rough Gevisser and the gay couple up with a brand of casual brutality that does not sit well with these good people's liberal-left political progressivism, throwing matters severely out of kilter. In fact, Gevisser's manuscript of *Lost and Found* is lodged in a bag he brought along with him on the visit. He had been editing it, and one of his most discomfiting moments of terror during the break-in and its aftermath is the fear that the hoodlums might take his completed draft away with them. In the event, they don't, but Gevisser nevertheless finds that he has no option but to delay submission to his publishers, because his nonfiction account of growing up in Johannesburg has just been derailed by this unwelcome new event. He might not want to include such a counter-intuitive happening, and its harrowing telling, in his otherwise upbeat summation of postapartheid South Africa's freedom from various repressions, but he must. Events have intervened and now threaten to change the story from cautiously optimistic to downright pathological.

Throughout *Lost and Found*, frontiers and borders are figured as places to explore, and as spaces in which transgression (for example, of sexual norms or political taboos) is regarded as positively liberating. Such crossings are also projected as acts of reconciliation and of potentially loving human encounter. The “home invasion,” however, represents the transgression of limits in an unambiguously ugly and sinister manner. The good intentions of Gevisser's stepping across established lines are sickeningly reversed, with theft and

blind violence seeming to make a mockery of the liberal humanism elsewhere evident in *Lost and Found*. This creates an unwelcome schism, a potential loss of plot.

How does Gevisser handle this? On the one hand, the author factually—and tautly—recounts the brutality of the event, but, significantly, he is also at pains to “humanize” the attackers. First, then, we read a chilling description of how the insurgents whack Gevisser on the head, sending his glasses flying and leaving the near-sighted writer almost blind, after which they pistol-wallop Katie. They proceed to upend the furniture, including the television, bringing to a premature end the episode of *The Slap* that the three of them had been watching. Not long after upending the TV set, the robbers lead Bea off to the bedroom, hoping to force her to show them where the apartment’s presumed safe is, but instead they succeed only in sexually molesting her. It seems the situation is threatening to become a homicidal rampage, but what Gevisser reads as a change in the robbers’ tempo is brought about by Bea before she gets dragged off:

I followed my breath, in, out, in, out, and heard Bea’s voice, calm and clear: “Excuse me,” she said, as if she was talking to someone at a book-club meeting, “but we’ve just made tea, I think the cup’s still hot, you’ll see, and I was wondering if you’d give me a sip before you gag me, because my throat is feeling very dry.”

Gevisser, “blind and disoriented” from the loss of his glasses after being struck, realizes from the “motion [he] could sense to the extreme left of [his] peripheral vision and the sounds [he] could hear” that the robbers are complying with Bea’s request for a sip of tea. “I understood immediately what Bea had done,” the narrator writes, “and what I needed to do, too”. He continues:

It was as clear as anything I have ever thought, and I will never forget it. We needed to communicate with them. We needed to make them

look after us. We needed to get them to acknowledge that we were human beings and not animals, not disposable, and then they might spare us. And then the revelation: this meant we needed to see them as human beings, and not animals, too, if we were going to survive.

Gevisser is not entirely naïve about the fact that these men are violent criminals with alcohol on their breath, and quite possibly recalcitrant to “reasoning.” The behavior of one of them, “the gangly pop-eyed man who had smacked me,” seemed “high beyond reason,” and “so fraught was the situation [...] that even the most careful, cooperative behavior imaginable might not have saved us.” But this determined optimist persists in his Alan Paton-like “love rather than hate” approach, and in so doing, he resists, both in his behavior on the night and in his subsequent narrative, the possibility of an “atrocities exhibition” (to borrow J.G. Ballard’s phrase) going the way of outright hatred, of torn and broken bodies. This is a significant moment, and it signals a divergence from mainstream true crime narratives in postapartheid writing. Gevisser is straining, both in the course of the actual event and in its mediation, to re-narrate (or re-orient) the happening, turning it away from an atrocities exhibition proper, or “true crime” pure and simple. For “crime,” another term for “theft,” and “theft,” another word for “race relations,” a euphemism for grand larceny on a historical scale, cannot be weighed in South Africa without taking the measure of a delicate series of counterweights.

Perhaps the fact that, in the works discussed above, nothing quite adds up in such reckonings, despite a determination to detect conditions, facts, causes and symptoms, is what most aptly distinguishes the postapartheid writer. Steinberg assiduously takes the measure of sociopolitical predicaments bodied forth in real cases involving postapartheid citizens, probing their feelings, contradictions, and behavior in his quests of detection, as if South African

writing is still the “scene of a crime” (as in apartheid), but now requires urgent recalibration. Like many of us writing about and from South Africa today, Steinberg is impatient with grand narratives: they have all proven to be gallingly disappointing, and the biggest dummy we were sold was the narrative of outright political liberation in 1994. Coovadia weighs things up coolly, refusing the clamor of self-assertive identity politics, as Jeanne-Marie Jackson argues in a revealing recent piece in *n+1*. Gevisser resorts to exercises in experiential mapping, redrawing boundaries and human responses to mirage-like vistas via the conceit of urban cartography. My own postapartheid novel, *Bad Sex* (2011), revisits the scene of sexual politics, taking stock of contemporary relations between “liberated” men and women against the backdrop of past abuse (“bad,” or exploitative, sex; racialized patriarchy; interracial sexual misdemeanors) as relayed by the book’s male protagonist, Sammy Baptista, who refuses to swallow whole the notion of realigned regimes of power, whether in the kitchen, the bedroom or the boardroom. It is as of we’re all seeking to detect in the stories of personalized encounter—things we know beyond doubt—the greater causes of our nation’s current waywardness.

Two Poems

Nathan McClain

Penelope, Birdwatching

A mockingbird alights,
softly, on a branch
that seems always to brace itself, ready

in case the bird takes flight
or the bird decides to settle,
which it never does,

or not for very long,
but what can the branch do
except wait—to be pared down,

to one day snap
beneath the bird's growing weight?
And what does it say about me

who, with binoculars, watches?
(Is it wrong to watch?)
What does it mean

if sometimes I feel haunted by an absence?
Outside my apartment, the wasps
sound as if they're humming

fragments of old hymns.
Soon men with hammers
and chisels in their tool belts,

men whose jawlines are dusted
with plaster powder and sawdust,
will come and take the hive away

and I'm afraid
that I will miss the wasps
and their song, but that's foolish.

I could say my heart is heavy,
but what would that prove? Yes,
my heart is heavy. And also feels empty.

Today there's a mockingbird
on a branch, though I'm never sure
whether it's the same

mockingbird, too hard to tell.
Mostly because whenever
you see one, it's singing

a different song:
a blues.

***Landscape in Red* by David Siqueiros**

Whoever said that, with time, the forest behind
the house would come back

lied—the forest still scorched
with sorrow. If you sit in ash

long enough the residue gets in your throat;
(odd to think you could carry

the dead forest around inside you for years)
yet sometimes I'd go out back and sit

in what ash hadn't blown away.
Before the fire, my father

left, angry. He went for a walk.
That night, the forest caught fire.

Firemen said no one was to blame.
But there's always someone.

Winter on the Inside

*An adult's season of snow
in New England*

Colin Fleming

I have never slept well. As I child, I was terrified of the dark and had to enter into negotiations with my parents—which consisted of promising not to listen too closely to the television—so as to be allowed to lug my Spiderman sleeping bag downstairs and sack out in the living room, while they watched *Hill Street Blues* in the happier glow of the family room.

You learn various tricks when you can't sleep. One of mine was to try to guess how many little red digital bars, all notched together, there were in the numbers of the clock by my bed at whatever time I happened to look at it. My game for the bulk of the winter of 2014-15, here in Boston, was to guess what words, in the middle of the night, the Hallmark Channel would feel a need to edit out of rerun episodes of *Frasier* and *Cheers*.

"Ass" was always censored, sometimes "hell," occasionally "damn." I don't think the context had anything to do with it. By then, it would be four in the morning, and I'd be up for the day, after sleeping about three hours. In December, when the snow really began to batter the Northeast, there were no *Frasier* and *Cheers* reruns because that's the month Hallmark airs nothing but oversugary, mostly vapid Christmas shows.

I've watched them all. They're awful. I can quote them, though, and I've even sat in bed with my phone doing Google searches on just who the hell these actors are. Like, are you on the way up if this is what you're appearing in, or were you someone who never made it, and this is the best thing on your CV, or were you someone more successful in a different decade and it's come to this?

I find that I ask myself questions of this nature more often in winter, and during last winter in particular. Normally, I like winter. Even Boston winter. I like that the wind howls harder here than anywhere else in the country, and I like knowing what streets have the most intense wind tunnels in the city, and walking through them

nonetheless, as if saying to myself, “okay, you’re all right, braving the elements. You must be in reasonable shape to do so, day after day. When life turns around, you’ll be in good shape to enjoy it.”

I’ve actually said words aloud to that effect to myself, but hell, it’s not like people are clamoring to line up behind you in those wind tunnels down by the harbor. I like, too, that when I’m walking—which I do a ton of—in a wind tunnel I have more sidewalk real estate to myself, and if you get hold of a round rock, you can have a pretend game of soccer that lasts several blocks, and you don’t have to worry about how wildly you’re zigzagging all over the place.

I’ve never walked more than I walked that winter. The winter that drove so many people inside, and which prompted my bartender friend, who is also in property management, to weekly launch into his pet theory, as he poured me free beer after free beer, that come the spring, people would be leaving the area in droves, because this was the winter that went too far and annoyed the fuck out of everyone and did a lot of spirit breaking.

I’ve been walking like I have for three years now. A good day, such as it is, is when I get to the George Washington statue in the Public Garden by 4:30 in the morning, a time which, if you’re counting digital bars in the middle of the night, you will find has fifteen of them.

Twenty miles is an impressive day, all the more so if there’s snow. I started walking like I do because there was an incident, after life had come apart, when I was on a bathroom floor, a long, long way from home, barely clinging to life as my face contorted and I forgot my own name.

I used to ride the blood pressure machines whenever the woman who was my wife and I went to a CVS. She’d stand behind me, and I’d take one score after another, and the numbers were outrageous, stuff like 200/130, so that you could practically feel the Reaper walking over from behind the cleaning supplies aisle.

“It’s fine, you’re nervous,” she’d say.

“I should be fucking nervous I’m about to fucking expire in the fucking CVS. I should take it again. It can’t actually be this high.”

And then it would, not surprisingly, go higher.

She eventually left. My blood pressure issues, presumably, continued on. I didn’t take it for a while. Instead, I walked, thinking maybe that would be, if not a cure-all, at least something that would do something positive. Grasping at straws, you might say, by moving your feet.

I had big plans for 2015. In those three years since my wife left, I had become someone who could write on anything, doing a work on Russian poetry in the morning, hockey in the afternoon, a short story at mid-day, and an essay on jazz at night. Otherwise, the lights would be shut off. It is always that close. If I don’t publish my eighty things a year, the fridge won’t work anymore. I suck at most things. You know that Stephen Crane line, “The things I can’t do, I can’t do at all?” That’s me. I have a friend named Heather, who manages a Starbucks, is a single parent to two kids, and who is a ghost writer, writing up to 15,000 words a day. She had to make me a video teaching me how to fold up the hood of this kind of rain jacket we both have, after I had tried, unsuccessfully, to figure it out every night for like three months. She also had to make me a press pot tutorial video, but I still haven’t mastered that yet. But I can write, I can talk on the radio, as it turns out, and I can walk, even in the worst weather, and even, I learned, after my winter breaking point, which came in the first few months of 2015, when I thought, *fuck this, I’ve had enough*. What was interesting was that you could feel how everyone, everywhere around here, had had enough too, in ways that they hadn’t before. It was palpable.

The day after Christmas 2014, when I was still enjoying the snow and hadn’t yet reached that fall-to-bits phase, I met a brilliant musician who lived in the middle of the country. I had just spent Christmas alone for the third year in a row. I grew up a Christmas fiend, and when I was married, my wife, around, say, May, would lean over in the car and say, “You know, it’s not that far off, really.”

“What?”

“You know what.”

“Hmmm...are you talking about...”

“You know I am...”

“Christmas?”

“Yes.”

“Brilliant. I cannot wait. Fucking Christmas and cheer and the 1742 version of the *Messiah*.”

“What is it with you and the original score?”

“I need that original score.”

Half a year later I had my first Christmas alone. That was the day I started coughing up blood. I worked on a novel and I spit into a cup. I didn’t walk that day. Christmas 2013 was much the same, minus the blood and the book, but on Boxing Day 2014, a presence entered my life that was more...I guess you’d say, vernal, than you expect at the end of the year. Even my nightmares, which I always remember, abated, and my walks would begin later, at more standardly human hours, like seven.

I had a brief fling with winter then, before that particular one broke me. The Public Garden, bedecked in snow, made it look as though you were inside of an aquarmarine crystal, and the concomitant memories of exploring the woods behind our house, as a boy, warmed me. I used to set out with a chisel and a hammer, and when my dad asked what I was up to, I’d say I was going geologizing, which must have made him wonder about me, but I’d sit out there for hours in front of those rock walls that crisscross the woods of New England, carving out bits of garnet and quartz, as the occasional garter snake came darting out of a hole. But I liked them, too.

Everyone on the news was referencing the Blizzard of ’78. I remembered that winter well, even though I was just three at the time. The snow made absolute mountains, and the daughter of our neighbors went out for some reason—must have been on account of a boy—during one of the worst storms, and she couldn’t find her way back to her house. I think she was a high school student at the time.

You couldn't even see where you were walking, and my dad was the one who found her and helped her get home, and that just always stuck with me, long after the girl had died, and my dad, too. That's ultimately what you're after, in a grander sense, someone to take your hand and take you home. No, not in some weird ass philandering married guy courting high school neighbor teen way, as my bartender friend insisted, when I stupidly told him this story just to get him to stop talking about that Stephen King one where everyone is walking in a line to some place and if you stop you get shot or some shit like that.

My friend is right in many matters. We're the same age. Forty. He was an English major. We talk books. He is always pushing Stephen King on me. His last name kind of sounds like Triscuit, and he showed me a form once that he filled out for this apartment he wanted to rent, and for some reason he just put his first and middle initials along with his last name, and then expressed consternation that he wasn't approved.

"Dude, you wrote that your name is M.C. Triscuit."

"My last name isn't Triscuit."

"It's close enough. They think you're like this weird Nabisco fan boy-cum-club DJ."

"It's not pronounced that way."

"It is. I'm not pronouncing it your way."

"Cum."

"Okay then, Stephen King. More free beer, please."

But for a while the snow was beautiful and so were the memories, as that is how life tends to go when you're feeling hopeful. Thoughts I'd have considered inconceivable began to pass through my mind as January 2015 went on, and the snow banks grew higher. I had had a wife, a life, a house by the sea, and my health, and all had been taken from me without any indication that they might be. As full stop as anything can be, like you're cruising along and someone who is smiling at you up until that point hits the breaks on the rocket and

you're launched out into a dark universe by yourself, with no explanation, only that smile left so vivid in your head, as if it had been painted there and the paint was still wet. You have that happen to you, you have the misshapen face thing go down, too, and you have your Christmas blood cup, you don't really expect to have someone else come along, day after Christmas, no less, and make you think that maybe, good God, all of that was worth it, if it led to here.

But you learn, as you go along, that there are two kinds of winter. There is the winter on the outside, which can be dangerous if you're lost in it, or just crazy fun, if you're a kid and on a hill with a sled, not sure in your mind which prospect is more exciting, this hill you're about to go bombing down, or the hot chocolate that will await you when you get back home. And then there is the winter on the inside, storms of a different sort, where one is not so much blasted by the winds, as by that icy feeling that comes so often in mid-stride, for some reason, as you walk like I walk, that makes you say, "Oh yeah. That actually happened."

I kept walking on into February. It pleased me that I knew, with utter certainty, that in the history of art, the three best walkers were Dickens, Van Gogh, and me. And I was no worse than in second place. Van Gogh would walk forty miles a day sometimes. My one day record was thirty-one. But, to me, his victory came with an asterisk because he was doing it to punish himself, and wasn't really working on anything but punishing himself as he went. Me, I wrote in my head, as did Dickens, entire stories and articles which I could just type out later. I think Dickens was more consistent with his distances, doing at least ten miles every day, whereas a lot of my weeks would top out at fifty or sixty, but still, good company.

I booked a trip to the middle of the country, to be with the brilliant musician who had come to Boston and gone on some walks with me. She wore my Bruins cap so as not to freeze, which seems an obvious gesture, right? Like one I had to do? Yes, but still, I wouldn't give out the Bruins cap lightly. The night before I was to leave, I was on deadline for *The Washington Post*. Some painting thing. The

storage unit where the bulk of my books and records and all of that are kept called to say that I needed to come down, that they had flooding on account of it being so cold the pipes had burst, and I should check if the contents of my unit were destroyed.

You'd think certain things just wouldn't be possible in a storage facility. You can't have fire, you can't have floods, and you can't have theft. Anything else, pretty much, you can have. I was wrong in this assumption. I had to ride the T, which is what everyone calls the subway here. I hadn't been on the T in an age, because I'd become a guy who could just walk across three towns in a go, but time was of the essence, if I was going to get my assignment in and get my ass out to Logan bright and early in the morning, so, panicked, I got on the Orange Line at Haymarket for what is normally a twenty minute ride, but which took two hours, on account of the weather.

I knew people had already had enough of this winter, that they were sick of their cars not starting after they had dug them out and their pipes exploding and probably, if we're being honest, their kids home from school yet again. But the T was insane. You can usually sit or stand in some comfort, but it was wall-to-wall people. Everyone seemed to accept their lot, namely, *this sucks, what is the deal with this awful, awful winter, oh well, this is how it goes, freakin' New England*, etc., save this one woman who clearly had already hit her breaking point.

She kept screaming at everyone, "Are you jostling me? You're pushing me, sir, you're pushing a woman."

She clearly relished this in some half-mad, maniacal way. No one was pushing anyone. It was this sardines situation that sucked for all. But for forty-five minutes, she had the personal crusade going. "Do you think you can push me because I'm a woman?" Then some guy yells out, "Shut up you stupid cow."

Things rapidly devolved. The woman—who was decently fullbackerish, to be frank—starts trying to push her way through everyone to maul this guy, who had this *fuck it, let's do this* look in his eye, as I suppose I probably did, too, by that point. The world

was grinding me down. In every last quotidian detail, it seemed, something made more obvious to me when confined with a group of people. I'd wonder, "why does no one care how they treat other people? Where is conscience? Why do so few people feel bad about not feeling much for anyone else?"

Anyway, I got to the storage unit, had to see things I won't see again, really, until I have my house back. Movie posters I had on the wall, books I love, boxes of records that bring me, in a sense, home in a way few other things do. That disconnect now, which even has a geographical disconnect, is always gutting, so that's why I never go. Then I had to get insurance for a shitload of money, so that meant more pitching and also the begging of famous magazines to pay me the money they have owed me for months.

But I hit upon the solution, in that moment, of writing my assignment, packing, and departing: After the T debacle, I figured I'd try and take a cab home. Mistake. Twenty dollars to get to Copley, near the Marathon finish line, which I regularly walk over in reverse, and we were still stuck in traffic and I was not close to home. The cab driver was ready to fall on his sword. "I let you down, my friend. We were in this together."

"What?"

"A team. Against this motherfucking snow. The snow is everywhere, I say. Everywhere. And I say fuck you snow. I am sorry. I am so sorry."

I tipped him three dollars.

"I do not deserve."

He then wadded up the bills and threw them out the window. I got out, picked them up. We exchanged a sad glance, and I said, *I'm going to keep these then, good luck, and I think I'll just walk.*

I passed out and got up early and wrote the story and filed it and left for the middle of the country, where the winter was drier, but colder.

I had the best time of my life. But then I have a different kind of relationship with time. Things go at a faster rate in my world. Faster

than it seems they should be able to go. My three weeks has never really been someone else's three weeks. I started writing this an hour ago. We're 3000 words in. I don't really care about how long something takes, or how quickly it goes. What matters to me is the quality of the thing itself. I was once with someone for four years, and we never came close to being engaged. It wasn't right. But everything I knew inside of me said that this was. When I came back to Boston, I was engaged. It was one of the more natural, unencumbered, inevitable things to have transpired in my life. A week later, that was over. She had been drinking in the morning, battling depression, and living portions of a life I was not privy to. Call it the winter on the inside.

My walks took on a different hue. She asked for my help, and I gave it, knowing that we were not going to be together. Or even see each other again. But then she just disappeared. I could live with that, because, well, you have to, don't you? That's life. We can do crimes to each other that are far worse than what you might go to jail for you. It's your right to lie as much as you want, for instance, to anyone you might be involved with. The thinking, I suppose, being that the person you're ultimately committing a crime against is yourself, because it's you, more than anyone, you walk back home with at the end of every day. I just wanted an explanation, because I couldn't go through that whole non-answer bullshit again. And she wouldn't give me one.

Amazingly, it started snowing even more, and now, in my head, along with the stories I'd write, was the torment of replaying whatever the hell mind fuck of a situation had just happened to me. Mind fuck redux.

The average person walks three miles per hour. If you put your head down and really go for it, and you're not on snow or slush, you can do five in an hour. That's a tough pace to maintain, but if you're walking twenty miles in a day, that's about four and a half hours if you're decently quickish about it. But it was at this point that I had my New England winter breakdown, my version of whatever was

happening with that crazy woman on the T, or the cab driver who pitched dollar bills out onto Boylston Street.

I started sleeping less. Rarely more than two hours a night, and I was out on that street, walking, at three in the morning, and now it didn't feel like I was inside of an aquamarine crystal, but rather fronted on all sides with dirty, disgusting looking mounds of putrefying snow, mounds which you later read had things like syringes in them, and I wrote, and I searched for answers that might have been provided in ten minutes, and I thought, fuck you Boston, fuck you New England and your snow as a general status across these six states. Because there can be a moment, and this is why, I have learned, the poets set many of their downcast bits in winter, that the winter on the outside and the winter on the inside rear up and meet, and mirror, each other. And so it went for me.

I went out walking one day when every broadcast you encountered said you should stay in. A proscribed weather-based lockdown. I got to the Public Garden, and rather than cross the bridge over the frozen pond, or walk around it, I walked straight onto the ice. Normally I liked this, because unless you were on the Swan Boats in the summer, or you were a mallard or those foolish dogs who went chasing them, like they'd ever be successful in the hunt, you didn't get to go there. I walked out to the middle of that snow covered ice, and I turned and faced the direction from which I came, which I told myself, as I was freezing, was symbolic, a sort of philosophical non sequitur perhaps not uncommon to walking in blizzards while sleep deprived, and then I just fell back on my ass and back like a child. And I lay there, looking up at the sky.

I could see the needle of the old Hancock Building behind me. It changes color based upon the weather. There's a catechism all Boston schoolboys used to know, I'd sometimes remark to people walking with me, for what each color symbolized—even though I didn't always know the catechism myself. But it came back to me then, on my back in the snow on the frozen pond.

Steady blue, clear view,
Flashing blue, clouds due,
Steady red, storms ahead,
Flashing red, snow instead.

It was flashing red. So was much inside of me as well. That synching-up of winters. I thought, at first, should we make a snow angel? Then I thought of how this might have all played in Dylan Thomas's "A Child's Christmas in Wales," a recording of which—by the man himself—I often listened to on my walks, for it is as musical as anything I know. And it has my favorite line in all of literature, which is also the most gutting when you extend it out past the realms of boys and insects, and into the worlds, and the winters, of adults, and what sometimes occurs there.

"And books which told me everything about the wasp, except why."

I was going numb, no one was out, and I was so tired, and I just thought, right, close your eyes, and—

This should be the part where I say I rallied, rose up and all of that, but that would not be the truth. Because I did close my eyes. I shut out that steady red of the Hancock building, felt myself ease into sleep, and then I snapped forward having had my latest nightmare. Which made me get up and start walking again.

"I am never fucking going walking with you," my friend Triscuit informed me when I unburdened myself of these details the next day, when the bars were back open again. Weather so bad as to shut down all of the bars in Boston is bad weather.

I can't help but write as I walk—stories, things for work, book chapters, essays, pitches to bring in \$200 here, \$500 there, \$75 there, the occasional four figure payment somewhere else, to pay the bills. I write fast, so I can't help having time to dwell on what deductions I could come up with, regarding my life, what I might try next, what could be a solution, solutions, even, and for all of the

writing that ripped through my mind, 6,000 words or whatever piling up just like that, on the solution side of the ledger there would be a blank page. And, if anything, the explanation side of the ledger had a sub-blank page quality to it, a mawness, almost, entirely in white. which didn't add up to much.

Heather, the ghost writer who makes press pot video tutorials if you need them, said, "We don't always get to know. Sometimes you just never know. Like with the weather and the winter."

"What are you saying?"

"The winter. Like this one. It's elemental. You can't predict it or explain how any of it happens."

"Of course the fuck you can. It's science."

"It's elemental. An elemental. Like a haunt. A ghost."

"Because the snow is white, too?"

"No. Shut up. You know what I'm trying to say. You do."

She was right. I did. And that also sucked.

When winter broke, the snow refused to go away. It lasted deep into the spring. In the woods, in the shade, you could still find patches of it in May. In late March, when it was officially spring, I went to this place just south of Boston called the Blue Hills. It is billed, in the local literature, as the highest point on the eastern seaboard, which is super dubious as it takes you all of fifteen minutes to get from the bottom to the top of the main hill. It's the only place in the state, though, that has timber rattlesnakes. The fall before, after watching video of one such creature on YouTube, taken right from the Blue Hills, I resolved to find one, so I got a stick and went off the trails and started poking it under rocks. I had some Benadryl with me in case things went wrong and I got envenomed. I only encountered a garter snake, though, like those that used to come out of the stone walls in the woods behind our house when I was geologizing, only this one bit my shoe, musked, and stared up at me as if to say, "are we really doing this?" and I gave him back a look confirming, yeah, sorry, I guess we are.

But this was supposed to be my big “winter is finally over” outing, save that snow was everywhere, and it took almost an hour to hike to the top of the hill. No one was out on account of the snow, but it was spring all the same, I kept telling myself. Problem was, I couldn’t find a trail coming down, and I got horribly lost. My shoes were soaked through, it was cold, and now it was getting dark, and I was thinking I was going to be that guy who they make fun of on the local news because he got lost in the Blue Hills and had to call 911 and a search party had to fish him out and return him to safety. But eventually I hit a road. Granted, it was six miles from where I should have been, ten from the train stop.

“So you walked it?” Triscuit asked me at our next session at the bar.

“Of course I walked it. What else was I going to do?”

“Fair point. I think I’m going to move to Florida, by the way.”

“You’re not going to move to Florida. No more than I am.”

“True. Winter. You just fucking deal with it.”

He then proposed drinking a toast to nightmares, opining that I’d be dead without mine, logic which I found slipshod but went along with anyway, as the beer was free, and it was the Samuel Adams summer batch, something I elected to think of as warm, vernal. Post-vernal, even. Summer on the inside, maybe, which is what, even in the middle of a miserable Boston winter, you’re always going for, I guess. The converse of that white mawness of the blank page, devoid of the language of explanation. Or overhung, perhaps, with whatever it is that grows when you are more at peace with yourself.

Two Poems

In translation

Dionisio Cañas

trans. Orlando Hernández

Nunca mais: Petróleo y matrimonio

Nunca estuve tan soltera. Nunca tuve tantos pretendientes. Nunca frecuenté tantos periódicos que solo hablan de Nunca. Nunca vi tantas noticias en la televisión que Siempre hablan de Nunca. “Más Nunca”, me decía, y volvía a verte como Siempre. Nunca el florero estuvo tan vacío. Nunca el burro me pareció tan sabio. Nunca la mirada del cartero me pareció tan lejana. Nunca un beso digital pudo ser tan esperado. Nunca un Tú tuvo tan poco Yo...

Yo Nunca haría eso, yo Nunca iría contigo a esa película, yo Nunca miento, yo Nunca te seré infiel, yo Nunca leeré el diario...

¡Ahora o Nunca!, y sin embargo no sé qué hacer. ¡Ahora o Nunca!, y el cerdo de tu marido te mata de una paliza...

Nunca no, Nunca mais, Nunca y Nunca y Nunca y Nunca. Bien, pues qué hacer cuando el día está nublado como Nunca, cuando la cama está más sola que Nunca, cuando amanece, sí, siempre amanece, pero es en otro lugar donde no has estado Nunca. Y el cuervo revolotea sobre los restos del petróleo abandonado por un barco, y el cuervo vuela sobre el rostro ensangrentado de una mujer...

“Nunca más”, se dice Siempre el cuervo, y delante de mí todos los días un millón de novias se casan con sus futuros asesinos.

Never Again: Oil and Marriage

Never have I been so single. Never have I had so many suitors.
Never have I perused so many papers that only speak of Never.
Never have I seen on television so much news that Always speaks of
Never. “Never again,” I’d say to myself, and see you once again as
Always. Never has the flowerpot been so empty. Never has the don-
key seemed so wise. Never has the mailman’s gaze been so distant.
Never could a virtual kiss be so longed for. Never a You with such
little I...

I would Never do that, I would Never go to that movie with you, I
Never lie, I will Never be unfaithful, I will Never read the paper...

Now or Never!, and nevertheless I don’t know what to do. Now or
Never!, and your pig husband beats you to death...

Never no, Never more, Never and Never and Never and Never. All
right, but what do you do when the day is cloudy as Never before,
when the bed is more lonely than Ever, when the day breaks—yes, it
always breaks, but in another place, where you’ve Never been. And
the crow flaps over the remains of oil spilled by a ship, and the crow
flies over a woman’s bloody face...

“Never again,” the crow tells itself Always, and in front of me, every
day, a million girlfriends are marrying their future assassins.

Todo empieza a tener un extraño sentido verdadero. Todo lo que antes era oscuro, ahora posee su luz propia, como las piedras en el campo, que crecen debajo de la tierra. Todo emerge de un pasado que cansado de estar en el pasado pide día y pide sol, y pide que se le despierte a una hora cualquiera, como los muertos. Curioso que sea esta mañana de destrucción y espanto, cuando como un ahogado sale de entre los muertos el sentido verdadero de la vida. Curioso que haya hecho falta tanto escombros para escribir unas cuantas palabras verdaderas. ¿Podremos algún día perdonar lo imperdonable? Hace muy poco las gaviotas acompañaban tantos barcos que salían sin miedo hacia sus destinos turísticos. Hace muy poco los alegres pasajeros de la muerte escribían tarjetas desde aquí: “la ciudad es hermosa hasta con la niebla”. Y todo terminó como un fandango, ruidoso y hacia dentro, todo, hasta nuestros más íntimos deseos de huir a otra fecha, sin calendario ni despertador, hacia un lugar del tiempo en que escribir no sea una obscena aventura de poetas.

It all begins to have a strange true meaning. Everything that before was dark, now has its own light, like the stones of the field that grow beneath the soil. It all emerges from a past that, tired of being past, asks for day and asks for sunlight, and asks, like the dead, to be woken at any hour. Curious it should be on this morning of wreckage and fear that the true sense of life, like a drowned man, comes out from the dead. Curious it should have taken so much rubble to write a few true words. Can we, one day, forgive the unforgivable? Only a little while ago the seagulls escorted the many boats that set out, without fear, toward their tourist destinations. Only a little while ago death's happy passengers would write cards from here: "The city is beautiful, even the fog." And everything was over like a loud dance, rowdy and inward, all of it, up to our innermost desires to flee to another date, without alarm clock or calendar, toward some place in time in which to write might not be the obscene affair of poets.

Village Governments

Daniel Healy

The shot sounded throughout the white gathered below the green, condensed mat. The green itself hovered hard up into a white crown of greater space above, capped off only by the field of vision. The field of vision belonged to a man lying prone, in a field, with a video camera behind him on a tripod and his daughter by his side. Standing up, she had a different field of vision, too. The green was a belt of trees dividing the white and the white. The white was the snow and the sky. The girl was hungry.

“That kicked hard, but not as hard as I thought it would,” the man said. “Just a reminder that this is the +P ammunition. We got the 230-grain Doubletap-brand ammunition loaded up here in this little Glock 29. It’s got a lot in it for a gun its size. And I could definitely see my hand getting tired if I shot forty, fifty rounds or so through this at the range. Still, I’m going to give you ten more rounds of the heavy stuff. Then I’m switching over to the 180-grain Federal brand for comparison.”

The man switched out his magazine and began aiming toward one of the steel targets he’d set up on hay bales dotting the field. He twitched and slipped from a solid hold on the weapon when Claire spoke up.

“Dad, how much longer?”

“Uch.”

“Seriously.”

“You can go inside if you’re getting cold. I’ll make up some cocoa after I finish shooting this. Sound good?”

“No I want to stay with you. It’s just getting kind of late.”

“Alright. Then, no more ‘How long, Dad? Or “Dad, I’m bored.”

“Ok.”

“Or ‘Dad, my friends at school say I’m weird for talking about concealed-carry permits. And for knowing what the word Kruger-rand means.’ Ok?”

“Uh.”

“Rewind the tape to after the part when I reload the pistol and then I’m going to start from there again. I can do the comparison with the Glock 20 after Cameron makes supper and while you’re doing your homework. I want some coffee, so let’s just get this next part done.”

“Yeah. For sure, Dad.”

The camera was from four or five years ago, and made of a weird purple-blue plastic. Using it for digital video required a tape to be converted to a laptop for edits and uploading because of the camera’s age. Claire had once appropriated it for videoing things she liked around the house, back in elementary school, before losing interest, just at the same time as when her father began “borrowing” the camera for his gun demonstrations. She screwed the camera back on the tripod when she was done with what her father had asked, and waited for him to take his shots. His groupings weren’t very good. In fact, Claire noted that somehow his aim was getting worse as every month went by. Maybe this time it was 10 mm ammunition. There was the unfamiliar kick it produced.

“You know, why don’t you just go inside and see if your sister needs some help with dinner? I think I’m going to try a couple more takes and waste some more bullets.”

“That actually sounds pretty good to me. I’ll see you in a few, Dad.”

Claire’s father picked up a pair of bright red safety earmuffs and put them on, took them off again because they would have ruined the continuity of his video, and Claire turned and started walking back toward the paint-peeled old house. Her sister only visited once a week. Claire knew it would be a good idea to spend some time with Cameron or else she would get aggravated after making the trip out from downtown. Cameron lived with her boyfriend there and commuted over to Fitchburg State for her master’s degree coursework when she didn’t have to work at a pub near her apartment in Madding. The name of the pub was Ned Kelly’s. After hearing about the pub, her father had

learned about who Kelly was. The Irish-Australian outlaw had become a constant obsession, along with the broadening constellation of related topics about which he never stopped proselytizing.

These topics included: the gatekeeper proxy academics who controlled knowledge about the government and how people thought of it; how the two-party system was dying spectacularly and why it needed to; how prisons were secretly training militiamen who were prepared to fight alongside the U.S. armed forces on a local level, and for the installation of controlled-puppet technocracies. According to their father, the new powers—former CEOs and federal economists—would strongarm the regulation of the people's access to oil and food resources. As climate change stressed the infrastructure, private industry would buy up any surplus in staple commodities. He saw secret communications all around but could not always decipher them. It was all just like the Business Plot of 1933, he said. Except the operation would result in unshakable success, with the end of the relative public order and moral security of the pre-Rapture era that the people now enjoyed. The girls had learned to tune their father out, or else talk him down when necessary. The hallucinatory theories were unsettling to everyone, but they upset him the most.

The house did not feel warm. Claire supposed that it was objectively more comfortable than the ice and wind and white outside surrounding her father, but the woodstove had gone out for certain and her sister was either asleep on the couch or upstairs doing some of her social work homework. So, the mudroom was all cold and weary-feeling, and Claire didn't want to think about the whole host of things she normally thought about when the house was empty and her father was outside, when she had already done her eighth-grade Spanish assignments and wanted to save the rest of her homework for just before falling asleep. The possibility of loneliness tinged the dead air like an unclean metallic taste, or like the smell of a forgotten piece of overripe fruit left in a bowl in the sun by a window. She wanted to cook dinner.

Claire lingered at the fridge. It bordered a long marble countertop under the glow of bright, clean cherry wood. Inside the refrigerator, ridges of intense, primary-colored bell peppers ran along the door and heads of garlic rested in between each of the individual bright bulbs. Two perfectly aligned half-gallon jugs of yogurt stood as sentries in front of a supermarket-brand gallon of milk, its soothing ivory watching out through translucent high-density polyethylene. Bushes of cilantro hung down over eggs that boxed in, against the refrigerator wall, a packaged ring of kielbasa like a coiled spine, a grotesque and meaty spiral safely surrounded with cardboard carton fences. Covering the kielbasa, a row of peaked, Saran-wrapped cheeses stood like houses along a knoll overlooking an ocean of white plastic waters, sea-foam buoying cold salsa jars and an island quart of cream. In the mornings when Cameron came, all three in the family went shopping together. Cameron arranged the groceries after Claire and their father went outside to film the gun reviews.

Claire found the slow cooker in the cabinets above the refrigerator and put it next to the stove. She then took out a cutting board from beneath the oven and started crushing heads of garlic with a chef's knife so she could mince them up with onion and shallot for making chicken tortilla soup. She relaxed and the act was all she wanted to do. Her father didn't cook and didn't care about food unless Claire presented it to him in between his cups of coffee, or when he mentioned supper after whole days of nothing consumed. She'd taken up all of the cooking for the past three years— it felt perfect for her— learning most of what she did through online recipes and old Julia Child hardcovers gathering dust on the rough-sawn mantelpiece. Next, she browned the garlic and onion and shallot in a saucepan, then added the mixture and a can of stewed adobo chipotles to the slow cooker. Claire realized that she should have cut up all of her chicken first and was tearing open its packaging when Cameron walked in. Tall and long-haired and wearing a baggy turtleneck sweater that made her upper torso look like a worn-down

woolen mountain face with two arms cresting down from either side. Carpathian, Claire thought. Carpathian and beautiful and with bad timing.

“Hey, Lady of Shallot. Why are you putting shallots into tortilla soup? I was going to make it. Remember?”

“What are you even talking about, Cam? I got this.”

“Well, you’re doing it wrong. And I guess you don’t like Tennyson.” Cameron made a sarcastic squint at her sister through the glasses on the tip of her nose.

“I think you should stop watching Downtown Abbey is all I’m getting from this conversation.”

“Let me help prep. Seriously, learn about England, though. They only once conquered like, twenty percent of the global population.”

“Well, I’m one hundred percent certain that you only got into the Anglo trivia to piss off Dad.”

“Why else do you think I majored in English and want to work in geriatric care and voted for Elizabeth Warren?”

“Okay.”

The sisters found the chili powder, cumin, hominy. They found everything that they could remember they needed from an old recipe printout, which neither of them wanted to look at, both as a challenge toward their ability to extemporize and for the sake of feeling the happy shock of accidental success after their own experiment.

“We should write this shit down.”

“Or take a picture. You can do it. My hands are pretty dirty right now.” Neither of them moved away from adding red pepper flakes to roasting tomatoes or selecting the appropriate ration of Monterey Jack.

In the middle of her thoughts about how to make the soup faster the next time in a big ten-quart pot, Claire noticed that Cam’s eyeliner had been running and her cheeks scrubbed clean of tear-lines.

“Wait, were you crying?”

“I’m fine. Something just came up and some stuff happened with August.”

August was the man Cameron had met during her undergrad years at Brown, who was also from near Madding, and who had also been a transfer student. They fought sometimes.

“Stuff? You’re kidding.”

“Stuff.”

“You know I know you better than that, Cam. Whenever August acts like a dick you want nothing more than to talk about it with me, and yell out about him, and tell me never to date ever and to go into a cloister. And then you go ahead and actually talk to him, because you love the dude.”

“I imagine that’s got some truth to it, yeah.”

“So what’s up? You were acting super strange and fake-happy and I didn’t like it.”

Cameron sat down at the heavy oak table next to the window where a band of sun shone through. It settled onto her forehead to illuminate her heavy green irises, and then it touched a strand of black hair that matched the broken black make-up scheme around her eyes. She tapped on the oak of the chair next to her for Claire to sit right there.

“So, I love you, Claire, but I don’t really know what to do. And I’m not sure if you’ll know what to do either. But you’re smarter and stronger than I was when I was fourteen so maybe that’ll help or something.”

“I don’t have anything to say to that because I don’t know what’s going on.”

Claire’s voice was flat. Cameron sighed and gave her a sharp look that was stern and beyond tired, and moved on.

“Look, don’t be logical about this, because you can’t be logical about this. Mom called on the landline.”

“Jesus. Wait, why?”

“She said she’s going to come here.”

“Wait—”

“Hold on. Please don’t interrupt me. I tried to tell her that it was a terrible fucking idea to do that but she kept talking over me and saying how she had nowhere else to go. Stuff about how Ezra said he wanted her out. All these other things.”

The sisters stared at each other. Cameron tried to smile but looked like she was going to cry, which made Claire scrunch up her face into a hard, glowering expression of thought.

“We can’t tell Dad,” Claire said. “We really can’t tell him. And we definitely can’t let her come.”

“I know that. But it’s Mom.” Cameron was practically whispering, and she’d gripped Claire’s hand in her own thin fingers.

But suddenly there was anger. Claire was up and yelling at Cameron, at the walls, before the room became a blur beyond the emptied pots of food, and Cameron’s pained expression, and the yelling receded even while it was happening itself. Their mother had been willfully gone and living with a diesel mechanic named Ezra several miles away for over three years without contact. She’d gotten into such a fight about the marriage, the house, the direction of things— and in front of Claire, too— that she and her husband had started to come to blows and Claire was forced to leap between them and push her parents apart. Claire and Cameron’s mother was the reason why their father had lost himself. She was the reason why their father had lost his job at the machine shop after breaking down and howling in loud anguish about how fearful he was that his boss would kill and eat him as retribution for his extensive knowledge of The Rapture. She was the reason why they were living off of disability and the fumes of a small inheritance, and the reason why they still lived in the same decayed house in which they always had, that had once belonged to Claire’s great-grandmother. The reason why spare money went toward canned food, gasoline, and weaponry. The reason why both sisters had found their father sobbing and hiding in the basement. Reason for everything that shouldn’t have been.

Their father crossed into the kitchen from the living room. He

saw. Cameron had gathered Claire up in her arms while her sister heaved with grief.

“Sweetie, what’s wrong? It’s okay, Claire. Nothing’s going to go wrong. Everything’s okay.”

Claire calmed in a small way but continued to choke and cry and kept gasping again and again.

“What’s wrong?” He said it a little more firmly now.

“Dad, just let her be,” Cameron said.

“Dad...” Claire said.

“Sweetie, tell me now. What happened?”

“Dad.” Claire’s words cracked out.

A strong pause allowed for Cameron to start getting up so she could put the teakettle on for everyone.

“Dad, Mom’s coming...” Claire said.

The man’s hands went slack on the shoulders. His face drained and settled into the kind of tension that looked like it was strong enough to break tendons, to pop open cracks in his wind-burned skin. He fell down on his knees, and then his daughters grabbed his underarms and tried to drag him up onto a chair. A single-letter sibilant noise escaped from the roof of his mouth, and his eyes dilated and looked up toward the window.

Now Claire was scared. Their father had started swerving his head to the left and right, snakelike, in a way that seemed deeply chemical and body-produced, and his daughters held him down. They told him to be calm. That their mother wasn’t coming and that he needed to go into a dark room and lie down.

When he let himself go limp Claire and Cameron loosened their grips. They didn’t expect him to snap up standing as soon as they had let go, and push them hard toward the floor, and bark.

“It’s that Bastard, kids. The time is now, the time is now, the time is now. Go into the cellar and guard. Go into the cellar and guard.”

His hands were over his forehead and eyes and he looked down into his fingers as he paced from corner to corner of the kitchen with

flawlessly repeated precision. Cameron made a move to take hold of his arm, but he shook her off.

The girls froze.

“What’s wrong with you?” their father said. “We have to go we have to move or else this fucking character is going to get away with it, but I know how to stop him and I think we can stop him but I need your help to stay at home and guard. Get moving.”

Claire couldn’t even feel her own lips but felt herself speak anyway. She felt herself telling him that things didn’t need to be like this, that nothing bad was happening, and if something were to happen they could figure it out together.

“You’ll know what to do,” he replied. “I’m sorry. I love you. I’m going to try and make it back alive but everything’s prepared if I don’t.” His eyes glittered bloodshot and strong.

“Dad. Don’t do this,” Claire said. “You need to sit back down and we can talk about your plan, okay? Okay, Dad? Just please come, sit back here.” Claire elbowed Cameron and tapped on her phone in her pocket, mouthing 9-1-1. She nodded to the door to the basement stairway. She was shaking.

“Cam’s going to go guard now,” she said. “But I’m going to stay with you before you go.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t do this when I should have,” their father said.

He turned and ran and slammed the door, locking it behind him on his way out to the truck, leaving behind a puddle of grainy water where his boots had been. The girls followed from the back door, but Cameron had to return to the house and take her keys from the hook in the kitchen and slipped coming back down the steps. They watched the truck speed out of the long driveway, and they got into Cameron’s car. Neither of them wore coats or boots or gloves and it was cold. After heading a few miles in either direction, into neighborhoods, pharmacy parking lots, the chain-linked sand and salt warehouse for roadway maintenance, it was clear that he was gone. Claire felt that she knew what was going to happen but

parts of thoughts only scattered into smaller pieces inside the thickness of her headache.

The cops had found the red, capped truck driven into an over-grown logging road and underneath a halfhearted covering of pine boughs and hardened snow. Their father had doubled back into and throughout the dirt roads that webbed out in the woods bordering the house's field. The field of white and green, where a tripod was still set up next to a wooden sawhorse and an empty thermos. The house cast a shadow down onto the flat plane of snow extending away from its patched foundation, epoxied boards, and warped lattice. The shadow was shaped like a tower, set in fuzzy relief to the adjacent driveway in black and white. Patrolmen who were ready and able had come from the neighboring town, and the chief of police had called the county sheriff to see what he could do with regard to talking to the state commissioner's office. The man was purported to be armed. His daughters described him as unstable, but harmless. The police chief did not know how to proceed, or if to proceed, with a press release and or a wider search.

Cameron remained at home in case their father came back after finding some clarity of mind. Claire searched alongside the police. They'd told her to stay at home with Cameron, and that he was probably in the woods near enough to the house. But Claire went out with a flashlight and an officer who didn't know the property as well as she did. When some officers went home to their families, and others went out to search further, she waited for their headlights to dissolve into the night. A dark parade of cruisers left a single car at the end of the driveway to stay and watch out for the girls, just in case. The last car stayed dark, apart, when Claire slipped outside, leaving Cameron cleaning dishes in the kitchen.

Looking into the woods at night was an unfamiliar field of vision. The nacre of the moonlit terrain by the house gave way to a mixture of dirt and snow and orange pine needles hugging tree trunks past the forest's edge. There was no clear path into the trees

but sections had been cut years before to make it at least somewhat easier to walk through. Claire navigated by what she felt, by where they'd last been together. After over an hour and a half of switchback searching up and down the hill where saplings had taken over old space, and where the brush got thicker, she sat down. Nauseated and lying against the frost of a fallen log, she looked through the stretch of woods leading to the light of the house. It was not far. A drop of liquid hit her on the forehead.

There was a man in the tree.

Claire's father crept down branch by branch and jumped to position himself in front of her.

"I knew you'd find me."

Claire stood up and put her arm out to his silhouette. After taking half a step she stopped. He was covered, the right portion of his face, his coat, his jeans, in blood.

He took off running toward the house.

"I took out the heart!" he screamed, "I took out the heart! That Bastard..."

Claire stumbled and fell headlong into the snow before forcing herself up to make chase.

She couldn't feel herself, anything at all, apart from her body. The running, the cold sweat and sensation of not being able to breathe. She felt built for running forward and reaching the house before he could get there, nothing else but adrenaline and slim branches whipping into her coat and face as she pushed herself forward. Anything could happen, to Cameron or the policeman who stayed behind or to her father.

"I'm so proud!" He shouted, ragged. "I knew you wouldn't betray me. I—"

The words trailed off as he ripped open the front door and scuttled into the house with Claire a few feet behind. He fell into the kitchen, Claire stood over him. Steaming bowls sat on the table, and the scent of cilantro emanated from them. Cameron sat at the table with their mother.

“You see...” he rasped.

Cameron leapt to put her arms around him and smeared blood onto her sweater and into the sand grains on the floor.

“Dad, what the fuck, they’ve been looking all over for you.”

“Ben...” Their mother’s eyes went wide. He produced a jagged piece of steel, shining red in the overhead light. “You see, Lorraine. You knew that I knew the kids would never betray me. But I knew about you, too. I knew you were a spy. The fact that you would do that for me. Living with him, for everyone—you’re the hero. You’re the one who made me know for sure he was the heart of the operation. But he’s gone now. I think it’s going to be good for everyone from now on. I took out the heart.”

Cameron edged toward the back door. “Girls, that soup smells delicious. What in the hell did you even put in it?”

Neap Tide

Sarah Bryan

The needle on the gas gauge was halfway below the quarter-tank mark, making for the red, but Pastor Bellamy knew from experience that it was enough to get everyone home. Only just, but enough. Today was one of those Sundays when he'd had to ask his wife Shonda to slip out during his sermon and, using the money just gathered in the collection plates, take the van to the gas station around the corner and add as much gas as the morning's tithing would buy. Usually it just bought a few gallons. Only once had the collection plate brought in enough to fill the tank, and that was during Patricia Alston's family reunion weekend, when half her relatives from Florence showed up to church with her. Her son—the football coach and only black faculty member at a white-flight academy—was prosperous by back-home standards, and all his own children were grown and doing well for themselves. Everyone down to Patricia's great-grandchildren had at least five dollars to put in the plate. Having a full tank of gas had been such a relief that the next Sunday, Pastor Bellamy felt that rather than pulling extra weight, the van was borne aloft on angels' wings.

But usually he and Shonda referred to the tank as being stuck at neap tide. At neap tide, the pastor had heard his father explain many years ago, the sun and moon have an equal pull on the ocean, and cancel out each other's efforts. Rather than reaching its usual high and low, the tide lingers at a muddling in-between. The pastor's father, Emmanuel, worked in his youth as a boat hand in a pogy fishing crew off of Wilmington. When a school of pogies was spotted, the hands would leave the mother boat in rowboats, dropping their net and surrounding the fish, pulling the net tight like a coin purse to the rhythm of songs not fit for ladies' ears.

Though rarely at its highest, the fuel level had never yet fallen low enough to strand the van on the side of the road with a cargo of old ladies. Add ten dollars' worth, subtract ten miles' worth.

With the van's air conditioner running, Pastor Bellamy sat and watched the front door of his church. A storefront in a small strip mall, the church had a silvery reflective coating on its plate-glass door and windows. On their first Sunday in the storefront space Pastor Bellamy had found that peeping passersby didn't help maintain a spirit of worship. For the previous twenty years the Greater Light Apostolic Church had occupied an actual church building, but the costs—of utilities, maintenance of the building, parking lot and adjoining graveyard, and new glass every few months for another broken window—added up to significantly more than the church's income, which itself was in steady decline as the congregation's tithing dwindled with retirements and deaths.

The door swung open, pushed by Assistant Pastor Maurice Johnson. He propped it in place with a broken cinderblock they had brought from the old church, where it had served the same purpose. There were currently four ladies who rode in the van every Sunday, and it was the congregation's custom to wait until they were all seated in their conveyance before everyone else exited. Alma Priest and Cora Green walked unaided, but Hester Green, who was frail, took Maurice Johnson's arm. As those two made their slow way across the two-row parking lot, Pastor Bellamy looked back to the doorway, where Patricia Alston was waiting. Behind her stood the rest of the congregants. A child squeezed partway past her hip, and was pulled back in by his mother.

Patricia, the pastor knew, was able to walk to the van on her own, but feigned lameness so that she could be squired by Maurice Johnson. The young assistant pastor was a slim, handsome man, full of enthusiasm—for God, for the church, for entrepreneurship, for his wife and their two little girls.

Alma Priest and Cora Green slid into the back row of seats, continuing a conversation that had started before the morning's service. With Maurice steadying her, Hester Green put one foot on the running board, swayed forward and back a couple of times for momentum, and hoisted herself in. She slid in staccato jerks to the

window seat. Maurice returned with Patricia Alston, who stepped into the van easily and sat down by Hester.

“All aboard the Greater Lightning Express!” said Patricia, who liked to be the mistress of ceremonies. Every week she made some sort of hearty comment to let everyone know that the ride had started.

“All aboard the Halleluiah Express,” said Cora Green.

The van pulled out of the parking lot. Maurice Johnson, in the front passenger seat, suggested, “All aboard the Anointed Abundance Express.”

“That’s right,” said Hester Green. “All right,” said Cora Green. “Anointed Abundance,” repeated Maurice. “Yes,” said Alma Priest.

Maurice would be starting his own church soon, Pastor

Bellamy figured. He had been an invaluable assistant over the last few years, but a few months ago he had received the call to preach. He was energetic and full of ideas about how the church might be run better, which he proposed tactfully, framing the ideas as things halfway between experiments and whims. They were big projects—outreach to bring in new members, applying for grants, starting a radio show.

The truth was, the Bellamys were exhausted all the time, between keeping the church nominally afloat and working their jobs during the week. Shonda was an administrative assistant to one of the town commissioners, and the pastor worked the day shift at a convenience store. Pastor Bellamy wished he could tell Maurice that what he needed most was exactly the kind of help he already provided—ushering, helping with the weekly van ride, maintaining the cemetery at the old church, and visiting congregants in the hospital when the pastor couldn’t get off work to make the visits himself. When Maurice would embark on a project, it inevitably reached a stage at which the pastor’s participation was needed, and he simply had no time or energy to spare, so the projects withered on the vine.

Maurice never acted let down, which the pastor appreciated. He knew that Maurice had a calling, and that he would be a fine minister when the time was right.

The first stop on the return trip was Alma Priest's house. Pastor Bellamy wished that she lived the farthest away, so there would be more time for conversation. She was by far the most exotic member of the congregation, a distinction apparent at first glance. While the other ladies her age wore skirt suits and often hats to church, Alma frequently appeared in a long batik dress and rubber-soled clogs. She wore no hat, but swept her braids back and into a tidy bun.

Alma had lived away, mainly in New York City, for more than thirty years before retiring back home. That in itself wasn't unusual. There were at least three couples at Greater Light Apostolic Church who had moved home after spending their working lives in the Northeast. But they had been secretaries and factory workers, a mailman and a delivery truck driver. Alma was a musician. When the pastor asked what kind of musician, she said that she was a pianist, and had played mainly free jazz. Pastor Bellamy recruited her right away to be the church musician. In services he could always tell when the Spirit was upon her, when her restrained church playing would tumble into barrelhouse, and then into inspired improvisations. The pastor sometimes wished that he could stop singing mid-song, hush the four or five voices of the choir, and just listen to her play.

Shonda Bellamy lit up when her husband told her that Alma was a jazz musician from New York. They invited her over for dinner in her first month attending the church. Three hours after she arrived, Alma and Shonda were so deeply engrossed in conversation that there seemed to be no end to the evening in sight. At a pause in their talking the pastor said, "You all are getting on like a house afire, and you know what they say to do when something is on fire." He stood and reached to pick up their plates. "Stop, drop, and roll. And I'm going to stop, drop, and roll into bed."

Carrying the plates to the kitchen, he continued, "But your voices are like music to my ears, so you all should just talk all night, as far as I'm concerned. Won't keep me awake. Goodnight, ladies." Alma thanked him for the hospitality, and Shonda smiled at him and said good night.

In church the next morning the two women greeted each other like old friends, and laughed about their new in-jokes. But in the coming weeks, though Shonda hoped that the friendship would grow, it became clear, through polite excuses and calls only slowly returned, that socializing wasn't on Alma's retirement agenda. From the first night's conversation Shonda knew that Alma had come back to South Carolina following a divorce from a drug-abusing husband, a divorce that also precipitated the breakup of the combo they both played in. She made passing reference to appreciating the quiet of her hometown, and the newly discovered pleasure of solitude.

Shonda was hurt, though she knew that the rejection wasn't about her. "An introvert," she explained, both to her husband and herself. "That's exactly what she is."

"And didn't she say she's always tired?"

"That too. Yes, she did."

"See you next week, Ms. Alma," Maurice called out to her as she unlocked her front door and turned back to wave at the van. Pastor Bellamy waved too, and before putting the van in drive again, he looked at the gas gauge. The needle was now on the half-tank mark.

"Maurice," he said. "Do we have more gas than we started with?"

Maurice peered at the gauge. "Must be expanding in the heat."

"Must be," said the pastor. He drove the van toward the bypass.

"Pastor," called out Patricia Alston. "When you preach on the theme of abundance, like you done today, I can't help but think how much the Lord has blessed me."

"Now that's what I like to hear. I hope He continues to do so."

Before he was done speaking, Patricia's voice surged over his.

“You see, there was a time when I didn’t think I would ever walk again. My knees were ruined. Thirty years standing at the counter at the DMV will do that to you.”

“Seem like it shouldn’t take that long to get your business done,” said Pastor Bellamy. “What was it, a title transfer?”

She swatted at his shoulder with her scarf. “You know I worked there.” Pastor Bellamy turned off of the bypass and onto a two-lane state highway. “Everybody came to see me while I was laid up after the knee replacement surgery. My children, my former co-workers, my sorority sisters. And I told every one of them, ‘I don’t see how I’ll ever walk again.’ But I prayed on it, and my children and my former co-workers and my sorority sisters would pray over me when they came to visit, and sure enough, I was soon back on my feet and good as new.”

“Does that mean you don’t need my help anymore?” asked Maurice.

“Not exactly good as new,” Patricia amended. “I just mean that it felt that way— that’s how relieved I was to be on my feet again.”

“I see,” said Maurice. “All right.” The van was pulling into Patricia’s driveway, a straight gravel line leading to the small brick ranch house. An overgrown field was behind the house. The pastor remembered Patricia’s father raising tobacco there many years ago. Now he watched as Maurice escorted her to her door.

Shonda Bellamy had belonged to the same sorority as Patricia Alston, though twenty years later and at a different college. She hadn’t been active in the organization since the day she graduated, with the exception of an occasion when Patricia had two tickets to a chapter luncheon in Columbia. Congressman Clyburn was the invited speaker and, unable to go herself, Patricia had offered her tickets to the Bellamys.

The luncheon in Columbia was unusual in that it was something the Bellamys had talked about doing ahead of time, and then actually did. They talked about other plans—about starting a garden in their back yard, volunteering for voter registration drives, maybe

even joining an overseas mission trip sponsored by one of the large churches in town. When the time came to make a decision, though, they were always prevented from doing what they wanted because of the Greater Light Apostolic Church. More often than not they used up their own cash covering the shortfall in the church budget. Reading the church's initials on a folder of bank statements one night, Shonda said, "G-LAC—more like 'we lack.'" Sundays had long been impossible too, but with Maurice Johnson now taking an occasional service to give his own sermons a test run, Pastor Bellamy allowed himself to hope that in coming years he would be able to take some weekends off.

Both Green sisters were now asleep, and didn't stir when the pastor's cell phone rang. He answered the phone and heard Shonda on the line. "Where are you? Do you need me to come get you?"

"Outside Ms. Patricia's house. What's wrong?"

"You haven't run out of gas yet?"

"No. We got"—he looked at the gauge—"looks like three quarters of a tank."

"Okay, you stopped and filled up, then," she said. "I just realized that when I went out this morning to get gas, I went in the store to get a coke and the paper, then drove away and forgot about the gas. I just found the money in my pocket."

Patricia Alston had kept Maurice standing at the door for several minutes while she talked, but now released, he got back into the van.

"Maurice," Pastor Bellamy said, "by any chance did you put gas in the van this morning?"

"No," Maurice said, laughing. "I got twenty-five dollars to my name until payday. Sorry."

"We should have run out miles back," the pastor said. "How is it we're still rolling?"

When the van pulled up in front of the sleeping Green sisters' house, the tank was full. Pastor Bellamy saw the third sister, Nettie, who didn't go to church, waiting for her sisters on the other side of

the storm door.

“Maurice,” he said. “Are you ready to take this church?”

Maurice looked at him, startled. “You mean as head pastor?”

“Head pastor. I’m ready to move on.”

“I would need to pray over that,” Maurice said.

“Pray over it and talk with your family,” said Pastor Bellamy, but Maurice was already praying.

When Maurice lifted his head, he clapped once loudly, and bounded out of the van. Sliding open the back door, he reached in, smiling, and held his hand out to Hester Green, who had woken up at the sound of his clap.

Pastor Bellamy opened the door on the other side. “Ms. Cora,” he said, touching her shoulder. “Come on now. Let’s wake up and get out.”

He Alright

What happened on the late-night subway

Saul Fussiner

I was twenty-six years old and on the L train home to Williamsburg, Brooklyn, from Manhattan. This was Williamsburg before it was cool and because it was cheap and a quick subway ride to and from NYU. I wore a goatee beard then, the purpose of which was to take a viewer's attention away from another feature on my face: my nose, long and Roman style. I was on constant alert that someone might be judging me because of it, in spite of the fact that no one had openly mocked it since eighth grade, when it initially grew large in the first place.

The L train gets a person into Williamsburg fast from Manhattan, and then it goes out to rougher neighborhoods at the eastern edge of Brooklyn. On this particular L train trip, two black teenagers spent the ride between 14th Street/Union Square and Lorimar Street/Metropolitan Avenue talking junk about the size and shape of my aforementioned nose. I stayed quiet about this, and attempted to ignore them, but they persisted.

I got out at Lorimar Street, steadied myself on the platform, and then raised two *fuck you* middle fingers at them from where I stood. I probably shouted an extended *fuck you* as well. It wasn't the best reconciliation technique, I now admit, but it felt good at the time. And then a thing happened that would force me to reconcile a little more fully. The doors of the train did not close. A delay was announced, and the two teenagers looked at each other for a moment and then decided, even though this was apparently not their stop, to get out right there.

I ran. They ran. And then, realizing they would catch me before I got to the turnstile, I turned to face my antagonists. They were now striking their fists into their palms menacingly, waiting to break the nose that had recently provided so much mirth on their part.

"Look," I said, "I've had a bad day." I wasn't sure this was true, but I thought it was a good opening. "I've had a bad day and you

guys just made it worse by mocking me throughout my entire train ride home. And you don't know me. And I don't know you. So what are we gonna do here? Are we gonna fight over this bullshit?"

They turned to each other and made a silent agreement. Then the bigger one put out his hand for me to shake. "I've had a bad day too, my dude," he said. "I don't wanna fight. You right." And then he looked over at the angrier seeming smaller guy. "He alright," he said. "He's just standing up for himself." And then they turned and walked away.

Several weeks later, I met them again, waiting for the L train at Union Square. The big guy introduced himself as Tremaine; the little guy was Johnny. Tremaine said he liked reading Stephen King books and wanted to grow up to be a horror storyteller. He lived in East New York, at the far end of the L line, but he went to school in Manhattan. Johnny claimed to want to be a serial killer when he grew up, but I think he was just messing with me. In any event, I did my best to interest him in more sustainable pursuits.

They introduced me to their buddies. "This crazy white boy gave us the finger," said Johnny.

"He alright," said Tremaine.

Months passed. I would see Johnny and Tremaine once in a while on the L train. We always talked about their lives and their goals. They saw me as some kind of a mentor figure at this point, which was funny, because I was completely dysfunctional in navigating my own starving-artist life. I was living on student loans while pursuing a useless Masters degree in playwriting, despite the fact that I was incapable of creating anything longer than an extended one-act. I had two low-paying dead end jobs that took up all of my non-playwriting time: filling bags of beans at a coffee and tea distributor and alphabetizing books and operating the cash register at a used bookstore. The second of these jobs kept me working until after midnight every Saturday night. Then I would close the shop and grab a beer and a snack with my boss that made my arrival in the basement of Union Square station take place around 1:30 a.m.

Here's the thing about the L train. During the day, if you're going to get out at Lorimar Street station, it's best to get on the very last car. But at night, the train has fewer cars, so it's best not to wait down at the "very last car" side of the train platform. One drunken summer night in 1993, I forgot about this detail, and I spent my post-1-a.m. waiting time at the very last staircase, the one hidden from public view, in the very bottom of the bottom of Union Square station.

I remember that I was reading a used copy of a book by Robertson Davies when a burly Hispanic young man stepped up the staircase behind me. I put the book down to make momentary small talk. After all, wasn't I the guy who could talk my way into anyone's good graces in the world of L train New York?

"Train takes forever at this hour," I said. I think he only nodded at this, maybe said a word or two. But this seemed like a sort of camaraderie between us. We had made eye contact. We had a moment. Two late night commuters, annoyed at the transit system together, in the melting pot that is New York. I then went back to reading. I felt safe. I was wrong.

When the glass bottle shattered, I thought nothing of it. It sounded like some drunk had dropped an empty bottle of beer. So what? No one breaks a bottle and then still holds onto it, right? But then things started to happen both really fast and really slow all at once, like the world was turning upside down, but it was doing so in instant replay.

The big guy was now holding me in his arms. A much scrawnier Hispanic guy was digging the broken beer bottle into my neck and telling me to give up my wallet. I told the big guy that I would appreciate it if he took the money out, but then placed the wallet back into my back pocket. I had some phone numbers in there that I thought might be important. The fact that he followed this instruction made me trust him. I had some variant on Stockholm syndrome. Even though the scrawny guy might want to kill me, the big guy wouldn't allow this to happen. Right? Because if he gave me back the wallet,

that meant he was giving my life some value, as if he was accepting the fact that I might have a life after tonight in which I might need the rest of what was in the wallet. That said, I had no trust of the scrawny guy at all. And as the incident progressed, I became more and more certain that the end of my life might be a bonus he was seeking in his own life, in terms of the score sheet of his own particular street cred.

The only thing protecting my jugular vein was my left thumb, which I was now holding against the right side of my neck, so that the broken glass was only half in my neck and half in my thumb.

“Move your thumb!” The scrawny guy was repeatedly hissing.

“I can’t,” I kept replying, as if I meant I couldn’t physically move it even though I might want to, when in fact I meant *I can’t let you take my life; there’s a few plays I still might want to write.*

“Let’s move,” the scrawny guy said, and the big guy lifted me to my feet. We started making our way to the very end of the track. The scrawny guy kept insisting that I move my thumb. I was insisting that they had my money and should just let me go. I felt like maybe the big guy agreed with me and could be convinced if I just kept talking. He didn’t seem to have the need to kill me. But I also had the feeling that the scrawny guy just wanted to slit my throat and then dump my lifeless corpse onto the tracks, so that the big guy could see that and know what a badass motherfucker the small man was. At some point, I managed to swivel around so that I was facing the stairs, but they suddenly looked a very long ways away.

And then the big guy did something that probably saved my life. He punched me hard, in the back of the head, and I fell forward onto the ground and then, importantly, I stopped trusting him. I got up and ran down the platform to where the crowd was. They stood there looking at me like I was crazy, or maybe like I was Kitty Genovese herself, covered in blood and surrounded by bystanders. I ran up the stairs and up more stairs, and I found myself just below ground level and headed for the exit when, poor as I was at the time, I remember actually pausing to consider whether I really wanted to waste a token

before I pushed back through the turnstiles and rushed onwards toward the Manhattan streets.

A black woman about my age saw me coming up the stairs to the street as she descended.

“Aw, shit,” she exclaimed. “You OK?”

I said I wasn’t sure. She informed me that there was blood all over my jacket and then she led me back up to the street, where she called 911 on a payphone while I lay myself down against the outer wall of Apple Bank. The adrenaline that had saved me was now draining out of my body. I was starting to fall asleep. She came over and rubbed my cheeks.

“Don’t die on me, honey,” she said. “You need to stay awake. I’ll tell you some jokes to keep you alert. Make you laugh. Let me think. I can’t think of any jokes. Well, you got a funny big nose. Maybe I can make fun of your nose to keep you awake.”

And so, like Tremaine and Johnny before her, this good Samaritan—whose name I will probably never know—spent the next few minutes mocking my nose, but this time with good intentions, until the police arrived.

I only remember one moment of the exchange between the woman and the police officer before I was loaded into the squad car and taken to Beth Israel Hospital.

“Is he OK now?” asked the officer.

“He alright,” said the good Samaritan. “Yeah, he alright.”

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Ruth Heil attributes her ecological awareness to a childhood spent playing in the woods. Her vision is to inspire and support those who care about the environment as well as remind society that nature requires our partnership. A book is in the works. You can find her writing at www.thewritebeat.com.

Orlando Hernández is a writer and tap dancer from Hoboken, NJ. His poems and translations have appeared or are forthcoming in *Fence*, *New American Writing*, *PRISM international*, *Circumference*, and *Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños: Letras*. He lives in Providence, RI.

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Tom Toro is a writer of fiction and a New Yorker cartoonist. His stories and artwork have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Harvard Business Review*, *Narrative*, *Audubon*, *Litro* (UK), *Slush Pile*, and *The Funny Times*. He is currently at work on two novel manuscripts and a children's picture book. Tom's debut collection of cartoons and prose, *Yes, The Planet Got Destroyed (Or: How I Learned to Cartoon Through Catastrophe)* will be published in 2017. He lives in Kansas City, Missouri.

