

New Haven Review

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“What’s Like the Craziest Shit You’ve Ever Seen?”

*Dispatches from a city of
love and disaster*

Daniel José Older

Usually, I lie.

At a party, someone asks the question. It's someone who hasn't smelled the rancid decay of week-dead flesh or heard the rattle of fluid flooding lungs. I shake the ice in my glass, smile, and lie. When they say, "I bet you always get that question," I roll my eyes and agree.

There are plenty of in-between stories to delve into; icky, miraculous ones and reams of the hilarious and stupid. I did, after all, become a paramedic knowing it would stack my inner shelves with a library of human tragicomedy. I am a writer, and we are nothing if not tourists gawking at our own and other people's misery. No?

The dead don't bother me. Even the near-dead, I've made my peace with. When we meet, there's a very simple arrangement: Either they're provably past their expiration date and I go about my business, RIP, or they're not and I stay. A convenient set of criteria delineates the provable part: if they have begun to decay; if rigor mortis has set in; if the sedentary blood has begun to pool at their lowest point, discoloring the skin like a slowly gathering bruise. The vaguest criterion is called obvious death, and we use it in those bizarre special occasions that people are often sniffing for when they ask questions at parties: decapitations, dismemberments, incinerations, brains splattered across the sidewalk. Obvious death.

One of my first obvious deaths was a portly Mexican man who had been bicycling along the highway that links Brooklyn to Queens. He'd been hit by three cars and a dump truck, which was the only one that stopped. The man wasn't torn apart or flattened, but his body had twisted into a pretzel; arms wrapped around legs. Somewhere in there was a shoulder. Obvious death. His bike lay a few feet away, gnarled like its owner. Packs and packs of Mexican cigarettes scattered across the highway. It was three A.M. and a light rain sprinkled the dead man, the bicycle, the cigarette packs, and me, made us all

glow in the sparkle of police flares. I was brand new; cars kept rushing past, slowing down, rushing past.

Obvious death. Which means there's nothing we can do, which means I keep moving with my day, with my life, with whatever I've been pondering until this once-alive-now-inanimate object fell into my path.

If I can't check off any of the boxes—if I can't prove the person's dead—I get to work and the resuscitation flowchart erupts into a tree of brand-new and complex options. Start CPR, intubate, find a vein, put an IV in it. If there's no vein and you've tried twice, drill an even bigger needle into the flat part of the bone just below the knee. Twist till you feel a pop, attach the IV line. If the heart is jiggling, shock it; if it's flatlined, fill it with drugs. If the family lingers, escort them out; if they look too hopeful, ease them toward despair. If time slips past and the dead stay dead, call it. Signs of life? Scoop 'em up and go.

You see? Simple.

Except then one day you find one that has a quiet smile on her face, her arms laying softly at her sides, her body relaxed. She is ancient, a crinkled flower, and was dying for weeks, years. The family cries foul: She had wanted to go in peace. A doctor, a social worker, a nurse—at some point all opted not to bother having that difficult conversation, perhaps because the family is Dominican and the Spanish translator wasn't easily reachable and anyway, someone else would have it, surely, but no one did. And now she's laid herself down, made all her quiet preparations and slipped gently away. Without that single piece of paper though, none of the lamentations matter, the peaceful smile doesn't matter. You set to work, the tree of options fans out, your blade sweeps her tongue aside and you battle in an endotracheal tube; needles find their mark. Bumps emerge on the flat line, a slow march of tiny hills that resolve into tighter scribbles. Her pulse bounds against your fingers; she is alive.

But not awake, perhaps never to be again. You have brought not life but living death, and fuck what I've seen, because that, my friends

at the party, my random interlocutor who doesn't know the reek of decay, that is surely one of the craziest things I have ever done.

But that's not what I say.

I lie.

Which is odd because I did, after all, become a medic to fill the library stacks, yes? An endless collection of human frailty vignettes: disasters and the expanding ripple of trauma. No, that's not quite true. There was something else, I'm sure of it.

And anyway, here at this party, surrounded by eager listeners with drinks in hand, mouths slightly open, ready to laugh or gasp, I, the storyteller, pause. In that pause, read my discomfort.

On the job, we literally laugh in the face of death. In our crass humor and easy flow between tragedy and lunch break, outsiders see callousness: We have built walls, ceased to feel. As one who laughs, I assure you that this is not the case. When you greet death on the daily, it shows you new sides of itself, it brings you into the fold. Gradually, or maybe quickly, depending on who you are, you make friends with it. It's a weary kind of friendship at first, with the kind of stilted conversation you might have with a man who picked you up hitchhiking and turns out to have a pet boa constrictor around his neck. Death smiles because death always wins, so you can relax. When you know you won't win, it lets you focus on doing everything you can to try to win anyway, and really, that's all there is: The Effort.

The Effort cleanses. It wards off the gathering demons of doubt. When people wonder how we go home and sleep easy after bearing witness to so much pain, so much death, the answer is that we're not bearing witness. We're working. Not in the paycheck sense, but in the sense of The Effort. When it's real, not one of the endless parade of chronic runny noses and vague hip discomforts, but a true, soon-to-be-dead emergency? Everything falls away. There is the patient, the family, the door. Out the door is the ambulance and then farther down the road, the hospital. That's it. That's all there is.

Awkward text messages from exes, career uncertainties, generalized aches and pains: They all disintegrate beneath the hugeness that is someone else's life in your hands. The guy's heart is failing; fluid backs up in those feebly pumping chambers, erupts into his lungs, climbs higher and higher, and now all you hear is the raspy clatter every time he breathes. Is his blood pressure too high or too low? You wrap the cuff on him as your partner finds an IV. The monitor goes on. A thousand possibilities open up before you: He might start getting better, he might code right there, the ambulance might stall, the medicine might not work, the elevator could never come. You cast off the ones you can't do anything about, see about another IV because the one your partner got already blew. You're sweating when you step back and realize nothing you've done has helped, and then everything becomes even simpler, because all you can do is take him to the hospital as fast as you can move without totaling the rig.

He doesn't make it. You sweated and struggled and calculated and he doesn't make it, and dammit if that ain't the way shit goes, but also, you're hungry. And you're alive, and you've wracked your body and mind for the past hour trying to make this guy live. Death won, but death always wins, the ultimate spoiler alert. You can only be that humbled so many times and then you know: Death always wins. It's a warm Thursday evening and grayish orange streaks the horizon. There's a pizza place around the corner; their slices are just the right amount of doughy. You check inside yourself to see if anything's shattered and it's not, it's not. You are alive. You have not shattered.

You have not shattered because of The Effort. The Effort cleanses because you have become a part of the story, you are not passive, the very opposite of passive, in fact. Having been humbled, you feel amazing. Every moment is precise and the sky ripples with delight as you head off to the pizza place, having hurled headlong into the game and given every inch of yourself, if only for a moment, to a losing struggle.

It's not adrenaline, although they'll say that it is, again and again. It is the grim, heartbroken joy of having taken part. It is the difference between shaking your head at the nightly news and taking to the streets. It's when you finally tell her how you really feel, the moment you craft all your useless repetitive thoughts into a prayer.

At the party, as they look on expectantly, I draft one of the lesser moments of horror as a stand-in. The evisceration, that will do. That single strand of intestine just sitting on the man's belly like a lost worm. He was dying too, but he lived. It was a good story, a terrible night.

I was new and I didn't know if I'd done anything right. He lived, but only by a hair. I magnified each tiny decision to see if I'd erred and came up empty. There was no way to know. Eventually I stopped taking jobs home with me. I released the ghosts of what I'd done or hadn't done, let The Effort do what it does and cleanse me in the very moment of crisis. And then one night I met a tiny three-year old girl in overalls, all smiles and high-fives and curly hair. We were there because a neighbor had called it in as a burn, but the burns were old. Called out on his abuse, the father had fled the scene. The emergency, which had been going on for years, had ended and only just begun.

The story unraveled as we drove to the hospital; I heard it from the front seat. The mother knew all along, explained it in jittery, sobbing replies as the police filled out their forms. It wasn't just the burns; the abuse was sexual too. There'd been other hospital visits, which means that people who should've seen it didn't, or didn't bother setting the gears in motion to stop it. I parked, gave the kid another high five, watched her walk into the ER holding a cop's hand.

Then we had our own forms to fill out. Bureaucracy's response to unspeakable tragedy is more paperwork. Squeeze the horror into easy-to-fathom boxes, cull the rising tide of rage inside and check and recheck the data, complete the forms, sign, date, stamp, insert into a metal box and then begin the difficult task of forgetting.

The job followed me down Gun Hill Road; it laughed when I

pretended I was okay. I stopped on a corner and felt it rise in me like it was my own heart failing this time, backing fluids into my lungs, breaking my breath. I texted a friend, walked another block. A sob came out of somewhere, just one. It was summer. The breeze felt nice and nice felt shitty.

My phone buzzed. *Do you want to talk about it?*

I did. I wanted to talk about it and more than that I wanted to never have seen it and even more than that I wanted to have done something about it and most of all, I wanted it never to have happened, never to happen again. The body remembers. We carry each trauma and ecstasy with us and they mark our stride and posture, contort our rhythm until we release them into the summer night over Gun Hill Road. I knew it wasn't time to release just yet; you can't force these things. I tapped the word *no* into my phone and got on the train.

I don't tell that one either. Stories with trigger warnings don't go over well at parties. But when the question is asked, the little girl's smile and her small, bruised arms appear in my mind.

The worst tragedies don't usually get 911 calls, because they are patient, unravel over centuries. While we obsess over the hyperviolent mayhem, they seep into our subconscious, poison our sense of self, upend communities, and gnaw away at family trees with intergenerational trauma.

I didn't pick up my pen just to bear witness. None of us did. And I didn't become a medic to get a front-row seat to other people's tragedies. I did it because I knew the world was bleeding and so was I, and somewhere inside I knew the only way to stop my own bleeding was to learn how to stop someone else's. Another call crackles over the radio, we pick up the mic and push the button and drive off. Death always wins, but there is power in our tiniest moments, humanity in shedding petty concerns to make room for compassion. We witness, take part, heal. The work of healing in turn heals us and we begin again, laughing mournfully, and put pen to paper.

From the Soil

Erik Gleibermann

On the prison rooftop Mandela
grew tomatoes to feed every man,
the one who bled from the neck,
tightened the rope,
considered reprieve,
cleaned shit and memory
the next morning.
One flesh digests the seeds.

A Sort of Pleading

Joe HSSERT

Here is Abdi, working the soccer ball among his friends in the evening half-light. Dust clouds surround him as he feints and spins, cradling the ball past Farro and Isael. He sees the goalie rush him, abandoning the beat-up sneakers they use as goal posts, and Abdi flips the ball into the air, leaping to head it once, twice. He flicks his neck to the side, sending the ball up and over this final defender. The clay feels cool and soft under his feet as he darts around the stunned boy, shouldering him away and receiving his own pass on the arch of his right foot. His body snaps straight like a whip and sends the ball into the goal. His teammates surround him, cheering. They toss animal bones to the right side of the field, changing the score. Abdi feels a swell inside his chest that lifts and separates him from the soil, the camp, the other boys. On the soccer field he is free.

As the winner of the game he gets to keep the ball until the following evening—a great honor. He walks along the outskirts of the camp. Ribbons of shadow from the barbed wire and linked chain fence fall across his dark skin and the flat expanse of red clay. Rows of white tents turn golden in the fading light. They stretch out before him, each white dome smaller than the last. Near the horizon they blur together—a sea of shimmering fabric. The ball dances between Abdi's feet and legs—the leather is cool against his skin and eruptions of soil mark his agile footfalls. Dust lingers in the air behind him, drifting in the slanted light. Beyond the perimeter fence feral dogs eye the ball cautiously through coils of razor-wire, heads low—eyes full of suspicion. He makes noise like a hyena to scare them into the low bushes nearby, thumping his chest.

Abdi works the ball past a row of dented steel barrels containing human waste and breathes in clean air once clear of the smell. From the corner of his eye he sees a pair of girls his age peek from behind a tent-flap, giggling. He scowls, flipping the ball into the air

and catching it. Childish things have no place in a man, he tells himself. He walks purposefully toward home.

Earlier this afternoon, before the game, his friend, Nurta, had come to the clinic—her face a mask of swollen bruises: black and red. Abdi knew the man who gave them to her: Mohammed Ali Osman—the same man who gave bruises to other women in his part of camp. Nurta was ten years older than Abdi, but they were close—survivors of the same raid on their village, north of Kismaayo, in Somalia. Nurta’s parents were killed by al-Shabaab the day before his family fled. Abdi hadn’t seen it happen, but from his family’s living space he heard Nurta scream as her mother was beheaded by the small group of armed men. Nurta’s father was bound, forced to watch his wife’s final moments of terror. Afterward his penis was removed with the blade that killed his wife and the three men stuffed it into his mouth, laughing and pouring beer on his head before he too was separated into two parts.

In the silence that followed there had been the sound of skin on skin as Nurta was hit, and one man with an ugly voice told her to wait for him. He called her his dessert. It was quiet for a moment, Nurta let out a yelp, and then there was more laughter.

In his home Abdi stood in the doorway to his parent’s bedroom and watched his father, Salah, wait for the al-Shabaab men to come, hiding behind the door with a heavy piece of driftwood in each hand. Salah had instructed Abdi to stand in view and to look the men in the eye—a distraction. As the footsteps grew louder, Abdi heard his mother quiet his sisters, Fahmi and Sara, in the darkness behind him. He was scared, but he stood straight, and set his feet wide. The door opened and the men who entered lowered their weapons when they saw Abdi’s small frame. Each wore a white and red checked shemagh around his head and the man in front had smudges across his forehead where he had wiped blood away. Abdi could see splotches of crimson soaked into the fabric stretching over his mouth and ear. This tall man pointed at Abdi and called him a puppy, laughing with the others.

Salah leapt upon the al-Shabaab men as they cleared the door, shrieking, his voice high and unrestrained. In the dim light of their living space he unfurled: transforming from gentle fisherman, loving father into a savage creature Abdi couldn't recognize. The two men closest to Salah dropped as one—the heavy driftwood clubs striking them squarely. The tall, blood-covered man in the front lifted his gun and opened fire as he turned, but Salah was upon him and knocked the gun wide. His hand snaked around the al-Shabaab man's skull and Abdi watched his father pull the last man forward, driving his fishing knife through the checkered shemagh and into his throat. Abdi's father pulled his knife free and let the body fall, turning to finish the others. Salah's breath was quick and unsteady. Air hissed from between his teeth as he stood over each unconscious man and drew the blade across his neck.

After all three men were dead, Abdi watched his father drag their bodies outside, swallowed by the night. The scuffed dirt of the floor was dark with blood.

At the West-Six crossroad, near the woman from Jawhar who makes good bread, Abdi slows, gripping the soccer ball. The sun is an open wound on the horizon: leaking shades of red across the street, bleeding into the darkening sky. The throb of the busy intersection dulls as he remembers the way that his father softly joked with Nurta's young brothers before hoisting them one by one into Ahmed's van the morning after the attack. Thinking of his father, Abdi feels a hot swell of pressure behind his eyes, tightness in his chest, and ducks into an alley. He crouches and pretends to clean the ball, biting back tears. There were things a man didn't do in public.

It has been five and a half years since Abdi felt his father fall across him as that van barreled toward the Kenyan border. His sisters lay flat on the van's floor while his mother—head down, whispering—held their faces to her breast. Nurta lay with them, her hands over her ears. Salah had been shouting for Ahmed to accelerate, shielding Abdi and Nurta's brothers with his large frame as a

group of rebels at a roadblock outside Qooqani fired on the vehicle. What Abdi remembers is the sound of wind leaving his father's body and the weight as he slumped forward—dampness hot and sudden on Abdi's shirt where Salah's torso pressed upon him. His father's large, rough hand slid across Abdi's cheek and into his lap. Somewhere there was a buzzing, indistinct, as the volume of everything around him faded. With his right hand Abdi gripped his father's long fingers. He closed his eyes. The van slowed after a few kilometers and he heard his mother's voice lift and break—a distant sound getting closer. It was the sound he had heard Nurta make the night before. He let his father's fingers drop and sat up. He touched his mother's shoulder and saw the wet cheeks of his sisters. Nurta's palms fell into her lap and she looked through the window at the sky—a kind of question. Fahmi and Sara reached for their father, but Abdi took their hands and squeezed, pressing them to his chest, wet with his father's blood. And then there was no sound, only the slow, desperate movements of the people around him and the awareness of air entering and exiting his body that, all his life, Abdi had taken for granted.

Later, after digging a hole in the roadside clay with a flat stone he'd found in a riverbed, Abdi wrapped his mother and sisters in his small arms by the edge of the grave and, in a hoarse voice that was not his own, he told them that he would provide for them in Kenya. Abdi was eight when he became a father to his sisters.

In the thick heat that hung over Dadaab in the years that followed, Abdi found work in the center of the refugee camp as an assistant for a British medical team. He drew medication from vials, watching the fluid spurt and fill syringes as he pulled the plunger back. He taught himself to read some English. He knew *patient* meant sick. He knew *vaccinated* meant the person would survive. He knew *prescribed rest* meant the person would be dead within a week.

It was to this clinic that Nurta had come that afternoon, one eye swollen to the point it seemed her head might burst. She was now

twenty four and married to a mouse-y crippled man named Siad. Siad had a kind smile—he taught English to Somali orphans at a mission established by Italian nuns.

“Can you hide it so Siad doesn’t know?” Nurta asked, seated in a shady corner of the tent.

Abdi was thinking of Mohammed, the man who had done this. Mohammed came from a different Somali coastal village, farther north, beyond Mogadishu, and there was a story that he had offered two of his wives to al-Shabaab so that he could pass to Kenya.

“Siad should know,” Abdi said. “He is your husband.”

Nurta lowered her head. Rations in the camp were based upon the number of adults in a family and Nurta had two young brothers to provide for when she arrived in Dadaab. Marriage had been a necessity. Siad was a good man, but he was nearing sixty and he could not stand.

“Siad’s pain will change nothing, Abdi,” Nurta said.

Abdi admired her for wanting to protect him.

With his fingertips, Abdi touched her jaw and raised it. The swelling around her left eye made him swallow. He feathered a moist cotton swab around the broken corner of her eyelid, erasing a maze of dehydrated blood. In a different world—their former life—he had recognized Nurta as beautiful. This feeling came to him again, though he was just fourteen and she was married. It hurt him to see her like this.

Across the tent, beyond Nurta’s face, a child stared at Abdi. His arms were thin and stunted and one of his hands was missing. The child held a shiny foil packet of processed vegetables and pressed it between his palm and the smooth, rounded end of the arm where his other hand wasn’t.

There was something about these eyes, the child’s slow, indifferent chewing, that caught and held Abdi—buoyed him in a silent eddy, immune to the current of human bodies that moved around them. The swirl of patients, the swift mechanical movements of

the staff—all of this merged and faded beyond the hardness of this child’s hollow gaze.

Abdi’s eyes returned to Nurta and he worked the cotton across her battered jawline. She needed stitching. Abdi thought about the high, savage pitch of his father’s voice as Salah leapt upon those raiders years before. “I will do what I can,” he said.

Lifting the soccer ball, Abdi dusts clay from his knees and changes directions—heading toward a small knoll dotted with scrub brush and tents a kilometer from his home. The sun slips over the horizon and darkness takes the camp. In the absence of light the rows of shelters seem to rise from the earth and glow, unnatural islands of white—floating. Some of these tents are lit dimly from within, the fabric moving as thousands of displaced bodies brush the walls of their small homes. This sight is new to Abdi, for he is not allowed out after dark. As punishment he will be beaten later by his mother, but this does not deter him. He will confront Mohammed tonight.

Looking up at the stars, the camp falls away and he is back in his father’s fishing boat, watching as Salah cast his net into the waves. His father had been a great fisherman in their small village, known by name in Kismaayo and respected, even by those who looked down on Bantu. He brought in giant Somali catfish as big as Abdi and sharks which Abdi’s mother prepared—the meat so fresh it dissolved on his tongue, flaking apart and swirling within his mouth.

His father had only taken Abdi in the boat once because he was young for the dangerous work, but Abdi remembers sitting in the bow of the skiff and studying his father’s movements. In the stillness that came after casting his net, Salah ran his hand over Abdi’s head and pulled him close in the thin light. He told his son that when Abdi was older he would show him how to set lines; that they would troll the Jubba River together for catfish.

Later, as Salah pulled his net into the boat, Abdi was surrounded by a wriggling mass of fresh mullet, bellies silvered by the moon. The

fish's separate bodies merged—the floor of the boat alive: a single, iridescent blanket. Abdi marveled at how his father could create this magic, pull this beauty from the ocean. One day all this would be his.

Kneeling in the skiff, his father invited Abdi to watch as he scooped up a fat, wriggling mullet and slipped his knife into its belly. The blood came black in the night—leaking over his father's hand as he efficiently filleted the small fish, chopping its head and tail off, tossing the pieces into the water. This was repeated until the water swirled around the boat—boiling with small fish, then medium and soon, with fair-sized sharks thrashing in the surf, glutting themselves. Abdi remembers the fear that came as the narrow boat rocked in the open water, the tight grip on his father's rough hand, but also—and this most precisely—a feeling of weightlessness and peace as he floated above the roiling chaos that surrounded them in the dark.

A blade of light from a loose tent flap stabs dark earth. Abdi

hears the family within speak about their day in muted voices as he passes. There is little privacy in the camp—one dwelling stacked upon the next, and the fabric is durable but paper-thin. The narrow street he travels is cluttered, littered with scraps of fabric, trash and dirty clothing. Half-empty clay pitchers and gnarly pieces of metal are strewn near the mouths of several dwellings. Plastic bags and bits of thin fabric flutter in the ragged branches of stunted trees and scrub brush. On the hill near the far edge of camp he sees light from Mohammed's bonfire and hears men laughing. Abdi slips his hand into his pocket and feels the smooth white handle of his father's knife, its leather sheath guarding his leg. His other hand drifts to his neck where a rawhide strap holds the shark-tooth necklace. These were the only items he stripped from his father before he covered Salah with thick roadside clay. The graceful curve of the knife's handle is still too large for Abdi's hand.

At a small junction at the base of the hill, a shrunken man in the doorway of a tent lets out a high pitched giggle and reaches for

Abdi's bare leg. Abdi steps toward the man and shows his teeth, hissing. The figure scrambles, retreating to the shadows of his tent. Abdi squeezes the white handle in his pocket and walks faster.

Mohammed's bonfire pushes the stars from view. Abdi enters the sphere of light and the world beyond is swallowed by darkness. Mohammed sits uphill on the far side of the burn and when he sees Abdi he stands. Light catches in the green glass bottle in his right hand and the grade of the soil makes him loom more than two feet above Abdi. The front and sides of his soiled tank-top have rips and rust-colored stains. Abdi knows that some of these are from Nurta. Mohammed's skin is smooth and impossibly dark. His shoulders are broad where Abdi's are narrow.

"You are lost," Mohammed says, and it is not a question. The men around the fire quiet. There are six of them—lean figures that Abdi doesn't recognize. Since Abdi arrived, the camp has ballooned to a number too large to count—an ocean of strangers. Through the fire, Abdi sees the entrance to Mohammed's tent. It is large, several white domes spliced together with wire stolen from the perimeter. Dark fabric hangs over the center joint, draped in strips, shielding the doorway. Inside, Abdi can make out the shape of a woman, curled and still. Several of the men looking on have overbites and their white teeth glare at Abdi in the firelight, lower jaws slack and waiting. Thin wisps of smoke twist the air between Abdi and Mohammed.

"I came to give you a message," Abdi says. Now that he is here he is frightened, but he digs his heels into the soil and looks Mohammed in the eye.

Mohammed's lips curl in a broad smile. He takes a drink, raises his arms toward Abdi. "The little messenger!" he says.

"I am from West Six." Abdi says. He winces at the shrillness of his voice. He clears his throat. "You must leave Nurta alone. Don't touch her again."

"Nurta..." Mohammed says, tapping a thick finger to his lips. He smiles at Abdi through the smoke and leans forward. "Was

your Bantu woman unfaithful?" Several of the men around the fire snicker.

Abdi swallows and grips the knife in his pocket. He speaks louder. "If you touch this woman I will come back and I will kill you."

There is quiet and then Mohammed laughs—slow, rolling laughter that boils up from deep within. The men surrounding the fire chuckle with him, softly at first and then slapping one another, bending. Abdi becomes aware of the soccer ball in his left arm. He had forgotten it. He drops it to the ground, stills it with his foot and steps forward, crossing his arms over his thin chest. This makes the men laugh harder. A lanky, light-skinned man with a shaved head stands and crosses his arms, mocking Abdi. Mohammed and the other men roar. Abdi pictures his mother in the dark, a kilometer away, standing by the mouth of their tent, wondering where he is, furious that he has missed his curfew. He is aware of his age, his size, how his shrill voice is eclipsed by these men. His gaze drops.

"Run away, Mushunguli," Mohammed says. His voice is thunder. He flicks his wrists as one might shoo a rodent. "I take what I want and your Bantu bitch was tight around me." To the men: "I will visit her until she loosens."

Abdi closes his eyes and sees the swelling of Nurta's face. He opens them to the twisted shape inside Mohammed's tent. He is not a fool. He knows the refugee camp is a place without room for chivalry or love. Every day at the clinic he sees injuries. He knows what happens when women are whittled away month by month, year by year. He knows the creatures people become. Abdi understands the business of men like Mohammed, that there are too many of them to stop. He made a mistake in coming here, in thinking that he could help. Every part of him is heavy.

But as Abdi turns to retrieve his ball and leave he is back outside Qooqani, years before, shifting the weight of his dead father to the side. Here is Nurta: eighteen, looking out the blood stained window of the van. Her eyes wash over Abdi like a great wave and

he feels some small gears turn within his chest. He is not so distant from his village that he can't remember the rush of pride he felt when he watched his father transform, killing the al-Shabaab raiders. Salah had been outnumbered the night of the raid, and at the edge of the bonfire's light, alone and surrounded by the laughter of men bigger and stronger than he might ever be, Abdi feels he understands his father—how Salah was filled with a power and violence unique to men protecting what they love. Abdi believes that this is something he too has earned.

“No.” Abdi's voice is loud and full and the men grow quiet as he turns to face them. His eyes meet Mohammed's and Abdi pulls his father's knife from its sheath in his pocket. The firelight catches the blade and it burns like a flame in his hand. “Your time with Nurta, with all of the women in West-Six has finished. I am young, and I am small, but I am not afraid to fight you. I am not afraid to spill your blood here, on this ground, on this night, in front of these men.”

Mohammed frowns at the knife. The other men watch to see what he will do.

The large man thinks a moment, takes a drink, and then moves around the fire and steps toward Abdi and the knife. Abdi sets his jaw, coils his body like a spring, and waits for Mohammed to come. When he draws near, Abdi lets out a wild cry and leaps high into the air, his father's knife aimed at Mohammed's throat. He feels a strange elation, a peace—envisioning the knife slipping into this man, dark blood spilling over his hand the way it had when his father sliced into the helpless mullet. The future unfolds before him—his mother's nod, Nurta's smile, the gentle grasp of Siad as he reaches up from his chair to squeeze Abdi on the shoulder. All of this is possible.

Instead there is a sharp pain in his forearm as Mohammed bats the blow wide. The knife slips from Abdi's hand and falls to the ground. Mohammed follows with his bottle, smashing it into Abdi's ear—the blow so hard that it feels as if he has been struck by a boulder. The bottle shatters and jagged edges of glass scrape across

his temple in a hot burn. Abdi hits the ground, crumples in a heap by the older man's feet. The men around the fire cheer and Mohammed tosses what remains of his bottle into the burn, lifts the knife from the soil, and stands over the boy.

"Fool." Mohammed's voice is soft and savage. He spits on Abdi. "No wonder your people were our slaves."

Abdi scrambles back on his hands and knees. He feels warm blood run from his ear. Thick, smoke-filled air presses in and the perimeter of grim white tents tightens like a noose. He makes a dash for the space between two bushes, but with one step Mohammed cuts him off and wraps a hand around Abdi's neck, lifting him into the air. Abdi twists, his right foot lashes out to kick the larger man, but his feet flail without contact. Abdi thinks again of his mother, looking out into the darkness over the sea of opaque, glowing shelters and knows that she will never think of this as bravery. She will think him foolish and hate him for leaving her to care for Fahmi and Sara on her own. Without his earnings at the clinic, his mother will need to take another husband. Fahmi and Sara will marry before the year is out—twelve and eleven years old. Air slips away from Abdi and he begins to see explosions of pink and white as he claws at Mohammed's hand, clamped around his throat. The laughter of the men, the light of the fire blur and spike as Mohammed turns him in the air above his bonfire, dancing with the helpless boy. This, Abdi thinks, this is how it feels to die.

Then he is on the ground, and feels a snap around his neck. Broken, Abdi thinks, my neck has been broken. But as he sucks air and regains his senses he realizes that he is alive, that his neck is intact. He looks up at Mohammed who holds his father's broken necklace bunched in the fist that grips the white-handled knife. Abdi watches as the large man steps across the open soil and lifts the soccer ball. He holds it toward the boy and Abdi sees flames reflected in the smooth surface—the valleys between each facet of perfect leather are deep and straight. He recalls the feeling of his foot connecting, the ball an extension of his will. The knife arcs and Mohammed

stabs it to howls from the men. Abdi cries out as air gushes from the ball and Mohammed stabs it two, three more times, raking the blade through. When he is finished, Mohammed throws its ragged carcass at Abdi, flicking his wrists again, shooing the boy away.

As Abdi limps home, cradling what is left of the ball, he weeps.

He does not attempt to hide his tears. He knows that he will never see his father's knife or shark-tooth necklace again. That Nurta will suffer a brutal vengeance at the hands of Mohammed. That Mohammed will certainly kill her after he has used her up. To the east, Abdi can see the edge of the sky turn gray as the earth rotates on its axis—the large events of space and time indifferent to his struggle. He understands that he might never see the ocean again; that this new world might be all there is for him.

Near the soccer field Abdi throws the ragged leather into the air and watches it catch in barbed wire atop the fence. A thin brown dog on the opposite side of the linked chain peers up at the tattered, hollow shell. It sniffs the air and then trots off in the opposite direction.

In the half-light of dawn, Abdi enters his tent and accepts the beating from his mother. He strips off his shirt at her request, raises his arms and welcomes the switch she keeps for such occasions. It flashes across the soft skin of his back in a searing burn—dark welts rising across his shoulder blades. Abdi usually takes his beatings stoically, refusing to let his sisters or neighbors hear him cry out, but this time Abdi's cries rise and swirl: soaring above the camp—a high, lonesome, desperate sound; a sort of pleading—that reaches into the night and tells the story of a thousand silent voices.

In the morning stillness, at the far reaches of the camp, men and women lift their heads and listen to the distant, anguished cry. As quickly as it comes it passes and the sound is soon forgotten, swept away by a steady wind that hurries over Dadaab.

Melanie (5 a.m.)

Michael Schuval

I can no longer touch the sun
where the sun ends
I can no longer touch the sun
there

I can no longer spit the light of the tongue
into the meat of eternity
because there was a drop in the price of roses
and gasoline has dreamt itself away

these hands are like razors that cut air
into trembling children pieces
but this was yesterday, when the people
got out of cars on the street and in silence
watched the sky tremblingly

this was before sleep stole the stone that
kept my heart awake
before I entered the park in a blanket
of dawn greyness
when I fell into the hole of dark grass and
naked river and could not disappear

these people exited cars and looked to sky
but I walked along through realms of oaks
and poured scarcity from the wound of edom
there is no end to this thing that hides

I can no longer touch the sun
where the sun ends
I can no longer touch it
touch it there
there where it
touch it where
there

Our Yankee Landscape

*Seeing New Haven from the
ground up*

Matt Cornish

If you want to see New Haven, walk or drive to the top of East Rock or West Rock, the twin sentinels of the Long Island Sound. There, 500 feet up, atop the parallel traprock cliffs of the Metacomet Ridge, bare rock face prevents the growth of trees and you have a rare opportunity to view, steadfast and stubborn, our Yankee landscape. Between you and a thin stretch of ocean: the gothic spires of Yale, the bank buildings downtown, the Quinnipiac river; beyond, on clear days, bits of Long Island itself. As you turn and walk down English Drive in East Rock, you can see clear through Hamden, but what you will not see, especially in summer, are signs of human habitation. Virtually unbroken treetops cover houses and roads running north all the way to Sleeping Giant.

During my six years in New Haven—ending this fall, just before the leaves give way again—it has been my pleasure to walk our hills many times, and I did not see why I should not make an article, like Thoreau's *Cape Cod*, on Connecticut's landscape: unremarkable, yes, but, I decided, worth remarking on. Wishing to get a better view of our city, I have often hiked and run the trails in and around East and West Rock Parks, alone and with friends and dogs. I have found that one does not actually come to know our landscape simply by viewing it.

Connecticut's low, rolling hills are the result of its ancient, much eroded geology, muted in comparison to the bright young Rocky Mountains, where I grew up. Our state's subtler geography allows for few vantage points. The Rockies are sublime, imposing themselves on the beholder. They threaten to crush you at any moment, and paradoxically reinforce your sense of yourself as somehow immortal when you succeed in climbing to 14,259 feet on the summit of Longs Peak. Ascending the Rockies, you pass the treeline relatively quickly, probably just after dawn if you leave camp early to avoid afternoon thunderstorms. In Connecticut, there is no above-

the-treeline—unlike, say, New Hampshire or Vermont. The highest point in Connecticut is in the northwest corner of the state on the slope of Mount Frissell, at 2,379 feet; the peak of Frissell (appropriately) is actually located in Massachusetts. Peaks in the New Haven area are only measured in the hundreds: East Rock, 366 feet; West Rock, 627 feet; Sleeping Giant, 739 feet at the left hip. This, combined with reforestation, frustrates: hikes here mostly deny us the spectacular climax of the long, wide view.

If you want an unobstructed outlook on our sober New England landscape, you should walk, often, in all four seasons. Connecticut's landscape can only be understood incrementally. (The best guide is the *Connecticut Walk Book*, in East and West versions, published by the Connecticut Forest and Park Association and updated regularly.) Two trails in particular form the foundation of the New Haven walk: the Quinnipiac and the Regicides. The Quinnipiac trail begins at water tanks in the corner of Cheshire and Prospect, and runs south, following the traprock ridge that will become West Rock; when it reaches West Rock Park in Hamden, the trail turns east and north to connect to the Sleeping Giant system, before cutting under Wilbur Cross Parkway and then south through Quinnipiac River State Park. Stretching some 24 miles, mostly in public and private wilderness, though occasionally on roads (perhaps you have come across its blue blazes on Route 68 in Cheshire or West Woods Road near Sleeping Giant), the Quinnipiac trail in its entirety forms a fishhook with a barb on the end. And where the Quinnipiac hooks northeast, you can instead continue south and onto the Regicides trail, which begins on the west slope of York Mountain (685'), and runs seven miles along the entire ridge of West Rock State Park, ending at the overlook of New Haven and the Sound, finally granting you your view.

At dawn on July 4, carrying about two liters of water, my girlfriend Rachel and I, with her golden retriever Jude, set out to walk the eleven miles from Cheshire/Prospect to York Mountain, and then seven miles to the West Rock overlook. This was the most ambitious hike

we've attempted in Connecticut—and it fell on one of the hottest days of the year. We are both in fine shape, but in this situation, as my mother might say, our eyes were larger than our stomachs. Did I say we began at dawn? Almost. We woke up a bit after dawn, 5:30 a.m., and ate a leisurely breakfast. Stumbling out, we drove in separate cars to a parking lot on Wintergreen Avenue, then caravanned up to Cheshire. I have walked this entire trail, with the exception of a mile or two in the middle, in bits and pieces over the years. During a year living in Cheshire, I must have hiked the beginning of the Quinnipiac trail at least ten times. This is what I told Rachel as we shoved our way through scratching underbrush on a steep decline, wishing we had machetes, battling mosquitoes despite our generous allotment of (expired, it turns out) DEET: “At least ten times. The trailhead is just up here.” It was not. It was back there, an understated curve to the right almost immediately after the water tanks, near a small granite pillar, carved with a “C” and a “P,” that marks the town lines. Tramping back, we each ate a wild raspberry and began our hike, twenty minutes after we started.

Leaving the marshlands, which form at the base of the gradual slopes of traprock ridges, we ascended upland past white ash trees, hemlocks, and pines, then oaks, battling fewer and fewer shrubs as we moved uphill. As soon as you make the correct turn on the Quinnipiac trail, the woods open up and begin to feel wild and remote; in the winter, you can see occasional houses and hear traffic on Routes 10 and 69, east and west of the trail, respectively, but the summer growth limits sight and dampens sound. Isolated in the forest, you might think of these trails as anomalies. Connecticut has no national parks, and its state parks tend to be contained: Sleeping Giant comes in at 1,500 acres, which would be hardly noticeable in Yosemite National Park's 747,956 (roughly the size of Rhode Island). So, where else in southern Connecticut can you walk in the forest, for tens of miles, uninterrupted?

The answer, as Jim Sterba argues in *Nature Wars: The Incredible Story of How Wildlife Comebacks Turned Backyards into*

Battlegrounds, is pretty much anywhere. The Northeast in general, but Connecticut in particular, is almost all forest, regenerating for a century and a half: acres and acres of suburban and exurban settlement, “areas of sprawl ... so covered with trees that they have the feel of a forest, and ... for many wild creatures ... all the comforts of forest.” Sterba writes that about two-thirds of northeast forest lost after European settlement have regrown. Reviewing the contentious scientific literature on pre-Columbian forests in New England in his book *1493: Uncovering the New World Columbus Created*, Charles C. Mann makes an even bolder argument: that there could plausibly be more trees now than there were when the forests were managed by Native American tribes. This would be pre-1492 of course, before smallpox and other diseases ravaged native populations and left the trees to grow unmanaged, possibly helping spawn the Little Ice Age of 1550–1750. In *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus*, Mann calls the pre-Columbian forests gardens, collaborations between Native Americans and natural forces. The wilds the early settlers found were these gardens gone to seed.

Native Americans managed the forests thoroughly, among other things setting fires to clear underbrush and to keep hunting trails passable and prey easy to find. Albert Bierstadt’s oil on canvas paintings of Yosemite Valley provide an example of what happened after Native Americans were pushed out of areas or killed. Among other paintings of what would become Yosemite National Park, Bierstadt’s arcadian visions depict a stunning landscape of meadows and clearly visible rock formations that no longer exists. Why? With no one left to manage them after the area was desettled, the meadows reverted to forests. Bierstadt and his predecessors in the Hudson River School helped to create the environmental movement, showing us in glowing oils the natural wonders we were cutting down, strip mining, and generally turning into commercial shitholes.

The Hudson River School is, surprisingly perhaps, intimately connected with our landscape in New Haven, as Wesleyan geology professor emeritus Jelle Zeilinga de Boer shows in his beautifully

published book *New Haven's Sentinels: The Art and Science of East Rock and West Rock*. William G. Wall, for example, a forerunner of the Hudson River School, painted his pastoral vision "East Rock from the South" in 1834 (two years before Thomas Cole painted the Connecticut River oxbow), with the towering rock reflected in the marshy Mill River, cows grazing in a meadow and tiny figures floating in a canoe. Environmentalists were wildly successful at shifting our attitudes towards nature—so successful that de Boer, like many geologists, now actually regrets how reforestation has rendered extinct unobstructed views of geologic formations including East and West Rock. From the paintings collected by de Boer, one can discern the narrative I'm describing: in a print from 1786, the land goes from wild hills beyond the town to terrain used for farming in the nineteenth century ("Cider Making in the Country," by George H. Durrie, 1862), to industrial site (a photograph of a quarry in West Rock from the 1920s); visit today, and you will see only forest, with few signs of the former meadows and industry. And the environmental effects of reforestation has not been confined to parks: even as we move deeper into now exurban forests, the forests and their critters are moving deeper into the suburbs, rewilding our neighborhoods.

In the New Haven area, such critters include white-tailed deer, fox, beaver, skunk, raccoon, possum, muskrat, turkey, heron, and a pair of nesting bald eagles just off, of all places, State Street by the DMV. The magnificent, the funny-looking, the thieving, the tick-ridden—to see them stuffed, posed in replicas of their ecosystems, visit the third floor of the Peabody Museum, with its "Birds of Connecticut" exhibit and "Southern New England Dioramas."

Soon after Rachel and I gained the hill for our long walk south on July 4, what did we see but several excellent examples of those fine creatures Benjamin Franklin declared ought to be our national bird: turkeys. (No offense to the eagles.) Jude spotted them first, and even with a golden retriever's good recall and love of humans, we felt lucky she eventually returned, while such a delicious and slow-

moving feast was so close, but just able to fly away from her.

Already it was hot, and we began to sweat in the heavy humidity. A swarm of mosquitoes surrounded Rachel's calves; good thing, I thought to myself, she was wearing leggings that left only her ankles exposed. Protected from the sun by the thick canopy, we made good time, and, after two hours of ups and downs on rocky hills, we reached Roaring Brook Falls in Cheshire, where Jude bathed and we admired the highest waterfall in Connecticut while rehydrating. Roaring Brook Falls is one of our state's little treasures, a bit cluttered by beer cans, but nice to listen to. A pleasant point of repose, easily reached not just from the Quinnipiac, but also by a much shorter trail that begins off Mountain Road. This whole area is reforested: if you walk up the hill from the trailhead off Mountain, you soon cross the foundation of an old watermill. In the late nineteenth century, sightseers rode to the Falls in buggies, and posed for pictures by the water. The Falls were much more visible then, surrounded by pastureland.

Rachel and I moved on after only a short respite, quickly getting lost again—several trails, not all marked, crisscross the blue-blazed Quinnipiac here. There followed a pulse-raising five minutes straight uphill and back to our trail. It was 10 a.m., bright light refracting through the leaves and forming dancing patterns on the ground. So far, we had not seen a single person. The temperature was 85 degrees.

Walking steeply downhill, we soon passed a horse farm, and crossed Route 42, the first road of the day, before marching back up hill in Hamden's Brooksville Recreation Park. Here, we began looking out for that most exciting of southern Connecticut megafauna: *Ursus americanus*, the black bear. Between August, 2012, and May, 2013, Hamden boasted ten confirmed black bear sightings, and this does not include the bear that disturbed joggers and bikers along the Farmington Canal trail near Brooksville in July, 2012. Of all the comebacks of animals to their habitats, I find that of the American black bear most impressive. (Though the migration of moose into

northeastern Connecticut is exciting as well.) Extirpated by the mid-nineteenth century, bears began to return in the late twentieth century. The Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection claims evidence of bears in the state since the 1980s, identifying the abandonment of farms late in the nineteenth century as a key reason for the return of forests, and thus, eventually, of bear food.

I can give you a quick idea of why the farms were abandoned. Rachel has a dahlia habit—in fact, you may know her as the former Dahlia Lady of the Wooster Square Farmers’ Market. Ever the supportive partner, I spent a day this past spring helping to prepare the plot of land she has been using to grow her late-blooming flowers. This was her fourth year of farming the plot, of tilling the land by hand using a large pitchfork, turning over the soil and removing rocks. She pulls out stones every year; this year, we pulled out enough to build new walls along two sides of farm. Moderately successful at growing dahlias, Rachel, like all Connecticut farmers, is tremendously successful at growing rocks. Walking the Quinnipiac trail, you often come across stone walls snaking their way across the hills, beautiful ruins that mark farmers’ struggles to raise food from soil totally uninterested. (“I farm a pasture where boulders lie,” Robert Frost wrote in “Of the Stones of the Place.” In the poem, an old man thinks about sending a stone to his grandson in the west, a place with “every acre good enough to eat.” He would ask the young man to say of the stone, that it is “The portrait of the soul of my grandsire Ira. / It came from where he came from, anyway.”) In Portland, you can dance in circles throwing seeds in the air, and end up with marionberries, heirloom tomatoes, funny-colored carrots, roses, and, of course, dahlias. Homeowners there use strawberries in the place of grass, for god’s sake! And their plants produce the entire summer. The recent return of community farms to Connecticut is delightful, but as for growing dahlias (or enough food to make a living): Go west!

But back to those bears, one of which we were pleased to have

sighted ourselves while riding our bikes in Farmington. Black bears are generally not dangerous, though individuals certainly can be if they grow to regard humans as suppliers of easy calories. Just wave your arms, make noise, and back slowly away. You can carry bear mace, but it's not really necessary here. In the Colorado Rockies, officials have gone to the trouble of reintroducing wolves, in the hope that they will feed on large herbivores running amok, and also for sentimental reasons: rewilding the Wild West. We haven't been crazy enough to reintroduce large predators here, where the population density would definitely put humans at risk, but we are on a collision course with the returned black bears. Not only have bears adapted to the exurban, and even suburban, forest, they're thriving. Omnivores (though they don't often hunt deer, unfortunately), bears love our trash, our birdfeeders, our gardens, and our roadkill, that increasingly ubiquitous result of driving cars 40+ miles per hour through forest. In January 2012, legislators quietly floated the idea of creating a lottery in Connecticut for bear-hunting permits, similar to recent legislation in New Jersey. In May, a mother bear attacked a woman and the woman's dog in West Hartford; the bear's cubs were tranquilized, but the mother bear was killed (to check for rabies, and because she now represented a threat to humans). Our population of bears has reached at least 500, possibly as many as 1,000, and is estimated to double every five to seven years. We can expect more of such incidents in the future, humans getting in the way of hungry bears, as well as campaigns for new trashcans and other attempts to make our suburban forests slightly less welcoming to bears. If a bill that cleared the General Assembly's environment committee in March passes, the Department of Energy and Environment Protection will study the feasibility of a Connecticut bear hunt in order to stabilize the population and to raise funds for environmental management. This will be protested vociferously.

On our trek on July 4, however, we observed no signs of bears—no scat, prints, or tree scratches—as we continued south, down Mount Sanford (860', the highest of the day's summits), skirting the

edges of YMCA Camp Laurel. The trail then runs for about a mile on Downs Road. Relieved to be walking for a moment on level ground, after the rocky ups and downs of the trail, our bodies relaxed—even better, there were far fewer mosquitoes to swat away. Luckily, we were still protected from the sun by a leafy canopy; but for the road, it felt almost as if we were still on a trail. At the corner of Downs and Gaylord Mountain Road we paused in Westwood Cemetery, the final resting place of many of the very common Doolittles of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, as well as a few Gaylords, for whom the mountain is named. After the old cemetery we passed several hilarious new-built houses—the meadow-muffins that seem to be spreading rapidly through exurban areas. Taking to the trail again, we walked uphill until we found a spot with a little breeze, and sat down in a grove of mountain laurel for lunch: peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and crushed bananas. Jude especially loved her portion of banana.

Sitting there on fallen logs, we could not see more than twenty feet in any direction. All through our walk that morning, we had been unable to see much further than that. At first this feels unsettling, as it is difficult to monitor your progress except for landmarks every couple of miles. On foggy days especially, there's a kind of white noise buzz in the back of your mind, a feeling that almost hints at madness somehow. But as you settle into the pace of the walk, the same feeling can be freeing: timeless, placeless, even selfless, the reward of hours of meditative movement. And there are the observational pleasures: noticing the colors, the scents of the flora and fauna that track the seasons. This is within-the-woods observation, not the ego-trip pride of summiting and surveying (as much as I enjoy that too). For me, the landscape of south-central Connecticut can only be experienced through this meditative state, brought on not just by one hike, but through many, the dirt on the ground always the same material, and always transformed through the seasons and subseasons. And not just in Cheshire, Hamden, Bethany, and New Haven, but also in the wetlands of Branford and Guilford, and the rocky

beaches of Hammonasset, where not even the frozen sand of January can keep Jude out of the water.

On this particular July day, it was clear—as we started walking again after lunch—that Rachel was feeling the strain of the heat. We slowed the pace as we continued up to Rocky Top, passing several overgrown foundations, including the remains of a stove. The ruins could not have been older than a century, but looked abandoned for hundreds of years. Back down the hill, we crossed West Woods Road where it becomes Brooks Road—in Bethany for a moment—and began the ascent of Mad Mare’s Hill (720’). We didn’t make it up. Rachel sat down, feeling nauseous, and we called a friend to pick us up on West Woods Road before heat exhaustion could really set in. It was 1 p.m., and 92 degrees in the sun. We sat by a brook in the wetlands by the base of the hill, feeling defeated and sticky.

The next morning, we found that Rachel’s legs were covered in mosquito bites. Hundreds—it looked like she had a particularly horrible case of the measles. I’m no expert, but I’d say she lost a half liter of blood, causing the weakness. Maybe not that much, but the bites certainly didn’t help with the hiking. So it turns out that polyester/spandex pants provide exactly zero protection from mosquitoes—and the same goes for expired DEET. Be careful in the woods! Bears should be the least of your concerns, at least for now. If you should become a platter for mosquitoes, Rachel recommends pointing a hair dryer at the bites until you can’t take the heat anymore; apparently it helps greatly with the itching.

Had we continued over Mad Mare’s Hill, we would have shortly reached the beginning of the Regicides trail at the northern end of West Rock State Park, to commence the long walk along the trap-rock ridge, the most spectacular of Connecticut’s limited geologic spectacles. The first European to sail the Long Island Sound, Adrian Block—who charted and named Block Island on the same journey, in 1614—made port in what is now New Haven Bay, and made special note of our dramatic red cliffs. These cliffs were not carved by glaciers, unlike much of the geology in the northeast. Rather, lava flows

around 200 million years ago, during the Triassic period, hardened into basalt (traprock) with mud and sand slowly forming brownstone (a sandstone often used to build, well, brownstone rowhouses) on top of the basalt. While the brownstone then eroded over millions of years, the volcanic basalt, which had slowly tipped twenty-five degrees or so east, was exposed, eroding much more slowly than the brownstone. Basalt rock is dark grey, but it rusts, and it fractures in clean lines where the lava originally formed—leaving us today with west-facing rusty cliffs that have little soil on them, and thus remain mostly exposed, free from trees. De Boer discusses these tectonics in chapter four of *New Haven's Sentinels*, and the Peabody Museum has a great permanent exhibit on the geologic history of Connecticut, including maps and mineral specimens.

Almost the entire Quinnipiac trail up to the Regicides follows the eastern slope of the traprock ridges, going up and down, from marshlands to laurel groves, occasionally touching the summit of a hill. This up and down is tiring, requiring much water as you are repeatedly overheated and then rapidly cooled off. The Regicides trail, on the other hand, follows the summit of the ridge line almost the entire way. While the slopes of the ridges were logged and used as farmland—our trails often follow old logging or farming roads—the ridges themselves were undisturbed except for sightseeing, as the lack of soil and the harsh western winds make it as tough for humans to build houses there as it is for trees to grow. Between 1912 and 1933, however, the basalt itself was quarried—most obviously on the western slope of the Sleeping Giant's head—then crushed into gravel for roads and concrete. Still, it is no accident that the parks and trails follow the traprock ridgelines, which have been little developed historically and today are of more service for recreation than for logging, quarrying, farming, or even real estate.

So, unlike the nine miles of road, marsh, slope, marsh, slope that precede it on the Quinnipiac trail, the Regicides trail offers a series of excellent long views. Walking south along the ridgeline—which I often do, despite our failure on July 4—you see Lake Wa-

trous, Lake Dawson, and then Konold's Pond, all dammed and used as reservoirs. You will not see Lake Wintergreen, a favorite swimming hole of the golden retriever, because it is hidden by the forest on the eastern slope of the ridge, though you will pass several trailheads that lead down towards it, marked with purple, golden, and orange blazes. The high, open cliff faces allow you to spy on turkey vultures, to watch them soar close up, wheeling in the wind, sniffing for carrion. The Regicides leads over Heroes Tunnel, past a tower seemingly built for a James Bond villain that funnels out the roar of Merritt Parkway traffic below. And just before it ends, the trail runs into the much-graffitied Judges' Cave, actually a glacial erratic, where, in 1661, Edward Whalley and William Goffe, later joined by John Dixwell, hid from "officers of the Crown" (according to the plaque attached to the cave). The King was Charles II, lately restored to the throne, and he ordered the signers of his father's death warrant hunted down. These three men are, of course, the Regicides. Ezra Stiles gave a rousing account of the regicides' adventure in his 1794 book *A History of Three of the Judges of Charles I. Major-General Whalley, Major-General Goffe, and Colonel Dixwell: Who, at the Restoration, 1660, Fled to America; and Were Secreted and Concealed, in Massachusetts and Connecticut, for Near Thirty Years*. Here's my favorite section:

Mr. Joseph Sperry [the grandson of Richard Sperry, who brought food to the three judges and helped conceal them] told me that the incident which broke them up from this Cave was this, that this mountain being a haunt for wild animals, one night as the Judges lay in bed, a panther, or catamount, putting his head into the door or aperture of the Cave, blazed his eye-balls in such a hideous manner upon them, as greatly affrighted them. One of them was so terrified by this grim and ferocious monster, her eyes and her squawling, that he took to his heels, and fled down the mountain to Sperry's house for safety. They thereupon considered this situation too dangerous, and quitted it. All the Sperry families have this tradition.

The eastern mountain lion was eradicated by the end of the nineteenth century. All biological evidence indicates that if we do have cougars in the Northeast, they have come from other areas, such as the one killed on the Merritt Parkway in 2011. Do we want mountain lions here? It would be neat, I suppose, the ultimate confirmation that we've transformed the state we live in back into wilderness. (Consider: The young male mountain lion killed on the Merritt was able to migrate 1,500 miles all the way from the Black Hills, through Ontario and then down through New York State, eating the entire way. It must be pretty wild out there already.) But we do live here. And I'm okay that none of my hikes have been interrupted by the blazing eyeballs of a grim and ferocious monster.

Past Judges' Cave, it's a mere jaunt to the south overlook. On the entire trail thus far, winding through the woods, you will rarely come across another hiker; on the overlook, there's always a small crowd. There is Southern Connecticut State University, there are the neighborhoods of New Haven, there is the East Rock ridge, there is Long Island Sound. And, to the east, beyond the rusty red cliffs of West Rock: wilderness, seemingly endless wilderness under trees on undulating hills, waiting to be walked. It's strange that we have invited the forest back into our daily, and sometimes dangerous, lives—even just going into the backyard can be a Lyme disease-causing adventure—since most of us clearly have no idea how to handle ourselves in nature. Still, our reforested landscape is a kind of miracle, truly restorative in addition to hazardous, and we won't learn how we can—or how we want to—manage it by continuing to stay indoors. So don't. Find a blue-blazed trail and hike on autumn's slippery leaves, winter's frozen earth, spring's mud, and summer's moss and dirt, again and again, tracking through time on these hills that track through our unique Yankee landscape.

Life Study: Camellias

Susan Rich

We need to look outside
ourselves to see

the sloping heads, the cartography of light

along the lip
of a hammered copper tray.

What might white camellias say

in such a private
disheveled state?

So much, we know,

belies the flounce of petals
in a tall, white vase—

a midlife meditation—

heaven-spent,
like bodies after sex

before one falls away.

Model Home

LiAnn Yim

They wanted to take the boy away from their current place of residence, a long and skinny two-bedroom house. It had been white-washed too many times. Also, there was a smell. A smell they could not get away from. It wasn't the stink of something spoiled, but it was a little sour. A staleness they noticed every time they returned from outside.

But it was the boy they worried about. They couldn't stop him from playing by the train tracks. The house was near a station, which was good for the father, who was a commuter. Twice an hour, trains hammered the railroad. It was impossible to speak on the phone when a train bawled by.

After the boy turned eleven, they started letting him stay home by himself. He walked home after school, let himself in, and got a snack for himself. Always sour worms, which he gulped down in ways that disgusted his sister. One day his mother returned early. The boy was not inside, nor was he in their small yard. She did not panic. As she stood outside in the yard between clotheslines, she saw him slip through the thin trees. The boy was walking along the steel rail, his fingers grasping the air for balance. When he wobbled off it, she was upon him. She clutched his arms, yelling at him the whole time, and shook him hard in her paroxysm of fear.

It kept happening, though the father even spanked him until both of them were red in the face, their breaths sobbing. But the next day he was back there again, crawling on his belly across the tracks, like he was without an endoskeleton, like he was a four-legged, lobe-finned fish seeking a coal forest.

Another time he built, with the rocks and dirt, some kind of fort, or perhaps a shelter. The mother found it after she had sent him sullenly inside. She brushed the leaves off the mound, wanted to dig into what he had been hiding from her. Inside he had placed two

tiny frogs. They were unmoving but alive inside their stony fortress, jeweled toes splayed on browning leaves.

His parents had a psychologist come see the boy. The psychologist asked him many questions and at the end of the two hours was only able to recommend, very gravely, that they remove the boy from “this situation.” The father was annoyed. “This situation” seemed to imply this was an unhealthy home. An abusive family. That was certainly not the case.

Then the father heard about a new townhouse development that was closer to the city. The company was in the process of parceling out homes. Each lot was reasonably priced, and it was sure to be a good investment. The family went to tour the model homes at the end of the month.

The development was built beside the wetlands. When they climbed out of their minivan, they could see the white plumes of sailboats passing through the bay. A flock of waterfowl scattered like so much confetti. The family smelled loam and salt marsh air, bit down hard on it and tucked it beneath their tongues. It was good to be away from the smell.

They walked into the first home, which the realtors were using for an office. The mother tethered the boy to her by his wrist, but she let him go once they were inside to shake hands with the woman who greeted them at the door. The foyer was curved, with a high ceiling and a circular porthole window near the top. How lovely. Like they were standing inside a mossy tower.

The woman led them to a room with a view of the empty street. Brokers and agents looked up briefly and smiled. Everyone seemed very busy, like they were selling units with every phone call. The urgency in the room was exciting. The woman said their realtor would be right with them. In the meantime, what would they like to drink? Just water for everyone, thank you. While they waited, they looked at the materials stacked on a table: contracts, disclosure statements, inspection reports. The mother and father browsed this literature.

Their realtor was a man named Peter who wore a gold band on his ring finger. He wore a silk blue shirt and gray slacks and a diver's watch braceleted his wrist. He showed them blueprints of each type of home—there were four of them, A, B, C, and D. They were currently in model A. Each home had three floors, a garage, and a small attic space. Other than that, they were quite different and would service different needs.

Peter showed them a model of the community under a glass casing. The father noted which houses were positioned with the best view of the bay. The mother saw where the school was located and that there were no railroads nearby. Just to be sure, she checked with Peter. He assured her that it was very quiet. He promised her that she would wake to only the sound of birds that lived in the wetlands.

“Why don't I let the homes speak for themselves,” said Peter. “We have just enough time before lunch to look at one.”

Since they were already in model A, the smallest unit, they went upstairs to take a look. All of the models followed the same structure. There were two smaller bedrooms and a master, two bathrooms and a half bath. The living room, kitchen, and dining area were one open space. The dining room table in Model A was a wooden tablet mounted on two blocks made from the same material. The father asked what kind of wood it was. Peter said it was am-boyna, with a natural semi-gloss finish. The father remarked that he hadn't heard of this kind of timber. It was an import, Peter told him, the lumber was carried out of a Cambodian jungle on the backs of men and elephants. They looked at it with fresh eyes, like it had been handcrafted and sanded down by Peter himself, after he had supervised its transport. Travel magazines were left open on a coffee table, glossily illustrating all the places they could go, if they, too, owned a home with this table.

Then it was time for lunch. Model A was nice, but much too small, the father said. Just wait, said Peter. He was sure they would

be very pleased with model C. He had a good feeling about model C. In fact, they were headed there right now because that was where lunch was being served.

The developers had hired a catering company for lunch. The hostess was a very pretty woman, but not unattainably so. Not pretty enough to intimidate anyone. Her name was Sandra, and she introduced the lunch menu to them. A handsome young man made a vegetarian pizza, white, with the option of throwing on olives. The family had two slices each. The young man tossed together a salad in front of them. The girl hovered nearby and smiled shyly when he asked her if she wanted cheese or pepper. She wanted to say yes to him, so she took both. The father praised the pizza and said to his family, "Now, it won't be like this every day if we move in." Everyone laughed. Peter laughed the loudest.

They ate at a square onyx table that could seat eight people. Other brokers came and left with other couples, other families. Everyone said hello to Peter and the family. They preened under the attention.

After lunch, they walked around the rest of the house. Model C was much larger than model A. The bedrooms were expanded and had cushioned bay windows, "leisure nooks," Peter called them; the closets were wider and deeper. There was also a fireplace. This, too, could be added into any of the models, Peter informed them. If they wanted one, they only had to ask.

"We've skipped model B," Peter reminded them. "The square footage is smaller, but there are some neat designs the architects have installed so you can really make the most out of all the space. But if you can't imagine going down in size, we still have the last model. We have five units of Model D available, and you will have no complaints about its space, I'm sure."

Model D sat on the corner of the townhouse row; it had more windows and a balcony on the second floor. Out on the balcony, a portable grill. The father thought: catfish and corn could be cooked

on it and while he waited, he would wave to his neighbors and invite them over.

There was a cushioned bench seat lining the windows of the dining space, and Peter raised the seat to show them the built-in compartments underneath. While the rest of his family went to explore the other parts of the open floor, the boy crept to the bench seat, lifted it, saw the space beneath was just large enough to conceal him. It would be like being tucked away inside a rock.

The dining table was set with porcelain plates that had dainty, scalloped edges, unfurling in bloom like giant lotuses, the center of which would house some tasty, precious morsel. If eaten, it would be transcendent. They would live forever after dining on food served on these plates.

Upstairs, the room the girl took for her own was lushly green. Three door hooks were affixed to the inside of the closet, shaped in flat discs stamped with the fossilized imprint of an ancient fungus. Standing inside the open closet, the girl felt she was in an overgrown wood, it was damp and dark here, a place buried at the foot of a hill that grew weeds and wildflowers that were heavy and impenetrable. The window was open; she smelled soil and perpetual nighttime, could hear a red-breasted bird's song. She felt her way out of the closet, rejoined her family in the hallway. It seemed to her that everyone now was speaking a little too loudly.

The bedroom that fell to the boy was done in cool earth tones. The walls were blue, but the ceiling was painted midnight. Planet decals, luminescent white orbs, stuck to the ceiling. The boy imagined himself traversing the surface of a planet or diving into a deep pool at night, a pool with no bottom, and once he had swum as deep as he could, he would no longer know which way lay the surface.

The master bedroom had a his-and-hers walk-in closet. The father opened one drawer and saw it was a place for him to put his cufflinks. He thought to himself that this was why a man had cufflinks, so that he could have a place for all of them and pick and choose the perfect pair for each new day. His wife slid open one drawer after

another, counting them, realized she could have a drawer just for her socks, just for her panties, just for her bras. Right now, they were all thrown into a single drawer. To have all the delicate underthings laid out was unspeakably delightful.

“We are not done building all the homes,” Peter told them as they traipsed downstairs to look at the two-car garage. “Not many people have moved in just yet, though we have sold nearly all the units. You’ll really have to act fast.”

“We like what we have seen,” admitted the father.

“We want our families to be happy here. In fact, we give higher consideration to people such as yourselves, people with families. We want you to grow into these homes,” said Peter.

The family felt good about what Peter was saying. People like them.

“We can also install a small stoop for the front door. You only have to ask,” Peter said. “You look like you enjoy spending time outside, taking in sunsets, geese headed south.”

The family agreed they were those kinds of people. It would be a small space, but they could all fit.

“Are there a lot of geese here?” the mother inquired.

“Nearly all year round. A lot of birdwatchers come out here. Black-bellied plover, kingfisher, avocet. Some pelicans, too. They love it here. But you don’t have to worry about hunters. This is protected marshland.” Peter chuckled. “They drive the golfers crazy. They like to land on the green a lot. You must have driven by it on your way in. Many families sign up for a club membership when they purchase a home here, at a resident’s rate, of course. Are you a golfer?”

“I play,” the father said modestly. He had gone out to a driving range twice. His wife had won a raffle ticket from their son’s elementary school fundraising event for six hours at the range. The driving range was over an hour’s drive away from their house, and it had been crowded with people who knew what they were doing. He spent

a long time adjusting his posture, the bend of his knees. He never ran through the basket of golf balls they provided for him.

“Then you’ll love the course,” Peter was saying. “It’s a fifteen minute walk, but we’ll take the golf cart. Some of our residents have purchased their own. We can set up a charging station for you in your garage. Part of the community amenities; we like to encourage energy-saving efforts here. It doesn’t take up any room in the two-car garage. You only have to ask.”

The family piled onto the electric golf cart. The boy and girl sat facing the back and watched the salt ponds and mud flats. Ducks speckled the brackish shoreline, their emerald heads gleaming.

Peter drove them right up the circular driveway to the lobby of the Clubhouse. Inside, pink-faced men smoked fat cigars and drank beer. The ladies curled their fingers around cups of iced tea and coffee, bobbing their heads, owl-like behind dark round frames. Plump, dripping slices of cold watermelon were served, the red wedges soaking in pools of ice water.

From the Clubhouse they had a panoramic view of the golf course. Here and there the lawn dipped into white sand shaped like beans. The water hazards were still as tin plates. And the birds, clustered on the narrow strips of green, taking flight only when a golfer whipped the club back and fired a shot from the tee-off point.

They were introduced to a woman named Jean, who told them about the other amenities the club had to offer. “We also have an excellent chef in residence,” Jean said to the mother. “Whenever you don’t feel like cooking, you can bring your family here.”

The husband and wife linked fingers as they walked back to the golf cart where Peter was waiting to drive them back to their minivan.

He shook hands with everyone, including the boy and girl. Made sure the family had the take-home materials. Peter said, “It was great meeting all of you. I’ll touch base later tonight.”

They drove home. When they turned, at last, onto the road by

their house, they raced a passing train to their doorstep. No one was hungry that night. They wanted to savor the taste of the white pizza, which had been so perfectly kneaded.

Sitting at the kitchen table, the husband and wife talked about the development. They remarked on how much they liked Peter, how glad and lucky they were that he was their realtor.

Peter called later in the evening.

“Hello,” said the husband. “Thanks for calling, Peter. Yes. We were just discussing it. Yes. Really wonderful...you answered everything, sure, really appreciate that. You know, exactly so. Yes. Well, thank you for calling. Good speaking with you.”

He hung up the phone, turned to his wife, told her, “He will have contracts ready for us to sign whenever we want. Now we just have to pick one.” He looked at her expectantly.

Pick one. Pick a house! Just like that. Like picking the right loaf of bread or stalk of asparagus that wouldn’t wilt as soon as she brought it home. The mother looked outside. Just in time—the boy was walking out to the tracks. They retrieved him from the railroad. Made sure he went down the hall to his room. Made sure he was inside it. As the father locked the front door, a train clamored down the line. Their empty glasses shivered on the tabletop. Enough of this.

In the morning, they called Peter. They had decided to go with D. It was the balcony that did it for them. Model D was the only model that came with a balcony.

In one day they moved their things in. They had not visited the house after their purchase, and even though it was the same size and structure as the home they had toured, it seemed like they had never been inside it at all. It smelled like turpentine. They looked for the things Peter had talked about: the fireplace, yes, it was there, and so was the little room beside the pantry. The front stoop had been added. The concealed storage space—it was there, too.

The movers carried in the pieces of their furniture, and for a

little extra pay, they assembled it. The boy crouched on the floor with his frogs in a tin breathmint box, watching tables and bookshelves take shape out of the bones.

That night they were too tired to enjoy the house. They went to sleep in the same, familiar beds, between the same starched cotton sheets and covers, which had all been laundered in the same detergent and softener the mother had always used.

The mother had worked herself to the bone putting things into place. Her dreams were dark and unfathomable. She dreamed of an ocean of warm, sour milk. Smelled ozone on the breeze. Dreamed she washed up on the shore. She woke up in her dream, listening to the steady trickle of coffee. She was not in their new home, not even in the home they had just left, but the house she grew up in. She went to pour herself some coffee, but her cup was heavy, filled to the brim. She turned it over on the floor, and the earth tumbled out of the cup. It bore a fruit. Star-shaped, yellow, the corners of the edges curled up. It looked like the fruit she had tasted in Malaysia so many years ago. The texture was slick, and there was an oily tang. She woke up. She and her husband were sleeping back to back, and his weight trapped all the covers beneath him. She got up and stood next to the bed, realized she was lost in the new dark. She climbed back into bed, tried to sleep, slept.

The next day, they continued unpacking their belongings, putting things away in the built-in compartments and shelves. They looked out the windows at the water and saw empty townhouses, models A, B, C and D, looking back. Their neighbors, who hadn't yet moved in, were much closer than they had realized. There were no boats on the water. Heavy drifts of fog brooded across the bay.

The cufflinks drawer could not be filled.

They walked over to the country club to sign up for a family membership. Jean wasn't there; another young woman, Debra, took down their information.

The club restaurant served a buffet lunch. A young man, not

as handsome as the one from the catering service, stood at one end of a long table, wielding a foot-long knife, ready to prepare custom order sandwiches. The boy watched the man slice sweet-smelling prosciutto so thin, he could see through it. When the man asked him if he wanted a sandwich, he said no. There were too many choices. In the end he let his mother fill his plate with pasta. His mother tried a salad with California abalone and shredded lobster. It slid slippery and too quickly down her throat.

The boy and his sister stuffed themselves on slabs of chocolate cake that was not crumbly or spongy, but cut like cold butter. Their father told them this was the kind of cake they had in Europe, in the chocolate capitals of the world, and he himself had two large slices. The cake stuck thickly to their teeth, and when they smiled, it looked like there were broken gaps.

They were not the only members there for lunch. There was a group of women drinking beverages, choked at the neck by the skinny arms of colorful sweaters knotted about their slimly rounded shoulders. An older couple came over to introduce themselves as George and Dana Hendelman. They always ate lunch at the club; the distance from their home—one of the unseen model Bs—to the club was the perfect exercise for them. The mother invited the Hendelmans to dinner.

“Just call us anytime,” she said. They exchanged phone numbers.

Dinnertime. The Hendelmans did not call, or come over. Just as well—the mother thought about making lamb chops but realized she did not have any seasoning. All they had were packaged hot dogs, and no grill. The Weber grill, of course, did not come with the house, they should have realized. The mother laid the hot dogs out on a tray, covered it with a damp paper towel, and put it in the microwave. No one felt like sitting down at their old dining table, so they stood clustered around the kitchen island, holding themselves up by

their elbows, which was usually not allowed at the mother's dinner table.

Even though it was only the end of summer, the father started a fire in the new fireplace. They sat beside it in the living room, sweating into the sofa. The daughter poked a finger at the pea-soup stain she had left on it when she was seven and her finger went right through.

After the fire died and the embers of it were crumbling, they went outside and sank onto the stoop. Far off in the distance, several rows away, they saw a light on in one of the houses. Maybe that was the Hendelmans' home. They weren't sure.

The birds began to sound human. The boy listened to their conversations; their chattering voices were plaintive and peckish. He got up, stroking a frog inside his pocket. Ribbit, ribbit, the frog protested. It did not like the way the boy's thumb prodded its throat, but it was too hot in the boy's pocket to do much about it.

The daughter swore she could hear people talking when she was in the bathroom, like hearing a movie playing from the next room, but their neighbors hadn't moved in yet so that couldn't be true. Still, the low murmur persisted, leaked from the bathroom and invaded her bedroom like the low drone of a machine that had been accidentally left on.

They all thought the smell had followed them from their old home by the tracks. They had an exterminator come in to see if some pest was walled up and nesting, but the man found nothing. It wasn't a bug smell or a rodent smell, he said.

The mother worried about the attic—they hadn't put anything up there, in fact had not been shown the space that Peter had promised them was there. What was in the attic? She imagined a hive of wasps descending through the ceiling, swarming into her children's rooms, into their beds. She called a fumigator. He did not charge her for his time, even though it was a wasted trip, because nothing was there. The house was too new, he said, for wasps to have made

their home there; the conditions weren't right for a hive like she was imagining. The mother began to fill it with empty suitcases and boxes of winter clothes. Every day she went upstairs to check that everything was undisturbed, that wasps had not built a hive there and were secretly trying to funnel through the floorboards.

The father dreamed he turned into a bird, red-and-gold-plumed, and a man whose face he couldn't see broke his wing.

The boy's frogs got lost inside the house, and he was desolate. They went into the fireplace, jumped through the holes of the iron gate, so now the family couldn't use the fireplace, in case the frogs were still trapped in there somewhere. The boy began disappearing into the hidden compartments of the bench seat.

A month later, they called the realtor and said they wanted their money back. Listen, they said, This is not the house you sold us. It is not the same at all.

Interim Agreement

Mark Dow

Here in the early middle memory starts to hold its own.
For years one mind, or so I thought, it part of me, but recently,
that world complete in terms with which we're yet to come to terms,
secession starts, autonomy yet wholly me. The paths of certain
observable entities are of one of two circling each other ever
since they split, split the moment they were born, voices
bodies emanate even though the receiving one can't be found.
But memory delayed, as in put off, the closing of its curve
until it could survive on its own time. Now, owning time,
reverts to what turns out to be as present as it always was.
The past, alight, hovers nearby with open eyes.

Leaping

On taking chances

Marjorie S. Rosenthal

My grandfather's toast to us at our wedding was, simply, that if we waited for the right time to have children, we never would. At thirty-two, I was conscious that my eggs would leap into a higher risk category in three years, so, despite the remaining two years of intensive training in your fellowship, we leaped into parenthood. By our first wedding anniversary, I was pregnant with Maya. Elina followed a little more than two years later. Through the long hours of your fellowship, a move to North Carolina where we knew no one, and my not knowing what I wanted to be when I grew up, we took my grandfather's advice and made babies.

And then, with Elina only two months old, you died in a car crash.

When I remembered how to breathe again, I questioned much of the life we had been living. First, I questioned our leap into parenthood. What if we had gone slower? What might we had learned? What change might have saved your life?

But our babies were not interested in slowing down. They crawled and walked and ran and leaped. They murmured and mumbled and spoke and questioned. They asked and pleaded and demanded and wanted so many things. Some things—like books and toys and trips to grandparents—I could give them. Some things—like you—I could not. And some things—like a dog—I wondered if I could.

We moved to New Haven, closer to my parents and yours. I got a great job, the girls finished preschool and started at our neighborhood school. We sat on our front stoop and waited for neighbors to walk by with their dogs so we could ask to pet them. We dog-sat when friends and siblings traveled. The girls continued to ask for a dog and I continued to believe we were not ready. Maya and Elina barely took care of their own bodies—how could they walk a dog?

Perhaps more importantly, could *I* really add a dog to all the balls I had in the air?

I wondered what you would have said, and I just didn't know. I remembered that the day before I proposed to you, we had talked about buying a house and filling it with children and dogs. I remembered that I had understood that conversation to be the pre-proposal conversation—I thought we were telling each other that we were ready for marriage. But you were surprised at my proposal the next day. You thought my saying “Do you want to get married?” was me bringing the topic up for conversation. And though, after a fifteen-second eternity, you said yes, and though we bought a house and started filling it with children, what if filling the house and adding a dog were just parts of what you and I had understood differently?

Then one day last winter, seven-year-old Elina came into the kitchen crying. “They put dogs down,” she told me, “I never want a dog.” As only an older sister could, ten-year-old Maya had told Elina these facts. I explained to both girls that only sick, old dogs get put down. And only after their family has done everything they can. Elina didn't believe me. I told our girls that having a dog die at the end of a long, loving life was OK. It would fill us with joy as well as sorrow. Elina burst into tears. She told me that if they would put down a dog we loved, she never wanted a dog.

Then it was my turn to burst into tears. Not right then in front of the girls but later, after they were asleep. What if I were creating a family where my daughters might not be willing to love because love ultimately ends? I may have had a good excuse for not leaping into love for a few years myself, but parenthood isn't about modeling love when *I* was ready.

Perhaps that is why when, one cold Sunday last March, I felt the confluence of the girls' “Do you think we'll ever get a dog?” and a neighbor texting photos of a puppy in need of a home, I leaped.

The next day we brought home four month old Wallie, a part black Lab-part terrier mutt.

In general, Wallie is mischief in a black fur coat. He drools.

He chews. He ruins shoes and books and toys. He has changed our morning routine and our ability to travel. He barks at neighbors and thinks that a brightly-colored mitten on a hand must be moving around in an attempt to get him to jump and chew. Wallie has made it clear that three humans cuddling together in bed around a book is a short-lived peace. He wants in. With apologies to Barbara Woodhouse, Wallie is a bad dog.

On the other hand, we love him fiercely. He runs and plays and snuggles with abandon. He brings us tennis balls to toss on the hard wood floor—each time, he chases the ball as hard as he can—running, sliding and just barely avoiding the cabinets. On days when he leaps the fence and I worry he will go into the street and be hit by a car, I wonder at the foolishness of bringing another fragile life into the girls' orbit.

Although I had been sure it would be you reading fantasy books to the girls, after your death I read all 4,100 pages of Harry Potter out loud. And I was rewarded. J.K. Rowling gave the three of us the ability to talk about bigotry, children trying to figure out where they belong, and parental death. Rowling taught us how concentrating on the most wonderful feeling in the world could conjure up a patronus, an animal that would be protective against Dementors and other scary aspects of life. The girls chose an animal to serve as a patronus for each of us—owl, koala, doe—and for your patronus, they chose a black lab.

Maya called it right away.

Wallie looked like your patronus.

The girls think my presence makes Wallie bark more. They think he is protecting me. And every time that unkempt, poorly behaved dog does something loving, I wonder if he is somehow being conjured up by you.

On our first vacation away from Wallie, my parents graciously offered to care for him. We unpacked his food and bed at my parents'

house, repacked our car, and buckled ourselves in. When I put the car in reverse and turned around to back out of my parents' driveway, I saw tears streaming down Elina's face. We were about to go to Mexico for a week, a trip Elina had been looking forward to since long before we knew Wallie, and she was crying over leaving our puppy. I stopped the car and found myself trying to explain the concept of bittersweet to the girls—we loved Wallie and that meant we would be sad being away from him—but weren't we lucky that we had him to love? I heard myself say that the feeling was painful but it was a small part of a really good feeling. In the backseat, Elina's tears turned to sobbing.

I still don't know if you would have brought Wallie into our lives.

But here's what I do know. Even on days when the extra work that Wallie requires frustrates me and makes me short with the girls, I try to remind myself to pause and simply to watch what Wallie does, day after day: he leaps. He leaps for sticks and balls. He leaps for squirrels he has no chance of catching, and yet he continues to leap. Then I know that every day, at least one of us is modeling hope.

An Ordinary Morning in Woodbridge

Priscilla Atkins

From around the corner in the next room
arrive my eighty-five-year-old mother's Oh shits,
each aspirated hiss an attempt to answer the raw ache

that quakes like a knotted fist in the chest, or hovers
like a giant ominous glove of tree-deafened sky, while
below, an old woman struggles to retrieve

a fallen Kleenex. How did this happen?
this unsettling re-settlement from Illinois
to her middle daughter's five bathroom house

in a New Haven suburb? Every morning
she re-remembers: these are the dogwood sheets,
peach comforter; there is my maple dresser. The light

seeping in the window is not ample, not prairie-morning
bright. Now, widow of a life she never had the chance
to mourn, she gazes out on trees grown thick, a certain distance

from the house—the kind of distance once noted as correct
at her eldest son's rural dwelling. These days, she says
she does not care to ever see another tree:

too dark, too many leaves.
Blossoming peach, delicate dogwood exist on another planet.
Her eyes, as if pressed with coins, able to reflect

the dappled light, but unable to perceive it,
or the squeezed April trees. Narrowness itself
circumscribed by privacy, distant tumults of adolescent

grandchildren whose television habits
and abnormally long weekend sleep-a-thons
give rise to clucks and mumbled perturbations.

Hiss or cluck, sun or rain—it's all the same.
Here where was is always more than is
nothing strikes the brash upbeat chord

of gaudy dailiness save, perhaps, this noon's
bark-less stray, in need of grooming,
a warm meal, who slinked in

through an unlatched side-door,
ducked the alarm,
pressed his damp nose against her knee.

Hasta La Victoria Siempre

Cuba in transition

Jonathan Fink

The following experiences, interviews, presentations, and conversations took place in Cuba during November 2012. While all of the characters are based on real people, the names used in this essay are pseudonyms. Photographs accompanying this essay can be found at newhavenreview.com.

Havana and the Cuban Economy

1. Outside of Havana

There are no streetlights in Cuba. The darkness mutes the bright colors of the small cement buildings. Headlights appear intermittently in the distance and materialize into Ford Fairlanes, Russian Ladas, and motorcycles with sidecars. The streets are quiet, though many people are walking. A man's feet propped on a coffee table are visible through an apartment window as a woman on the street looks through the window to the man's television. Faces flicker in the passing cars. A woman lights a cigarette, and the small flame of the match illuminates her laughter before she shakes the match out. A man in a convertible sings to the woman in the passenger seat as he steers with one hand and lightly keeps time with his other hand on her knee.

2. Introduction: Arturo Suarez

Arturo Suarez is a Cuban translator and educator. He has lived in Cuba his entire life. Professionally, he has worked as an elementary school teacher and a supervisor of schools. He currently teaches on the university level, training future diplomats. As a guide and translator, he has worked for U.S. news organizations, as well as individual professional groups in Cuba.

3. Arturo Suarez: Automobiles in Cuba

Cuba is a car museum. All of the American cars are from before 1960. We call the American cars, “Yank tanks.” They’re only American on the outside. Inside they are mostly Russian parts. Sometimes you will see a muffler made out of a tomato can. The Russian cars are Ladas, and the models here run up until about 1990—when the Soviet Union collapsed and the Special Period began. The contemporary cars are Korean or Japanese. Most mechanics like the Russian cars because they are simple to work on and build parts for.

4. Hotel Copacabana at Night

A band plays in the lobby. Two provocatively dressed women smoke in the hotel bar. The elevator is out of order, and the tile steps on the stairs are chipped and broken in places. Three rows of deckchairs line the long pool. Beyond the pool, the sound of the ocean rises and falls as waves repeatedly strike the coast and the seawall.

5. Introduction: Madison

Madison is an American woman in her early thirties who has traveled to Cuba several times both legally and illegally.

6. Madison: The Hotels

Cubans cannot enter the hotels. The only Cubans who can enter the hotels are the female prostitutes. Did you know that? It’s crazy. It makes no sense. My boyfriend—he’s kind of my boyfriend—works in one of the government ministries here, and he cannot enter the hotels. He’s an important person. He’s high up. It’s hard to date someone when you are American, and he lives in Cuba. We both have kids by other people. I had my first child when I was a freshman in college, and then I had my second when I was a senior. Because I don’t drink or smoke, everyone asks me if my parents were missionaries, which is far from the case. I’ve become more and more religious as

I have gotten older, though. Noah keeps calling me, “George Bush.” He thinks it’s hilarious.

But back to my friend. Whenever he walks me home, he cannot enter the hotel. Mostly, we stay at “casa particulares,” which are homes that are approved to function as hotels. He can stay there. I brought my children to Cuba recently, but you are technically not allowed to do that. Did my children meet my boyfriend? No, they will never meet him. That’s what love is, though. It’s not about being practical. It’s about patience and hoping that things will work out.

7. Introduction: David Price

David Price works as an economic correspondent for an international news agency. He has lived and worked in Cuba for over thirty years.

8. David Price: Prostitution in Cuba

There are about 600,000 women in Havana. Let’s say that there are about 300,000 between eighteen and thirty-five. So arbitrarily take one percent of that number, and you are still looking at 3,000 prostitutes. The thing is that they are concentrated in high-traffic tourist areas, which makes them seem more pervasive. There are also no laws against prostitution in Cuba because, remember, the Revolution allegedly “cured” the economic need for women to be prostitutes. There are big laws against pimps, though. The charge doesn’t use the word “pimp”—it says something like “social degradation”—but the pimps can get twenty years in jail. The police don’t ever go after the johns, either. Arresting the johns would help clean up prostitution in Cuba.

9. Hotel Copacabana in Daylight

A repeated thump, thwack, thump sound rises from an outdoor, three-sided court. Four men play doubles, moving gracefully together, swinging their rackets as if rehearsing a scene from a

play instead of competing against each other. At the Copacabana pool, two men in Speedo swimsuits stride quickly around the pool deck. One man scoops a muscular woman upward in a lift, as the other man practices dance steps alone, his arms around an invisible partner. “Again,” the choreographer calls out. A fading, painted toucan—his bill is approximately ten feet long—undulates on the bottom of the pool as synchronized swimmers come up for air and the surface ripples.

10. Arturo Suarez: Two Cuban Currencies

There are two currencies in Cuba: the Cuban peso and the Cuban convertible peso. We call these the CUP and the CUC. Most Cubans use both. Foreigners can only use CUCs. The CUC was introduced in 2004, and it is basically equal to a U.S. dollar. U.S. dollars were accepted throughout Cuba before 2004, but they are no longer accepted in circulation. There is a ten percent charge to convert dollars to CUCs.

11. David Price: Overview of Cuban Economics

Right now, Cuba is going through what I would call the two phases of the “weaning of Fidel from Cuba,” or the “weaning of Cuba from Fidel.” You could look at it either way. The first phase was when Fidel got sick in 2006. The second phase was when Fidel recently stopped writing his daily bulletins. Raul is overturning much of what Fidel stood for in the economy. Cuba is moving more towards Asian market-type socialism. It’s not reform, but kind of a grand modernization. For example, Cuban citizens can now lease land from the government. This is a big step. They can’t own the land, but they can lease it and develop it. This has psychological as well as economic effects.

The first step for Cuba was recognizing it had to change. A Latin American diplomat friend of mine likes to say that “Cubans have an ideological problem, and it’s not communism. It’s nationalism.” Here’s a telling fact: Cuba has the least amount of Chinese invest-

ment of any country in the Caribbean. As Cuban businesses grow, the relationship between Cubans and the government will change. Cubans have traditionally had a paternalistic relationship with government—the government gives and provides—and soon they will potentially have an antagonistic relationship with government. For example, the previous tax laws comprised fourteen pages. The new tax laws comprise 450 pages. The state wants to hang on to what was most important in the Revolution: healthcare, education, civil defense, and culture. The state doesn't want to have to micromanage every hotdog stand.

12. Old Havana

A horse brays and stamps his feet as a boy, frightened, darts behind his parents. The carriage driver strikes the horse on the neck, but when the boy looks back, the carriage driver is stroking the horse's mane and cooing in the horse's ear. Another man draws unflattering caricatures of two tourists—one tourist with a prodigious Adam's apple and nose, and the other tourist with elongated, sagging breasts. Standing beside the guitarist in a three-piece band, a percussionist rhythmically scrapes the teeth of a cow's jawbone with a stick. Venders circulate through the crowd. Booksellers, hot dog cart entrepreneurs, and women with elaborate flowers in their hair call out to tourists. A young woman in a hoop skirt poses for pictures. Between performances, dancers on stilts attempt to shoo away three costumed dogs who have escaped their handler.

13. David Price: Cuba's Top Industries

Here are our top industries, which will give you a sense of Cuba's future growth and investment possibility. If you notice, sugar is nowhere near the top:

Export of services. Cuba sends healthcare and teachers to Venezuela in exchange for oil. This is about six billion a year. And how is this different than Cuba's relationship with the Soviet Union

in the past? Venezuela is an exchange where the Soviet Union was a subsidy.

Tourism, which brings in about two-and-a-half billion.

Remittances. This is the money sent to Cubans by family members in other countries.

Nickel production.

Medical equipment and pharmaceuticals, which bring in about five hundred million.

Cigars and sugar, which bring in about two hundred million each.

14. Introduction: Noah

Noah works as a union organizer for nurses in New Zealand. He has visited Cuba several times, both for personal reasons and to study agricultural sustainability and healthcare.

15. Noah: Trabajadores para Cuenta Proposita in Old Havana

The Trabajadores shops are over here. You would probably just walk right past these without noticing them in the States, but these are some of the little businesses that Cubans are now able to open. They are usually small sections of homes that have been turned into storefronts. “Joyero” is a jeweler. “Relojero” is watches. One of the main problems these little businesses face is a lack of consistency. Laws change, and the business owners frequently face closure.

This guy drives a “Bici taxi”—a bicycle taxi. He has to pay five CUPs a day to park and store the Bici taxi here. Maybe he owns it. Maybe he rents it. Over here, these Trabajadores shops are pretty new. They’re basically like small cubicles and booths where Cubans can sell things like rugs and clothes. There is a makeshift dressing room there with a curtain over a railing for a door. The shop owners have to take everything down and pack up every day when they leave. That guy over there gets maybe one CUC to pack up all the bags.

16. David Price: A Story about Current Economic Dysfunction

One of my friends is a surgeon, and let's say he receives 600 bottles of whiskey a year from grateful patients. In order to convert this to currency, the surgeon gives the bottles to a bartender, and, from each bottle, the bartender makes thirty or so drinks that he then sells. The surgeon and the bartender split the drink money over the course of the year as the bottles run out. There's got to be more efficient ways to do this, no?

The Aristocracy

17. Arturo Suarez: Casa de la Amistad

At the beginning of the twentieth century in Havana, a wealthy widower named Juan Pedro Baro and a married socialite/beauty queen named Catalina Lasa fell in love. Divorce was not legal in Cuba at the time, and the affair was the scandal of Havana. When Catalina and Juan Pedro went to the theater together, everyone in the audience left. The actors continued the play and performed for Catalina and Juan Pedro alone. Catalina threw her jewelry on the stage at the end of the performance to show her appreciation. Juan Pedro and Catalina went to Paris where French law allowed them to marry. The Pope even blessed their union. Most likely, Catalina and Juan Pedro made a financial donation for the Pope's blessing. They returned to Cuba in 1917 when divorce was legalized. Their home, Casa de la Amistad, was a palace. Sand was brought in from the Nile. The cement came from the United States. Marble was imported from Europe. When Juan Pedro and Catalina officially married in Cuba, people who had left the theater years earlier came to the wedding. Before her death, Catalina requested that stained glass flowers should reflect on her grave. Juan Pedro was buried beside her in a vertical tomb. He wanted to stand beside her and guard her through eternity.

Hasta la Victoria Siempre

18. Arturo Suarez: Revolution Square

In 1959, Civic Square was renamed Revolution Square. The José Martí monument went up in 1958. It's 139 meters tall—the highest point in Havana. The inscription on the Camilo Cienfuegos image reads, “Vas bien Fidel”—“You are doing well Fidel.” Camilo said this to Fidel when Fidel asked him, “Am I doing all right, Camilo?” The inscription on the Che Guevara image reads, “Hasta la victoria siempre”—“until victory always.” Both of these images are on government buildings. Camilo is on the Ministry of Information and Communications. Che is on the Ministry of the Interior. A common phrase Cubans will use in signs, graffiti, or when closing letters is “Hasta la victoria siempre.”

19. Madison: The Bus System

The bus system is a good example of the current post-Revolution community in Cuba. After the Revolution, people would wait in line for the bus, and when it would arrive, someone would say “ultimo,” and people would mark where the line ended. It was all very orderly. Now, no one follows the “ultimo” system. People push and shove. Also, the system used to be a way for people to show their fidelity to the Revolution. Are you a true supporter of the Revolution? Are you willing to stand in line, to be organized and disciplined? These kinds of small things showed your participation and your sympathy for the Revolution.

Arturo Suarez on the Special Period

20. The Beginning of the Special Period

Cuba was scheduled to host the Pan American games in 1991 right as the Soviet Union collapsed, which set the Special Period in motion. As a point of pride, Cuba went ahead with the games and used their financial reserves to build the infrastructure needed for

the games. After the games, everything collapsed in a domino effect. I was fifteen years old when the Special Period began. I remember food slowly starting to disappear. When the buses stopped running, I had to walk everywhere. There was almost no electricity. Elevators didn't run in the buildings. If you lived on the eighth floor, that's a long climb.

21. Absence of Gasoline

There was no petrol. You could sit in the middle of the street for twenty minutes, and no car would run you over.

22. The Russian Embassy

The Russian Embassy, which is still functioning, was built in 1988. Before the embassy, a church tower was the highest point on Fifth Avenue in Havana. Fifth Avenue in Havana is modeled on Fifth Avenue in New York. After the Special Period, many Cubans see the Russian Embassy as a symbol of Russian imposition. Some Cubans say the building looks like a sword or a robot or a Transformer. Other Cubans think it looks like a fist with a raised middle finger.

23. Vegetables

Before 1990, most Cubans thought that eating vegetables like bok choy or parsley was for goats. The meals were very Spanish: rice, beans, and meat. Now, the meals are more international. Ninety percent of Cubans still think, though, that if there is no meat at a meal, it is a sin.

24. Bicycles

China donated one million bicycles to Cuba during the Special Period. Each bike weighed seventy-five pounds. Most of them are still on the roads. People were not fed well enough for bicycling during the Special Period. There was not enough water for people to stay hydrated. Smell was a problem with people biking twenty kilometers to work in the heat and having no place to shower or

change once they arrived. One lane of the tunnel under Havana Bay was opened specifically for the bicycles. The air was hard to breathe in the mile-long tunnel—especially at the low point in the middle. A large truck was used to transport the bicycles from one side of the tunnel to the other. No one in Cuba rides bicycles for fun. Cubans associate bicycles with the Special Period. Cubans remain traumatized by bicycles.

25. Camel Transports

In the Special Period, there were these long tractor-trailers called “camel transports.” They were called this because of a hump in the middle of the tractor-trailers. The camel transports would carry people to the provinces. The camel transports were massive, and they would be packed with people. Now, there are similar buses that transport people to the provinces, though nothing has ever been as large as the camel transports.

26. The End of the Special Period

The Special Period ended around 1998. There wasn’t one event that brought about the end. Things just very slowly got better.

The Antonio Núñez Jiménez Foundation and Permaculture Community

27. Introduction: The Antonio Núñez Jiménez Foundation

The Antonio Núñez Jiménez Foundation is a nongovernmental foundation dedicated to the work of Antonio Núñez Jiménez and to solving environment problems through cultural sustainability. The Jiménez Foundation also sponsors a permaculture community in Havana.

28. Director of the Antonio Núñez Jiménez Foundation: Agriculture in Cuba

To understand where we are today, you must understand the past. When the Spanish first arrived, Cuba was ninety-eight percent forest. By 1959, Cuba was fifteen percent forest. The Spanish planted three things: sugarcane, sugarcane, and sugarcane. In 1972, Cuba entered into a mutual assistance agreement with the Soviet Union. Basically, we provided the sugar for the system. Understand, this was the only way for us to survive because of the blockade. We still produced some rice, milk, and eggs, but much was imported. We sent sugar to the Soviet Union and received agrochemicals, fuel, and fertilizer. When the Soviet Union collapsed, we were up in the air. We were falling. There were no more canned tomatoes. There was no more canned cabbage. We had nothing. We had to relearn everything.

Right now, the land in Cuba is classified as 5.4% Very Productive, 17.8% Productive, 30% Moderately Productive, and 48% Minimally Productive. Remember, fertilizer did not exist until the 1950s. The depletion of the land comes primarily from monocropping, not fertilizer. Look at Argentina and the problems they are having from monocropping soybeans to feed cattle. There are also other aspects that contributed to our struggles. We are a long island. I always say, “We have an east and a west, but not a north and south.” We are vulnerable to winds because of our long coastlines. We have droughts and the rainy season. We have seismic zones. We have earthquakes.

Most of all, our greatest losses were our agricultural traditions. We lost our agricultural traditions because farmers had to be involved in industrial production. They lost their history. The new model we are working towards is sustainable and cultural. We’re not there yet, but we are making process. It is not easy, but we are transitioning.

29. Introduction: The Jiménez Foundation Permaculture Community

The members in the permaculture community subscribe to the

cultural and ecological practices of sustainability and peace. In their homes, the members of the community attempt to develop agricultural systems that are modeled on natural ecosystems.

30. The Permaculture Community Welcoming Committee

There are no dogs on leashes in Cuba. Most of the female dogs look like they are either currently nursing a litter or that they have previously nursed so many litters that their bodies have altered permanently. The male dogs move quickly, marking territory on the gravel roads or the small bushes growing though the crumbling sidewalks. Virtually all of the dogs seem affable. True to her name, "Floppy," who looks like a corgi/dachshund mix, flops on her back to initiate a belly rub. A shirtless young man scratches a pup behind the ears as a man stands up from the barber chair on the young man's lawn and shakes the hair clippings from the white sheet around his neck. The light reflects off the blue paint of the porch and house, making the scene seem iridescent, as if it is rising from Caribbean waters, and the sheet is a sail snapping in the wind. Greeting the visitors in the small park at the center of the community, the dogs sniff one person's hand after the next and wag their tails.

31. Permaculture Community Member One: Benches in the Park

The tops of the benches in our park were destroyed or stolen not long ago, and the park was ruined. Each of the permaculture members was given a bench to repair, and we rebuilt the benches with thrown-away materials and tile. Each bench theme is important to the individual who repaired it. A taxi driver created this taxi-themed bench. A sports fan created this Nike bench. On other benches, some of the themes include the saints of the African religions, broken chains, a flower basket, and rabbits. This is my bench, which is two roses and the AIDS symbol. The two roses represent the man and the woman and the struggle against AIDS. There are many

romances in this park, and this bench is a reminder of how AIDS can affect the family. Now, people can come here and sit down and fall in love.

32. Permaculture Community Member One: Her Home and Garden

I began this garden to relieve stress. I have had a family loss. I'm planning to plant lettuce in the winter. This garden keeps me cool in the summer. I have fish here in this small cinderblock tank. My husband passed away not long ago, and this garden used to be a garage space. The ground was compacted from my husband's truck. I had to carry the soil here. Now I have leeks and chives, bok choy, beets, and parsley. I give healthy food to my grandchildren. Here, I have planted a banana tree. I feed my grandchildren with healthy bananas. This is where I compost. This is turmeric, which is good for soup and stops cancer. The water is filtered from the house. Soon, I will have a three-part filter. You are welcome to take all the photographs you would like, but I would prefer not to smile in the photographs. I don't like to smile in photographs.

33. Photograph: Permaculture Community Member One

In a tank top and jeans, the woman stands at the end of what used to be the driveway. A banana tree leans into the left side of the frame. A hibiscus rises from a rusted-out oil drum. Old computer monitors have been gutted and converted into planters. The woman doesn't smile, but she doesn't frown either. Arms straight at her sides, she looks past the photographer, past the camera, to a spot she alone can see.

34. Permaculture Community Member Two: People Who Don't Like Plants Don't Like Anything

Hola! Hola! Besos para Todos! Kisses for everyone! Welcome to my home! Wave to Grandma. Do you see her there in the window? Hello, Grandma! Dear guests, I hope you are enjoying our commu-

nity? I don't know if you know this, but there used to be two rivers on each side of the community that always flooded the houses. When the rivers were dredged, we asked the trucks to drop the dirt from the river bottoms off at people's houses. That is where the soil comes from for my gardens. All of the raised planting beds are made out of used beer and wine bottles. See how I invert them in the ground to make the frames for the beds? People bring me their empty bottles.

There are three simple things achieved through my gardens: grow healthy food, save money, and save energy. This tree here produced 241 bananas last year. The garden is for my family, but I also help the school across the street. The kids from the school come here and ask for things—this vegetable and that vegetable. I don't charge anyone for medicinal seeds or plants. We are starting to build these permaculture gardens all over the island. You want to know about the doghouse on the roof? Yes, one of my dogs loves the roof. His house is up there. He's a grey pit bull, and he kind of looks like a gargoyle up there, but look how quick he moves! It's a flat roof, so he loves it. A guard dog is a very important part of a permaculture house. Would you like some tea? Here, try this. It's made with anise seeds and honey. "Plants are love," I always say. People who don't like plants don't like anything.

35. Images: The Permaculture Community

A television antenna has been welded to a metal ladder that leans against one of the flat roofs. Several stuffed animals, including Sonic the Hedgehog, Santa Claus, and Mickey Mouse, sway back and forth on a metal clothesline. A construction crew works on a home next to the school. Scaffolding abuts the house's facade, and a cement tumbler rotates in the street as two of the workers sit on the curb and eat sandwiches.

36. Permaculture Community Member Three: El Capitán

The most important components of permaculture are the house

and the family. Everything here grows from that awareness. For example, this is a solar drying box I use for bread to feed the rabbits. This is a teepee with squash. I'm preparing the roof to make a roof garden. This is a goldfish tank. This is the compost toilet, and I have painted a picture on the side. There are three boxes underneath to process the fertilizer. Urine is another system. One liter of urine mixes with ten liters of water for fertilizer. My goal is to convince people this is something normal, that it's not an outhouse. The door has to be facing the sun all the time.

In 2009, I began preparing this place, and I also took courses on gender equality. Permaculture people have to be peaceful and patient. Can you imagine if you come out and see the slugs have eaten everything you have worked so hard on? We have lots of slugs. They are our main gardening problem. You can't overreact. Previously, I had made a fishpond next door, and I had to give it up so that someone could build a house there. You have to be patient and accepting.

Before I retired, I was a captain in the armed forces. I was a chemist. When I retired, I became a delegate for the people's power. I am a poet and painter also. I didn't intend to be a poet. A woman asked me to write something in a small space on her flyer. I wrote, "In the earth there are many riches we can develop but if there is no love in what we do, we can never achieve it." I wrote this in five minutes, and it just came out. In Spanish, it rhymes. The woman told me I was a poet.

You have to love something to achieve it. I believe that. You feel so proud when you plant the seed. You see how the seed is growing, and when it is the moment to eat it, you feel pleased in the task. Now, I give anti-violence talks to children, and they tell me, "Antonio, I don't kill lizards anymore!"

Permaculture is against violence. I put signs outside my house about violence against women. Many men say, "I do this and that to my wife." After they read my sign, they say, "Oh, I never realized that. I will think about what I do now." You want to know where the

word “permaculture” came from? It is your word. I learned it in this book. Here, it’s by an Australian named Bill Madison.

37. Painting: The Compost Toilet

Pants around his ankles, a cartoon man sits on a white commode. His disproportionately long arms transform into a book he reads as he sits. An arrow proceeds from the man to a brown bucket filled above the brim with brown material. The next arrow points to a plant, which points to a bushel, which points to a bowl filled with green material that is being pierced by a fork. So there is no confusion about the completion of the cycle, the final arrow points from the bowl back to the man reading on the commode.

38. Arturo Sanchez: Translation of the “Violencia de Género” Sign Outside the Third Permaculture House

He begins with a definition of violence: “An act or omission based on inequality of gender that brings about physical, psychological, or heritage damages. Please respect the rights of other people.” And then the sign goes on to say, “Men and women have roles of victims and/or perpetrators, but the ones more affected by violence are women. It is a matter of social justice to recognize and attend to and prevent violence against women.”

HIV/AIDS

39. Arturo Suarez: HIV/AIDS in Cuba

Cubans didn’t know what to do when they first started to encounter AIDS, and the government quarantined AIDS patients in a sanatorium. This was a shameful time in Cuba’s past. They did this, though, because they did not know what the disease would do. They received many human rights objections on this. Experts were sent to France and South Africa to study the disease. Once they understood it, the sanatoriums were opened and people were allowed to

return to their jobs. The presence of AIDS in Cuba is much lower than in many other Caribbean cultures, but people in Cuba still think the rate is too high. You should read the book, “Confessions to a Doctor.” This changed many people’s thinking about AIDS. The author was a doctor in Cuba, and he wrote the book full of individual people’s stories. People would come to him and say, “I have two wives, and both of them have AIDS, and I don’t know what to do,” that sort of thing.

Social Life

40. Arturo Suarez: Dating

In Cuba, dating is different than what you probably do in the States. Here, everyone goes out together in groups. You need to have your friends and family approve of the person. If they don’t approve of the person, and you really like the person, then you have to persuade your friends and family to like the person. We don’t have any of those online dating websites. Here, we have the bus stop. We have the Malecon. You walk the Malecon. You talk to people. You say, “Hey you...”

41. Noah: Nightlife and Advertising in Cuba

Do you know how in the States—they do this in New Zealand, so I’m sure they do this in the States as well—people on the streets will be handing out flyers about upcoming events, and people will just walk past or drop the flyers? In Cuba, people will come over and want to know what’s on the flyer. They’ll say, “What do you got?” Remember, there is no advertising here in newspapers or on television. The phrase for word-of-mouth information, I think, is “radio bembas,” which literally means, “radio lips.” They also pass info around on flash drives when there is a show or a concert. Internet is basically nonexistent across the country. There is nothing faster than old dial-up.

42. The Malecon

The Malecon runs along the coastline in Havana. Designed originally as a seawall, it has become the main thoroughfare for young people, streetwalkers, and fishermen. At night, romances bloom along the seawall. The roads of the Malecon trace the curves of the coastline. Weaving in and out of each other, the taxis rake their headlights across the crowds. The lovers appear then disappear into the darkness. Not quite invisible, they are little more than entwined silhouettes. The ocean bears down again and again at the base of the wall, projecting vertical plumes of sea foam that hover like fountain spouts in the air behind the lovers before falling back to the ocean.

The Literacy Campaign and the Bay of Pigs

43. Images: Traveling through the Provinces

In a single-file line on the shoulder of a two-lane road, three bicyclists lean forward into the wind, their legs pumping like pistons. Behind the bicyclists, a riderless horse gallops smoothly, his bridle attached with a rope to the third bicycle. A fieldstone wall extends for miles. Men clear grass with machetes. White smoke covers the road where overgrowth is being burned back. A horse and farmer appear through the haze. Lifting his hat as a greeting, the driver bounces on his makeshift buggy, which is an upholstered seat welded to a car's rear axle and wheels. A dirt road leads to an abandoned stone house. Only the walls remain. Trees grow in what was once the living room. They spread through the windows and the doorways. A small shrub has even sprouted from the stone chimney like a green top hat.

44. Arturo Suarez: The Bay of Pigs

In Cuban literature, we call the invaders the “mercenaries.” The conditions in this part of Cuba at the time weren’t good. There were

no roads. It was the Zapata Swamp. The population here was very poor—mostly farmers and some teachers from the literacy campaign. This area also produced charcoal, and Fidel had previously met with the workers. The literacy campaign began here. There were already thirteen teachers here at the time of the invasion. The Revolution had married unmarried couples—common law couples. Once the couples were married, they registered for benefits. They weren't forced to marry, though.

The invasion showed that Cubans would follow Fidel no matter what. The CIA-backed group bombed some of the airfields, but planes were hidden away, so there was little effect. The attackers' plan was that once they were here for seventy-two hours, the U.S. would support a provisional government. But the struggle was lost at sixty hours. The Cuban military was limited, but the mercenaries underestimated the human intelligence system and the people's support for the Revolution. The U.S. thought there would be more support for the invaders. 1,300 mercenaries were caught, and Fidel exchanged them for baby food for the people. We don't call it the "Bay of Pigs." We call it "Playa Giron." That's what we know it by. There's a billboard marking where the invaders were stopped. It reads, "Hasta aqui llegaron los mercenaries" – "the mercenaries got to this point."

45. Images: Playa Giron

If not for the thin coastline on the other side of the bay, there would be little to differentiate the water from the sky. A row of huts lines the shoreline. Each hut is identical, except for varied pastel colors. "Pizza" is spray-painted on the side of one of the huts. The "Octopus Club"—a rickety "Internacional Diving Center"—offers lessons and tours. Painted on the side of an old sailboat is the advertisement, "Visit the Indian Village in Guama. Don't Miss It!" Beside the advertisement, the entrepreneurs have drawn a naked man wrestling an alligator. Straddling the alligator, the man

grasps the tip of the alligator's tail with one hand and, with the other hand, binds a rope around the alligator's mouth.

46. Introduction: Mariela Luis

Mariela Luis is the director of Cuba's Literary Museum in Cuba. As a professor and educator, she is an expert on the history of literacy in Cuba.

47. Mariela Luis: History of the Literacy Campaign

After the Revolution, Fidel Castro decided that he would implement a program to eliminate illiteracy in Cuba. In January of 1961, 100,000 teachers were sent to the rural areas and farms to teach people to read. These teachers weren't like your traditional teachers. Because so many teachers were needed, many young people were recruited for this task. Most teachers were between nine and fifteen years old. They wore special uniforms so that they could be identified as teachers. The youngest teacher was eight years old. The oldest person who learned to read was 106. Most of the farmers learned to read in three to six months, depending on the teachers, although some of the teachers stayed eight to ten months. To help the teachers, there were gifts from other countries. There was no power in the countryside, and China sent gas-powered metal lamps. Lessons were at night, and many of the farmers had never seen these types of lamps before. The lamps became the symbol of the literacy campaign. Other socialist countries sent lenses for glasses. Cuba was declared free of illiteracy at the end of 1961.

48. Photographs: The Literacy Campaign

A young teacher who appears to be fourteen or fifteen years old brushes her hair while using the polished metal lamp as a mirror. Perhaps she leans in close and her image ripples, or she leans back and her image inverts on the curve of the lamp. To commemorate the completion of the campaign, a parade was held, and the two young women leading the parade carry a giant pencil between

them. The youngest teacher—an eight-year-old boy—poses in his uniform for an official portrait. He wears his backpack in the photograph, and his small beret is rolled and buttoned under his left epaulette.

49. Mariela Luis: Resistance to Literacy Campaign

At the beginning of the campaign, many of the farmers didn't want to be taught. Some farmers didn't want the teachers in their homes. Some families did not want to send their children to rural areas. Being a teacher was voluntary. No one was required to be a teacher. In Cuba, there was a movie made about the young teachers in the farmers' homes. The film starts with someone getting all of the farmers together and telling them that they're going to be introduced to the teacher. The farmers put on their nicest clothes and go to meet the teacher, but when he walks into the room, he is a fifteen-year-old boy. The teacher and the farmers argue. When the teacher tries to correct the farmers, they tell him not to speak when older people are talking. The teacher has never been in the countryside before, and he is afraid of animals—frogs, spiders, etc. The first time he lifts an ax he almost falls. But by the end of the movie, the farmers do not want the teacher to go home.

50. Mariela Luis: Teachers and the Bay of Pigs Invasion

There were many painful moments, though. Counterrevolutionaries sponsored by the CIA killed ten of our people during the Bay of Pigs invasion. There were thirty teachers working in that area during the invasion. Two teenagers, ages fifteen and nineteen, were captured. Conrado Benitez Garcia, one of the teachers, was killed. He was eighteen years old.

51. Document: Medical Examiner's Report for Conrado Benitez Garcia

The report is one page long and consists of six sketches of a human figure on which the medical examiner has recorded the evi-

dence of trauma. The sketches show a figure facing forward, back, left, right. In one set of the left-and-right-facing sketches, the arms are raised. In the other set, they are down. The medical examiner has marked sixteen puncture wounds across Conrado's back. The red marks span across the figure's shoulders, shoulder blades, and waist. On the front of the figure, there are nine marks on his abdomen. One is below his right bicep. With a black pen, the medical examiner has circled Conrado's left knee and has marked the placement of the noose around Conrado's throat.

Committees for the Defense of the Revolution

52. Introduction: Committees for the Defense of the Revolution

Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDRs) are interconnected neighborhood organizations across Cuba. The CDRs focus their activities on promoting social welfare and protecting the values of the Revolution. In a speech establishing the CDRs in 1960, Fidel Castro said, "In the face of the imperialist aggression, we're going to implement a system of collective vigilance so that everybody knows who lives on the block, what they do, and what relations they have with the tyranny, and with whom they meet" (CNN Wire Staff).

53. CDR Meeting

The power has gone out at the six-floor apartment complex, but the members of the CDR carry on their meeting in a walkway between the two buildings. One member of the CDR says that the darkness reminds him of the Special Period. Another member corrects the other member and says that during the Special Period all the lights would have been out, not just the lights of the apartment buildings. The members seem tense, anxious. One man operates a hand-cranked flashlight, which produces a constant high-pitched whirring sound. Before speaking, a middle-aged CDR member unfolds a piece of paper in his hands. Even in November, the night is still humid, yet the speaker wears a sweatshirt and jeans. On his

sweatshirt is the image of a sailboat above the words, “San Francisco,” and there is perspiration on his forehead as he begins to read.

54. CDR Speaker One: Prepared Remarks

Distinguished guests, we would like to give you the warmest welcome especially from the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution. All of us have a profound respect for the people of the United States and the desire of peace we all dream of. These exchanges contribute quite a bit to these purposes. We receive you today with a big hug and our arms open to friendship.

55. CDR Speaker Two: History and Tasks of the CDR

After the triumph, the Revolution began organizing itself around the leaders of the rebel army, and the people organized. Revolutionary laws began and the process was supported in 1959. In September 1960, Fidel gave a speech at what is now the Museum of the Revolution. As Fidel spoke, some noise bombs went off. In that moment, Fidel said, “It doesn’t matter. We will organize the committees and watch the achievements.” The CDRs were charged with watching out for what went against the Revolution. The first task of a CDR is revolutionary surveillance. The CDR works towards mass organization. Anyone past ten years of age can join. Black, white, young, old, armed forces or not—it doesn’t matter. The organization defends, protects and watches over the Revolution. It is the eyes and ears of the Revolution.

Our logo is a shield, a farmer’s hat and a machete. We began as surveillance, but now we are more ideological. We do tasks related to healthcare, production, the Cuban people, and the mitigation of natural disasters. The CDRs also watch out for criminals, work with vaccinations, and organize volunteer blood donations. For example, there was a campaign against mosquitoes that produce yellow fever. Also, there is a children’s CDR.

In Santiago de Cuba, CDRs went out and worked after Hur-

ricane Sandy. We are involved in elections to confirm municipal elections. No political party should intimidate anyone, so the elections are done with the CDRs. CDRs are the engines that move the country. They move the wheels to move along. You cannot talk about the Revolution if you do not mention the CDRs.

56. A Garbage Truck and a Tense Question

In the parking lot behind the apartment building someone slams the lid of a metal garbage bin and everyone jumps. A garbage truck beeps while moving in reverse, and the speaker looks over his shoulder but does not stop speaking. When asked about the ways in which the CDRs act as enforcers of the values of the Revolution, instead of just surveyors of the community, the speaker defers to a heavysset, gray-haired CDR member. The gray-haired CDR member steadies himself with his cane and lifts his hand for quiet before speaking.

57. CDR Speaker Three: Surveillance and the Damas del Blanco

If there is a criminal problem, we work with national police. If a crime has been committed, and the victim has not reported it, CDRs will become a way to report it. Police work with CDRs for info. CDRs know the neighborhoods. We know who has income not connected to a specific job. The people who don't agree with the CDR can express their opinions. They have the same rights as other people. They can be elected. They enjoy the same rights as other people, unless they break the law.

There is a group of women that goes out to demonstrate. They do not have the people's support, but they are not suppressed. The main problem is that these groups of dissidents have financial support from other countries, specifically the United States. They are offered communication, courses, technology, and publicity. In their activities, dissidents commit crimes. That is when there is a call for subversion. Some of their activities have been tried in cases.

In terms of criminality—the prevention of criminality—we have a talk with potential criminals. In the neighborhood, we all know who the criminals are. I have been in those meetings, those interventions. They are preventative, political, and also prophylactic. We do not oppress these people. A big part of the Cuban people does not like the dissidents. The Ladies in White, they know who they are. What they receive in money doesn't fit with the fact that they don't have jobs. It is hard to see a person who does not contribute to the country act against that country.

58. The First Female CDR Speaker

Finished, the heavy-set CDR member rocks back on his heels and folds his arms, his cane held against his chest. In the darkness of the walkway, a female CDR member lights a cigarette before beginning to speak. She exhales smoke over the heads of the crowd and then ashes her cigarette at her waist.

59. CDR Female Speaker: Dissidents, Children and Education

Dissidents don't work, and they live better than doctors and lawyers. In the Revolution, we learned that our children are the main treasures we have. Marti said, "Be educated to be free." CDR members go to the family and work with the family when there is a problem. It's not political. There are three pillars of the Revolution: support ideological work, defend the Revolution, and educate the people. Even though we have a blockade—and we experience the effects of that blockade every day—education is required. CDRs work with natural disasters. During Hurricane Sandy, all the actions were taken down to the level of every block. We're reconstructing things that were destroyed. The government will provide materials, but the people and the CDRs do the work to rebuild.

Work was done before, during, and after the disaster. With the flooding from the sea, we told people about the situation that was coming, and then evacuated the people that were in danger. We had

to convince them to leave because they didn't want to leave. After the last flood, I had three families in my home. Families help government find the right channels.

60. Image: The Three Pillars

When the female CDR speaker states the three pillar of the Revolution, she lifts her hand. Holding the cigarette between her index finger and thumb, she enumerates the pillars by grasping, in sequence, her middle, ring and pinky finger.

61. CDR Speaker Two: On Being Asked If He Has Any Questions about Americans

No. One thing we know is the U.S. people. Fidel has always taught us to differentiate the U.S. people from the U.S. government. Many of us have relatives living in the United States. The Cuban people are always open. Those who left in 1959 are not around much anymore. It is a younger generation. So we know the Americans. The ones who love the Revolution know the United States.

62. CDR Speaker One: On Whether or Not He Believes the Embargo Will Be Lifted Based on Changes of Political Power in the United States

We have a famous journalist who always said, "There is nothing more similar to a Republican than a Democrat."

63. The Lights

As if in agreement, the lights in the walkway and the buildings flicker to life. The CDR members cheer and the high-pitched whine of the hand-cranked flashlight subsides. With the light, the tensions also diminish. Someone asks the woman with the cigarette if she has children and what are their names, and she blushes and produces photographs from her purse. The CDR member in the San Francisco sweatshirt discusses fishing and a recent catch. The gray-haired CDR member steadies himself on his cane, smiles

politely, and says, “mucho gusto” to several visitors before retiring to his apartment.

64. Arturo Suarez: After Exiting CDR Meeting

In the past, many things were done too quickly and too passionately. Reports were often to the CDRs instead of the police. This is not so much the case anymore. The needs of the CDR are changing. Now they are more about social pressure. They are more open. They are about community. If a family does not support a child, the CDR will help. A comrade will knock on your door and say, “I have heard your child is having a problem. What’s up?”

The Media

65. David Price: His History as a Journalist

Fidel always liked to interact with the foreign press. He liked to attempt to manipulate the foreign press. Raul is not interested in talking to us or attempting to manipulate us. Access is almost zero, though it is opening up a bit more. Raul is more pragmatic than Fidel, although Raul is not as charismatic.

So how do I, as a journalist, cover Cuba? Here’s a story. Let’s say you are a cub reporter covering the police beat and you run into police brutality. You have two choices. Choice one is to cover the story and potentially lose your job and/or your access to the police. Choice two is not to cover the story and sweep it under the rug. With choice two, you retain your job, but the story goes uncovered. Neither option is a good option. The only way you can do both is to swallow your ego and give the story to someone else who is a little more protected. That’s the only way that the information actually gets out.

66. David Price: Freedom of the Press in Cuba

They don’t check your stuff here. I’ve never had an editor refuse to print something. They’ve definitely yelled at me if they didn’t like

it, but they never refused to print it. It's kind of like covering a war. It's a pressure cooker. I came here with an American wife, and now I have a Cuban wife, but I should say that she's old. She's my age. She's an appropriate age.

Dissidents and the Cuban Five

67. Arturo Suarez: The Damas del Blanco

During the Special Period, the dissidents became stronger. It was proved that they were receiving salaries from Miami. This is the biggest problem: that they are paid salaries from abroad. Remember, Polish dissidents overthrew socialism without foreign financial support. Cuban law says you can go against the Revolution, but you cannot be paid from abroad to do so.

If you are a "Lady in White," the U.S. will grant you a visa. The Damas del Blanco have become a business. Originally, they were the wives and the other female relatives of jailed dissidents. They dress all in white, and they protest by attending mass each Sunday in silence. You will also see them walking around Havana, mostly in the tourist areas. As I said, they have become a kind of business to get a visa. Many of the current Damas del Blanco aren't connected to jailed dissidents at all.

68. Introduction: The Cuban Institute for Friendship with the Peoples (ICAP)

Founded in 1960 after the Revolution, ICAP is a non-governmental organization dedicated to increasing Cuba's international relationships. The primary goal of ICAP is to work towards freeing the Cuban Five.

69. Speaker at ICAP: The Cuban Five

For fifty years Cuba has been the victim of terrorist activities, especially from Miami. There are many terrorist groups: Alpha 66, Omega 4, Brothers to the Rescue, and the Cuban American National

Foundation, to name a few. We consider these to be terrorist organizations. There have been 3,000 lives lost because of these groups. There have also been 3,000 people who have been injured or handicapped. In 1976, there was a Cuban flight from Barbados to Jamaica that was sabotaged. A bomb went off, killing all seventy-eight people aboard the plane. The terrorist is now living in Miami—you can look this up. Terrorism also escalated during the Special Period. These groups paid mercenaries to place bombs in tourist areas. One terrorist died in the Copacabana Hotel.

In 1998, the Cuban Five were arrested and tried in Miami. They were charged with conspiracy to commit espionage, though evidence has never been proved. During the trials, the U.S. government paid journalists to write against the Cuban Five. The atmosphere pressured the jury. Evidence that would have helped the Cuban Five was never presented.

70. Arturo Suarez: The Cuban Five

I know one thing—that you are not the U.S. government. We know the difference between the U.S. people and the U.S. government, especially after Elian Gonzalez. We saw Americans carrying signs, protesting, all of them wanting Elian Gonzalez to be able to return to his father in Cuba. Elian Gonzales is now a second-year engineering student here in Cuba, by the way. Fidel has always repeated that the U.S. government is one thing, and the people are another.

Before I get into the Cuban Five, you should know that the Cuban Intelligence System is not based on paid agents. It's made up of people who go abroad and send back information. In the early nineties, there were lots of actions against Cuba. After the Cold War, there was lots of U.S. focus on Cuba. I remember as a kid seeing planes coming to Cuba from Miami and watching the planes drop flyers that said things like, "Down with Fidel" or "Down with the Revolution."

There are many Cubans against the Revolution who live in Miami. When the Cuban Five were caught, the issue for us was not

whether or not they were spies, but the issue was the lengths of the sentences. There were some Israeli spies who were captured at the same time, and they only received two years. The Cuban Five got life sentences.

In Cuba, the Cuban Five have become a symbol of what courageous people do for their country. There have also been many CIA aggressions against Cuba. The Cuban Five were also tried in Miami. It's been proven that the media was against them. There is no way they could have received a fair trial there. All I am saying is that you should go behind the information you are given. You should try and look below the surface.

Coda: The Future

71. David Price: The Future of Cuba

The toughest card to play is who will lead the country once Raul and Fidel are gone. Fidel and Raul are legit. They're the real deal. But if you put Joe Schmo in there who is just parroting their ideas, the country will collapse. Raul Castro's daughter can't take over. Her number one agenda is LGBT rights, and sex-change rights, and, to resonate with the Cuban people, she couldn't have picked a worse position. But maybe that's her point—she's chosen something she's genuinely passionate about because she doesn't have any political ambition. There were some young guys who were up-and-comers, but they were run out of their jobs because they were caught talking bad about Castro. They weren't run out of the country, though. They're still around. They know too much to be let out. Right now, no one knows what the future holds. The question of who will take over once Raul and Fidel are gone is stamped like a great big question mark right on Cuba's forehead.

Folding Centers

Ben Berman

In the movie, the lightning transformed
the sand into long thin strips of glass
and I thought of Jarrell and his thunderstorms,

how in a lifetime a man might be graced
with such streaks of clarity five or six
times—enough to make the hearing loss

feel like a sound trade, the wet, itchy socks—
mere SOP. But real fulgurites, I soon learned,
are root-like and hollow, about as sexy

as their name—which, for me, held the allure
of affirmation—even when lightning flashes,
the results are opaque and granular.

Not to trade what fuses for what confuses
or applaud the post-modern centerfold
who, instead of baring it all, confesses

to folding centers—but clarity has failed
us too many times—it is as clear
as glass, we say, then watch our patios fill

with dead sparrows. As water, we declare,
until we reach in and watch ripples form,
until we grow dizzy from chasing circles.

The Shampoo Thief

Alessandro Mario Powell

Dear Reader,

Perhaps you should put this down—now. This is a story for free spirits, soulful boys and girls. If you should at any point feel yourself to be less than that, I would suggest you put this down. Immediately. Pick up some pulp and have a nice day. If you are unversed in Italian I would expect you to be at a keen disadvantage. Godspeed.

For my Nonna, Liviana

Butler Hall.

Is it the right or left knob that does the hot water? Down in New Orleans? *Shit. Fuck.* Yeah, it was the right-hand knob. *Ah*, a cloud of steam crawls up the cement walls of my shower cubicle. Bone-chilling water warms, running over the yellow bags under my eyes. Dom, my roommate, is in the final bracket of his weeklong *Team Fortress* tournament. Dom is a semi-pro gamer, a citizen of the digital realm. His PC bathes our room in a phosphorescent light. All night, our room smells like Funyons.

“Out!” I want to shout: “Out, brief console.” I want nothing more than to smash it, if only to see the liquid crystals inside (Google says they’re there).

When he is winning my nights are syncopated with his snide quips. When he is losing he utters fragmented curses. Dom is the closest thing I have to a friend. While I’m trying to sleep I hear his banter: “Oh yeah? Keep eating pistachios you fucking chinks. . . . From Cornwall? Isn’t that where grown men consort with their livestock?”

A cannonade of clinging cappuccinos, rather poorly stirred, all through the night: his fingers zap across the f-bar—shortcuts. They save time. And then there’s clicking. Incessant.

Blue shampoo worms through my hair, into my ears. Then I close my eyes. *No tears*, I tell myself. But there are a thousand pebbles packed behind my eyelids; they ricochet madly whenever I close them. I open my eyes, and promptly cry. But then I laugh, eyes red, so it is okay. Some people do not have shampoo. Dom got his stolen. The word in the lounge is that there is a shampoo thief on the loose. A White Plague, for weeks our floor has been with a universal case of just awful dandruff. Is this an apocalypse? *Perhaps*.

Just what I needed, I think, *a kleptomaniac on my floor*.

It's night by the time I get out of the shower, but I've tossed on my Ray-Bans anyway. Shutting off the water, I wrap myself in a towel, and head back to my room, snickering, my teeth chattering.

"What's good, Dom? I'm about to be naked over here, man," I say, as I step over a pile of my communication textbooks.

It takes Dom a few minutes to respond. I have been slashing the price of his Concerta more than usual on account of his tourney—the stuff is like juice for the video game junkies. He'll munch down about 116 milligrams per day, and, if he's feelin' spunky, maybe another 54 at night; and I hear him grinding his teeth in his sleep.

"Okay dude, I'm not looking," he finally says cynically, as he munches down another Funyon. But I've already pulled up my black boxer briefs.

I'm hanging up my towel when it hits me. It is not on my shelf. It is not on the floor. My shampoo, I cannot find it in my shower bag.

"Dude have you seen my shampoo?" I ask Dom without looking up from my search.

"Nope," he says.

"Well if you see something," I say, "say something." As Dom pops open his second bag of artificial onions, I race back to the bathroom, still in my briefs; but it is gone.

The shampoo thief has struck again.

I clutch a sink to stabilize myself, cackling—vivid and high-pitched, and yeah, maniacal. Maybe there's still some shampoo in my hair. Rubbing clammy hands now.

Ha.

The sound of me skipping through supposedly shuffled songs seamlessly. But I know the words to all these songs. They bore me. Fed up, I unplug it.

The wind grinds against me, pushes my blue Huffy bicycle across the trail and back again and again across the thin black asphalt trail along the New Orleans levee. Does my quadricep quiver of its own volition or is't just the radioactivity from my smartphone's chips?

I check my iPhone: no texts. I never get any texts, but I check again anyway—still, not one text. I give a soft sigh of ennui.

It is a chilly, windy Halloween Eve. I wear my usual red jeans with a red muscle-cut jean jacket, a felt Pokémon-style-hair wig with horns, my silver mask, white gloves, and knee-high purple and blue striped Italian Trystero-socks (I am an evil plumber); I'm borne back by an unseen and perpetual tide.

A company of joggers in green short-shorts and high socks pass by. I notice one girl's ass has 1834—the year Tulane was founded—written across it in block letters. She sees me, her eyes inexplicably teary. We notice each other! Then she flips her hair and etches into the night, along with her butt.

I pause so as to better hear my new voicemail, left by some unknown number: twelve minutes of static. This transports me into a random person's pocket for about seven whole minutes. Finally, I fruitlessly churn away at my wheels. My back wheel is loose and its squeals give the distinct impression that there is someone behind me. I look, but there are only telephone poles, hissing down. On the purple horizon I can just make out the wireless tower marking the beach and barges and the Mystery Bonfire.

Meyer, Room 104.

"Now. Can anyone tell me who was the first bluesman to sell his soul to the devil?" Professor Sciaconi, my advisor in the department

of English, asks my Blues TIDES class—a required freshmen orientation seminar.

Some gardener's hedger hums through the window, forcing Sciavoni to address the class through the podium mike. There are twenty-three of us sprinkled about the lecture hall. I sit beside the Marth, who lives down the hall from me. We're in the third row. I twiddle the leather grip of my silver pen against my prescription Ray-Bans. They fade in and out, fueled by magic, dependant upon ambient lighting. Do I squint? Well, Nonna Livia did have a word to say about how I was looking at her broccoli funny. But I *hate* broccoli, and everyone knew this.

"Man, that is one sweet pen," Marth says.

"Thanks, dude."

I had just nabbed it from my high school guidance counselor, before leaving for college.

Professor Sciavoni has neglected to shut off the projector, so a giantess Aretha Franklin wails mutely over his podium. He wears a tan fedora to class; Sciavoni, as well as teaching several courses on the nature of cool, is also a nocturnal DJ at WWOZ.

Someone says Bob Dylan. Wrong. Another kid, who claims to hail from Brooklyn, makes a knock on Lil' Wayne. Professor Sciavoni patronizes this one with a halfhearted grunt.

For some reason I think of my Nonna, but I mumble: "Robert Johnson."

No responses.

B.B. King, Eric Clapton. Tom Waits? Jimi Hendrix, Jack White, etc. No, no, no, no, absolutely not, no, and so on.

Marth's hand goes up.

"Wasn't that, uhmm, uh, Robert Johnson?" he says.

"Yes," says Sciavoni, pleasantly surprised. "Yes it was. Very good, Marth."

"*What the fuck*, dude," I say under my breathe.

"What?" Marth says in an outside voice.

"Nothing, sorry." I say I'm sorry.

I am sure no one heard me over the hum; I need to work on projecting better in class.

Of course not a soul had read our assigned text: *Mumbo Jumbo* (You should read it, if you enjoyed Frederick Douglass's *Narrative* for all the wrong reasons.) Life goes on; Professor Sciavoni has splurged—on Tulane's dime—and brought Brooklyn-style pizza for our entire section.

"It's real, nice," I chew at Marth.

"No thanks. Not hungry," he says, and he pats his stomach two times.

Professor Sciavoni finishes the class by having us all improvise a blues line. Marth asks to borrow my pen, so I give him my silver one, using the spare I keep.

I got no ...

I got no money.

I got no money in the box, I write.

It feels good. It feels familiar, like I'd lifted it without even knowing.

I got no money in the box, I write my line a few more times.

Neatly folding my paper, I tuck it into my back pocket, pack my bags, and glance at the clock. Time to prepare to leave.

"Does anyone want to share what they got down?" Professor Sciavoni asks the class.

No thank you, I think, *I will be keeping this one for—*

Marth raises his hand. Sciavoni gives him the floor.

"I got no money in the box," Marth says, and he adds that vocal flourish over *box*.

A silence; it persists.

"That was beautiful," says cute row two Tribeca-type girl, with a faint squeal.

"Yeah—that's a good blues line," Sciavoni says. "Keep it, bruh.

Put it in cho pocket, y'heard? . . . Class dismissed."

My eyes are wide, my eyebrows high, with stupefaction.

Fuck, I think, *I knew I got that from somewhere else*. Thinking,

it must be famous, like—I consider defrauding the line, revealing how in fact it belonged to some legendary bluesman whose name was at the tip of my tongue—not Marth. But no one would care. One by one we all file out anyway. Passing the door I toss my copy of the line into the trash bin.

In the hallway I wait until the crowd has dispersed, then pop a Concerta to ready myself for Elementary Symbolic Logic, my math requirement.

“What’s that there?” says Marth, out of nowhere and I start.

“This?” I say. “Concerta. It’s a study aid, friend.”

“And you just keep it with you?”

“Nah. Usually it’s in my drawer. Top left.”

Halfway to ESL, as I cut the quad, I realize my silver pen is no longer on my person.

I think, *I left it in my dorm*, and press on.

Okay, so the Halloween bonfire itself is not so great; really, it’s just a couple of dried-out low tide timbers over embers. René, the deaf president of the Benevolent Society of Jugglers, told me about the Mystery, which I assumed meant orgy. If an orgy transpired, I’ve missed it.

Kitty’s moldy doe eyes dance around the fire with a funky gait, but she had not told me about the event. She’s wearing a Marilyn Monroe wig, and I get the distinct feeling I’m being avoided. A local girl, she sings war-era jazz shamelessly. The breeze sends her hair into its own giggles; she giggles. And Zach, her ex, mimes her every step about the fire, not unlike a little duckling.

That dude looks way too old to be in college, I think. *What the heck.*

Kitty’s mother’s turtle keeps up the rear. Kitty and I met last week, dog-sitting for the Good Professor at his duplex; we split an eighth of shrooms and listened to all of Incubus’s *Morning View* album. Then we slept together. Doggie prints up and down the sheets. He’d warned me it would be better if nothing began at all while he

was out. My jaw slack with not understanding, I'd nodded. On his walls were the sorts of masks that could put butterflies into your knees. Sciavoni's bed was hardly raised above the floor. A miasma of plants and stale rum lingered, mossily.

Kitty fed me sexy pop tarts. She brought a bag of carrots too, but those were for her, and for her turtle. She serenaded me with transformation formulas while we played toe-war. At that moment, if I had peeled back her eyelids, I might've glimpsed the chalky residue of overlapping proofs, swirling about green irises, blotted out by a shaky hand. Her clothes came right off, but something went wrong; when I tore open my condom, brownish powder fell onto her stomach. She giggled. Dom had replaced my prophylactics with ramen packets—again.

"I'm sterile," she told my earlobe.

So I bridged the gap in between the arches of her back with my left hand. Meanwhile, with the other I texted sweet nothings into her spine. I utilized my every other nail. Then I ate the chicken substitute out from her bellybutton and we took it from there. *Sweat ignites ramen dust*, I thought. And her lips tasted of pudding.

"Woof," Kitty moaned, unrealistically. My dog impression was much better.

My paper doll tacked to my crucifix, I spat that forever-pillow-talk that a man can never abjure. Her breath had ricocheted around my ear canal like ragtime. I dozed off on her breasts.

I woke up early that morning and caught her pulling up her socks. She pecked my lips (we'd both achieved morning breath). Shutting my eyes, I listened to her weighty footsteps clunk down the spiral staircase. Since then it's been a something of a dry spell for me.

I found one of her filigree earrings under my pillow, and I've kept it on my windowsill since. She, however, jacked my green striped sweater. That or it's been misplaced. Since then, Kitty has not responded to my texts. My thumb seems to have lost its touch.

At the bonfire I meet this ginger. Anastasia's a Pennsylvania

train hippie, and I get her number. I warn her that I had a friend, also named Anastasia, back home with whom I often exchanged Star Wars–themed sexts (it’s an inside joke). This Anastasia, however, does not call or text me, not ever, and I’m fine with that. I already owe Anastasia number 1.

Funny, my texts were Anastasia the former’s favorite thing about me. I’m Poe; I am the Edgar Allen Poe of the touchscreen. Those textual vibrations became synonymous with her voice, which made my heart skip out through my nose at all odd hours. Sometimes just when my phone meant to tell me it was charged. Day and night we’d shoot each other textual poems, riddled with accidental rhymes, unintentionally syllabic—*oops*—a cascade of collateral aliteration:

You. Now I’m jealous of a
cat. I’m not even a cat
Person.

That was the last text we ever shared. It is for the best that they never found her phone; Anastasia was a good Catholic. That same night Anastasia ran her red Subaru—she’d painted the Star Trek insignia onto her spare tire—over the separator on I-95. A hemophiliac, Anastasia was so fucking dead it wasn’t even funny.

That was just a week before she would’ve left for college. Not a soul knew of our furtive correspondence, save my Nonna, but she speak no English. I made sure Nonna stayed off the highway all the way to LaGuardia. It took an entire day. It was difficult for Nonna to drive on account of her hunchback, and one leg being slightly longer than the other. She’d balance her platform shoe atop the accelerator. I listened half of the time Nonna talked.

I wore a black hoodie on my redeye to New Orleans. I’d tacked the paper doll Anastasia had cut out for me at our graduation onto the crucifix at my chest. There it remained, always—and there’s nothing to put the fear of God into you like *just a little turbulence*.

Nothing to be afraid of, folks. Clutching my nausea bag, I still had a whole hour of jetlag to look forward to; and why were my arm hairs red?

From up there, New Orleans looked like some crappy, shelled-out puzzle. Even the buildings recalled upside-down top hats, just pregnant with trickery. Of course some lots remained vacant. From the air, Instead of renting a shuttle I tiptoed through the twilight hours along the streetcar line to my first class: Blues. And my new glasses still pinched my nose. *Bloody condensation.*

And why won't my glasses sit horizontally on my nose? Perhaps it's just my nose's bridge that's askew. So I down my third of a fifth of Red Label—I have a vague memory of standing, shirtless, by the marsh. Some suspended Ukrainian, it is possible that he is also deaf, struggles, to no avail, astride a unicycle. He finds support on a smallish tree. "I'm not sure what's going on," the midget says, "but I'ma have at least one more cigarette." It has been a furious night, grisly. Grisettes mesh into clouds in between my toes. My bacon belly gleams in the firelight.

Marth's room.

"Yo," Marth barely remembers my name, "Ale. You down to hit up the sauna? Smoke some weed first?" Still wearing a snorkel, he's just getting back from the pool. He was captain of his high school diving team.

The Saints have just kicked off. Mickey, Hieu, and I are listening to Louis Armstrong's *Struttin'* on Marth's record player. We've just returned from our early dinner, where I broke the cafeteria toaster, set it ablaze when I attempted to toast my double-thick-peanut-butter-chocolate-chip-cookie sandwich.

I drop Dom's glass vaporizer that he borrowed from a friend; it shatters.

"The *fuck*, Aly," Mickey cusses me out, saying my name wrong. "I said," he says, "how *in the fuck* do you do it?"

"Still wanna go to the sauna?" I ask.

“Wanna go to the sauna?” says Hieu, “Where do you get off, pal?”

Mickey, our cannabis connoisseur, has to roll a joint now. He does this well, although fractals of bud still cling to his waffle-knit. He leaves with it tucked behind his ear, in a huff. Our pot is not up to par, apparently.

I have been trading my Adderall for Mickey’s Ambien at 2:1. At first, they were definitely 20 milligrams, but I’ve suspected his prescription’s been changed for some time now. There’re etchings where the dosage markers once were. Maybe that’s just the company mark. Either way, I have begun to enjoy more. Last night I took four. At breakfast, Dom mentioned I’d been exhorting him, and since when do I sleep in the nude? Apparently, I had an entire conversation with Jesse, agreed to help him move some boxes too. Although I slept through two alarms (technically one; Dom punched off the second circa 9.50 a.m.) I hadn’t missed a single class. Regardless, I was a pancake throughout Elementary Symbolic Logic. Really, it’s terrific stuff, Ambien. And one a day does override my diving watch’s chromatic ticking. Usually.

Heiu grabs the remains of the vaporizer from my hand, picking shards of glass off his carpet.

“Shit, I’m sorry,” I say, unabashed.

Hieu tells me it’s fine.

I look to Marth as though he had said something more and then say, “for sure, man,” thrilled by the prospect of the milk of human kindness.

I should be working on my Portuguese essay.

We light up and leave.

She sits in the sand by the fire and I have somehow gotten over into that area.

“Italian or Irish?” Evylln asks.

We have been talking about our hometown: North Haven, Connecticut.

I tell her I am Italian, and I point to her: “Irish,” I say.

Evylln is the first Connecticut Tulanian I have encountered all semester. Her smile confirms it.

“Irish, okay,” I say. And she laughs, aloud.

She smells like flowers I wouldn’t necessarily know the names of. Evylln has dark eyes, like little planets with moons, too. Her hair’s an obtuse cone of red.

We list off all the middle schools, churches, and hybrids thereof in our neighborhood. Evylln invites Kitty and I back to her boyfriend’s place in the Seventh Ward. So, in the name of love, in the hope that Kitty might someday respond to my texts, I climb into Seth’s green sedan.

Reilly Center.

Cats! I am berated by a volley of mind-numbing meows the instant I leave my dorm. The Department of English insists on feeding the infernal creatures. Little fuckers follow me wherever I go on foot. I kick a few to clear a path for Marth and myself.

It is a nebulous walk to the campus gym. Regardless, my Ray-Bans come on the second I got past the cats. Marth wears a yellow shirt with a smoking, smiling black skeleton on it, waving. Marth also smokes his hand-rolled cigarette.

“You think I can bum one of those?” I say.

“Sorry,” Marth says, as though to say no.

“Do you mind if I have a cigarette?”

“Didn’t know you smoked, Allie.”

“Occasionally. Habitually,” I say, and I hold out my hand.

He looks to his side and exhales a thick cloud of unfiltered smoke.

“Look at this,” Marth says, and he squats down in the middle of the street to pick up a rusty green penny; on his way down, he burns my hand. The ember sticks onto my skin, which stings. It is white after I’ve finally brushed the embers off.

He is always finding shit like this; kid has a knack for it.

“1962,” he says. “Sweet.” And he pockets it.

My crucifix heats up faster than anything else, searing my chest. Orange light glows against the wood grain of the walls. It is an electric dry-heat sauna, and we both complain how the wood-fired ones are far superior.

His eyes closed, Marth says: “Just tryin’ to get a sweat going.”

Already my sweat streams across my Ray-Bans.

“Say, what kind of watch is that, Ali?”

“This? Swiss Army.”

“Sweet,” he says, and he clucks his throat twice.

He is always inquiring about various personal effects of mine—printer paper, staples, staplers—and about borrowing my Huff, which I have not seen in two weeks. Marth sits cross-legged, effortlessly. I bumble about trying to cross my legs over each other, but give up and just sit normally.

“So what do you even study here, man?” he asks the dreaded question.

So I tell him I am an English major.

“Oh,” he says, with a light slap of his knees.

“My brother has a housemate. He’s an English major. He’s real smart.” He opens his eyes and says, “so what do you do? You just read books and shit?”

I consider carefully how I might offer Marth the most insightful response to his, my most loathed, question.

“Yeah, man, we like to think we practice reading. And thinking, I’d say,” I tell him, “and, mind control, you know, man,” I say, and I wink like Paul Muni in *Scarface* (1932).

I hammer shut a fistful of sauna air. Marth laughs it off—meditates, I guess. “There it is,” he says, and, indeed, his sweat has broken.

Just as Marth’s pores open, a professorial gentleman with silver-plumed genitalia steps in, his towel under his arm. The silver-back sits down right between us and sighs the heavy sigh of sagacity.

Since this dinosaur has let out most of the hot air, and because he refuses to don his towel appropriately, we quit the sauna.

“What’s this?” Marth says, picking up a lanyard that someone hung up on a locker.

A goatish look sweeps over his face. Fingering the lanyard, he grips it tight. As though noticing me for the first time, Marth straightens himself out. He puts it back.

“Some idiot,” he says, “just left this. Could maybe open up the storage closets after dark, who knows, man.”

“Sure thing man,” I say, as we leave the gym.

It was a plain, green lanyard, yet his expression . . .

It’s Marth!

Marth the archeologist: the klepto.

It has to be him.

Turn him in?

No.

Marth could yet prove useful.

“Hey man,” I say. “I’m about to cook tonight. You down for some, eh, ciambotta?”

“What’s that?”

“Pasta with fish and vegetables,” I tell him. “A sort of gumbo, my friend. You will love it, I know, this is my very own family recipe. . . . The trick is to use a bit more olive oil at each stage! Especially in America, you Americans do—”

“Oh, hell yeah,” Marth interrupts.

You should know my *real* secret ingredient’s about 1,000 milligrams of crushed up Concerta—roughly twenty pills. But, for the Americans, I do add in the auxiliary fats as well, yes I do. Combining Nonna’s relaxing herbs with these ridiculous American study aids in such vast quantities generally allows people to be more agreeable.

A few bowls of Nonna’s ciambotta will get my mind-fix into this first soul, I hope. I need it to; I need friends. Dom’s bickering is getting louder every night, more coherent. And I am starting to

wonder if everything he says, or, well, what I hear...

No it is not.

Never mind. There are more cats every time I step outside.

"Let's go back to Butler," I say, and I grip Marth's bare shoulder amicably. Marth would be my first really real friend.

Seth was at the bonfire, pushing cocaine and LSD. Seth wore

a golden, glittering unitard under a black fur coat. The dude has got blonde dreads.

"If anybody needs some LSD," Seth said and, onebadmotha-fucka, straddled the bonfire with his lanky frame, "I know where you can get some, just come talk to me."

So Kitty and I have ended up in Seth's car. She likes to meet new people too. Her turtle finds its own way home, I guess. Seth has to pull over en route a few times, whenever the road lifts up and twists away into the wine-dark night (because of the acid he'd eaten); moonshine floats like a thousand diamonds across the Mississippi. Deftly, Seth avoids the many potholes, caused, perhaps, by invisible meteor showers that left these veritable dimples every which way. It's like navigating an asteroid field.

I ask Seth and Evylln for some of the cocaine they are snorting off my bike lock key, while Seth is driving. The coral reef of fuzz that is Seth's hair scrapes against the roof of his car. His head turns, skeptically.

"Are you a pissed-off mongoose or something?" Seth, who clearly enjoyed neither Pokémon nor Super Mario, asks.

I give him a toothy smile. Evylln gives me the key.

I sniff coke. And it is cocaine, or, at least, it is not Pez—like what Coco would snort off his desk in U.S. History, crushing it up between doodles, snorting for that mythical sugar rush.

Kitty shoots me arched eyebrows.

"Okay, this is the first time I've ever done cocaine," I tell her, softly and hoarsely, as I brush powder from my nose, "I swear."

And it is true: I've only done cocaine once—twice—maybe twice.

I may have done another key at the subsequent red light but I cannot be sure either way, so, yeah, once or twice.

We get there, though, to Seth's shotgun house. It has a radiator and a window fan. Even a refrigerator and a bedroom and a sink—two sinks, if you count the one in the bathroom. The bathroom, by the way, is attached to the kitchen. Seth is a fellow who lives well, but low on the hog.

"Welcome to the house, mate," Seth says, and his jaw lulls to the side as Evylln pours a small mountain of sand out of her shoe and onto the floor.

I puff on an unfiltered Camel. When I exhale, and smoke and saliva both leave my mouth, nobody notices.

Seth and Evylln snort stuff off of each other atop the bed, which consists of yoga pillows scattered over a large pile of dusty hardcovers. Few of the books are uninjured; spines are cracked or pages torn or they've sat in some puddle of God knows what. More-whole novels rest nearest the top. They nudge Seth's dreads. A plume of dust rises from said books as the two grapple, playfully. I turn away when he begins to defile her with his collapsible cattle prod. Sitting on the couch where Kitty is coiled up, sleeping, smiling, I'm not sure whether or not to close the door. I do.

Kitty has high, wide cheek bones and nearly perfect calves. Her eyes peep, pop, muted, toneless yet sultry: Modigliani's own *Reclining Nude*—they close again. With every blink of her quail eggs the room fills its lung with musk. Seth's lights forever tremble. I suspect I still reek of firewood. She presses languidly against her dress like a medium-height jug of aberrantly sensuous month-old milk and she exhales, whether she knows it or not.

Gently, I tug off her wig. I try it on and it fits; I check myself out in Seth's cocaine-runway looking glass. Why not? I try the shades on. Pretty fucking cool. *Ha*.

I cannot sleep; it's against the rules. Whenever I close my eyes a miniature troupe softshoes along my jaw.

Kitty sleeps, dreaming. She flails her arms. And I wish I could

sleep. And I wish I had friends, too. And I wish Anastasia could have stuck around, and I wonder what my Nonna is up to in heaven?

I doze off, still wishing.

My eye feels moist; I awake to Evylln's pug's incessant licking. Seth, with his wild posture, is already in the room leaning against his auxiliary bookshelf—gray skin and blue, blue eyes.

Seth fiddles with his ironic and Faustian facial hair.

Marth's room.

The shouts and murmurs emanate from Marth's room. I turn up *The Clash* on my laptop to tune out the ruckus. Bob Marley's rubbing his chin on my wall while I chew a mandrake root, just because. It's late, but the voices are all jazzed up. It sounds like our little klepto turned himself in. Mickey, a criminology major, once told me how the best criminals really want to get caught, and I agree.

I feel for the dude; Marth just could not stop stealing. Some things you just cannot stop. They nestle right up into your being. Sometimes, all you can do is choose your victims with benevolence.

I spoke with Marth over ciambotta on the afternoon of our trip to the sauna. He's a shiftless eater, and he only became more so as his meal progressed. The eyelids inched closer together with each morsel. I explained to him how he would have to give up his shenanigans, again and again, and he nodded, pasta slithering down his cleft chin. I was trying to help him. Am I really such a bad person? I merely convinced Marth to do the right thing, and give back the shampoo he'd so feverishly stolen—not that night, of course, but in due time (I needed a while to make my own contribution to this, our now communal, shampoo). What better way to coax my floormates into friendship than introducing my broth into their shampoo?

Ingredient 1: A fishy stew . . .

Ingredient 2: Of Concerta, add a few . . .

Ingredient 3: Mix broth into shampoo.

I've got mixes for fixes for tricks for pricks, for you.

Tonight the shampoo would flow freely: All shampoo. Everybody wins.

“Ale, you should really see this,” Dom says, poking his porky face through our dorm room door.

“Alright.” I say, snapping shut my laptop, hopping off my bed. I spit my sweetish root into the recycling.

Our whole floor is packed into Marth’s room like silent sardines. Marth stands by his bed. No 33 1/3 vinyls spin tonight; no Sly and the Family Stone; no Steely Dan; only Marth towering above us at 6’7”, yet hunched in shame.

“Good pants,” Seth says, and he smiles, in reference to my red skinnies.

I nod. Kitty also smiles, in her own way, in her sleep, still. Falling back to sleep is no longer an option because a small congregation of middle-aged black men chatters vociferously at a table just by the window.

At the bonfire Evylln told me about the sorts of drugs Seth sells.

“Not the commonly available green kind nor the psychedelic. The incredibly expensive incredibly illegal kind.”

“Like designer?” I asked.

“Like,” she answered.

I am admiring Seth’s red Air Force 1s when Kitty wakes, eyes wide, to Evylln’s clarinetesque nose blowing. Popping a few backbones, maybe muscles, finally pimples (which she eats, in a sexual fashion. It’s a thing, now), she reaches for a wine glass of cloudy, icy water. Grabs it. Downs it. Seth had prepared it, and placed it on the oval oak coffee table. Just for Kitty.

“Kitty, my dear. Kat,” Seth says, like a mad villain, “you’ve become quite the heavy sleeper, haven’t you?” Kitty’s eyes water.

“You two know each other?” I ask, stretching my arms too. They slit their eyes.

“You.” Seth means me. “You talk a lot in your sleep,” Seth says.

Fuck. Shit.

I realize I am still wearing Kitty's wig. I rip it off; I toss it onto the table and play it off as a joke. Although I vaguely recall briefly waking to his and Evylln's and maybe a third voice's laughter.

"Shit, sorry man if I said anything, sorry," I apologize, profusely.

"So you want friends?" he says, out from the frayed, bulbous wicker chair that seems to grow from his hair. His knees cross. From his unitard Seth plucks a map.

"I can help you out, I think, my friend."

I have had an off year, a lonesome semester, and one bad day. "I'm listening."

"Look, I'm sorry," Marth says, his head at an angle.

Marth's dark, beady eyes ricochet about his room. I'm peeling an orange with my thumb; pulp fills my nails.

"This is fucking crazy," says Dom.

"Right?" My eyes are halfway shut behind my shades; I feign a disaffected malcontent.

"I knew it. I knew it was Marth, this whole time," says our ROTC kid.

"Bullshit you did," says Dom. "Bullshit."

Marth crouches beneath his bed and pulls out a red wooden chest with a white cross on it. Its rope handles cannot be comfortable. He made it himself, using rubber cement to cover the inside of the lid with (Mickey's) rolling paper packs. His mother was an art teacher back in Fort Worth, and I would say he got *the gift* in his bag. Sliding the chest across the rug into the center of the room, into the eye of the crowd, he peels back the lid.

Meticulously aligned columns of shampoo fill Marth's red chest to the brim. It appears to be color coded, and my Selsun Blue dandruff shampoo sits on the surface, nudging someone's Head & Shoulders.

"Wow. So, okay..." I say, flabbergasted.

"I know. Yeah. I donno man, take it all back. I donno, know why I—just..." Marth says while I chomp down on my triptych of orange. "I'll see you around, Ale."

We do a limp-wristed Fort Worth handshake, his hair mad as wood.

Friend.

Eyes fixed on the vomit-colored carpet, he fidgets through the crowd. Slinging his backpack over his shoulders, Marth opens his door. He does not look back. He says, "I got to study some archeology shit. Y'all just, do what you got to." The door shuts itself.

Earlier, I sold him a 54-milligram Concerta. Meanwhile, Marth had stolen three more. If I know my fixes he'll spend the next twenty-four hours grinding his teeth, utterly focused on absolutely nothing. And he will get a shit-ton of work done too, if I know my fixes, that is.

Concerta's 100 percent non-addictive. However, cutting off the body's supply tends to invoke a general spirit of, well, lassitude. The short-term memory goes to shit, comparatively. The morning after that first bowl of amphetamine-enhanced ciambotta, Marth came to me. *He* knocked on *my* door. He could neither study, nor could he focus for more than ten to fifteen minutes at a time. *He* needed *my* help! I told him, selling him his first fix, "I understand."

The sardines jolt back to life, murmuring; they grab at their long-lost shampoo. All fourteen of them file out, clutching their forgotten memories of suds.

I linger.

I peruse through Marth's vinyl collection—which is to say his uncle's vinyl collection—and flip on a lovely bit of Chopin: Nocturne Opus 9 No. 2 rolls about my earlobes like a dreidel carved from an opium moon. I crouch over the red chest, close my eyes, and crack open my Selsun Blue. I take a resounding whiff. *Ah*, the scent still carries a trace of something special, something fishy.

Satisfied, I stand and walk to his sink, leaving Chopin to spin away. The record snuffles, no doubt due to some miniscule imperfection inherent in one groove or another—a flawed whistle, this cracked-open aria; the picking of scabs. But it snickers back to life as I pour out my thick goop of shampoo. The sink—our dorm rooms come with sinks, believe it or not—has been clogged with all sorts of miniscule hairs, mosquitoes, lint, and floating whatnot. Shampoo, however, is denser than water. Down the drain it eddies. And I laugh—lightly at first, but soon a hoarse guffaw comes through and I am chortling. I leave dear Marth a perfectly peeled orange. A few tweaks later, I’ve arranged the skin into a smiley face on his vinyl player.

None for me, I think.

No, no, no, this is Marth’s shampoo now. Marth’s and, I bite into my hatchet nails, everyone else’s.

My friends.

Pellets peg my forehead.

Seth’s map led me right back to the beach. It is still freezing by the levee the night after the Mystery, only without what passed for a fire. Still I sit. Kitty remained at Seth’s and slept, I guess—a fair trade. I dig my toe into the dirt through the burnt sand. Dirt packs under my toenails; sand becomes mud. Out from this mud I nudge a translucent orange pill bottle. I pick it up and shake off bits of mud. I hold it close to my face so as to read the label via moonlight: *Concerta—54 mg—extended release*.

The bottle’s packed with thick pink pills. And even the moon smiles back at me.

I sit alone at a dock over the fertilizer-brown hue of the lapping Mississippi, pop open the bottle, my cure for loneliness, with my thumb, and then twist it shut, again and again. It’s not half bad as an instrument. Through the clouds I can make out the stars’ strings. They look fucking fake.

Cicadas hum over the tides, expressionless; the drizzle picks up. Across the water, cranes wail at one another like robot bats in the midst of an orgy-themed rollercoaster. The Ray-Bans I nicked from Seth's coffee table begin to fog. Some nights New Orleans smells like Napoli, and tonight is one of those. My paper doll dampens. My ears start ringing. My nose bloodies. I feel a little bit of pressure in between the hemispheres of my brain. For a moment I go blind, and wake up to a thunderstorm.

Beautiful, clouds, aren't they, in their fleshiest tones. They say you only get to see them thanks to so much light pollution, whatever that may be. I'm grateful.

But I do miss them badly. I miss Nonna, Anastasia, Kitty. Holy shit, I miss Kitty. She was bushels of fun. She took it like it was a jaded knife that was not killing her. I'll bring her back. First I'll make these friends, and then, I will win her. I swear it; I'll bring them all back. Why? Because I've nothing better to do. Besides, whatever has a beginning deserves to have an end. No more of this limbo. What began in Sorrento ends in New Orleans—you'll see. Using a flat stone, I crush a couplet of pills, grinding them into it (thunder). I've ground my pills to dust; they make a paste that I snort off the wet sand.

Finally, I shake myself dry and head back to Butler Hall for a soothing shower.

Butler Hall, lounge.

If only I had some peas, I would add those as well. Needless to say, I don't have any peas—"*Mannaggia-Catzo-Santo-Cristoforo--Jesu-Maria—Cristo!*" I holler out as my thick pool of spiced olive oil spurts from my pan and sears my forearm. Because it hurts less if you scream, or sing. So goes Nonna's lore.

I kiss the burn to ease the pain. I add the vegetables. My pot of water and salt comes to a boil. If only I had just one of those Lorelei

lemons, as big as your skull. I add pasta, fettuccine; watching the garlic simmer to evanescence I dice up the fish. Redfish. Add it. Add vegetables. Watch the pasta; stir it; add olive oil, so the aforementioned pasta does not stick to the pot. Killing time, I harmonize with the Italian folk arias emanating from my laptop.

“Torna So ... rre-en ... to,” I sing Nonna’s Neapolitan patois litanies, deeply. Conducting a phantom orchestra with my saucy wooden spoon, I’m sending marinara spluttering; the cleaning staff should have the kitchen spotless by Monday, tomorrow, so no worries.

“Vidi o’ maare ka ...”

Do you like my song? I’d sing it along with Nonna, cooking, in the kitchen of her hotel—the Lorelei—before those oily mafiosi tore her from our breast; before they’d grown fat from the life of her land, and her gnocchi; before the Hotel Lorelei half-burned off her cliff on the Amalfi coast, sizzling, but not for insurance; before I came to America, where business booms, and souls come cheap—more bang for your buck.

So long, Vesuvius. Goodbye, burning lemon trees.

Now what’s been done must be undone, they say, repaid in full: Soul per soul. They don’t care how long it takes. There can be no vacancy. Find us fifteen friends, replacements, they say, and we’ll let her go, they say, maybe. And I love my Nonna, very much. I had a few things to piece together, but no longer may I dillydally (as they say). And forever did seem like an exaggeration, but nope.

Take with food, says my orange daemon, and how *right*. How *true*. The pasta goldens as though it were whorls of hair. These strands I comb, with much love. They twirl along like the poesies left by candles. Strawberry blonde.

Barefoot, I mumble: “Curdle, kindle, boil and niggle: lyre churn, sky turned musky, purple whirlpool!—redeem me and mine, there was never no crime.”

Smell, taste, drain, combine. Mix a bit. Serve, with your preference of red or white wine. Eagerly await soggy mafiosi, dragging clammy feet trailed by algae.

3:00 A.M.; 3:00 A.M.; 3:00 A.M.; my alarm clock keeps splashing the time against the wall. My eyes yearn to be rubbed. I am on the mend, I suppose, from an all-nighter hustling Ritalin by the library stoop. It had not been any trouble for me to keep awake. Normally, I wouldn't stoop so low, but Vivance has wrecked the study-aid economy. How's a red-blooded American to compete with these overinsured bastards, pawning their shit by the nickel jar, flooding my freaking market. Meanwhile Uncle Sam foots the bill. Yeah, right; money's negligible. Friends are forever.

I dish out the ciambotta as fast as they shovel it in, eyes ever fixed on the their texts (it's a study party).

"Enjoy," I tell all fourteen of my floor mates. I leave the wines to breathe on my desk extension. Their aromas defy gravity.

I allow the dudes a dollar off Concerta if they study with their friend: me. Marth, Hieu, Mickey, that ROTC kid, Dom, and so on are all present. They have poured themselves over my room like lemurs; they sprawl over both beds, the floor, even the desks. My arm lolls slothfully against my chair.

It's times like these I get to thinking everybody's got a little ADHD.

A few people, whom I will never understand, study with house music blasting through earphones. *Because we are*, lyrics leak through now and then, *you will never be alone again....* But the chattering of teeth, teeth sliding over each other, and the nervous cracking of bones overwhelms the buzz.

Hieu, ever our architecture major, leans over the aforementioned extension, which bends, creaking. He's crushing some Concerta (when you grind down XR finely enough the molecules break down into a fuck-ton of IR. Thusly I have diversified my fixes) with the butt of his black lighter. Hieu divides it into three lines with the edge of his Tulane Splash Card. Snorts the first line and closes his eyes with a resounding grunt. The wine bottles quiver.

"Does it burn?" I cordially ask.

"No. Not nearly as bad as cocaine wakes me up," he says.

Hieu takes a moment to lick the residue from his card, next off my desk extension. *Silly, silly, Hieu*, I want to say. *Atta boy*.

"If I ever tell you to stop selling me this shit," Hieu says, his eyes bleak like oysters, "please, stop."

Mickey rolls and unrolls a spliff, experimenting with various tobacco-to-pot proportions, getting his filters just right. Mickey is, his jaw clenched, sweating now. He sprinkles Hieu's second line into his spliff, which is funny because I've been lacing his pot with this fix for approximately seven and a quarter days.

Dom picks at his acne, in his reflection on his PC screen, which illuminates the room, opaline. Marth reads and reads, and furtively nabs my .7 led. Our ROTC kid's hooked into *Starcraft II*. At the end of the day—day after day—after a few spoonfuls of Concerta, the whole world is lonely, I often think, like me. We're born alone and we die alone; but when I go, a second-line of loners will follow in tow to the supreme abode.

"Of course." I tell him. "My friend."

You snort so as to clear your nostril. And I hit Dom's final line—why not? Not like I'm getting any sleep anyway. I am my own cipher. The powder leaves a bitter aftertaste in the back of my throat. And I read all 130 pages of an F. Scott Fitzgerald biography in one sitting. It is a library copy, but I underline every word with red ink nonetheless. I annotate illegible Italian notes into the back of my left hand. India ink spills across my pores (I've been practicing my signature too, but I've done that on my feet).

I scan the room, flecks of Concerta snowing from my nostril. With Concerta, life is like a snowglobe. I adjust my fitted lid—my friends all do, too. *They'll do nicely*. In an attempt to fall into a vaguely Native American squat I roll back and knock the back of my head against the corner of my desk. Flailing, you bust a toenail against my bedpost.

"Oui!" I cry out, "oui-oui-ouiioioioi."

These friggin' glasses are cracked down one lens again. Dom snickers; they laugh. They all laugh and they will not stop. They can't

stop, and so I join in. What's laughter? And we are all in stiches, really. Blood mats my hair. *It's three a.m.*, you think and I smile to myself, *three a.m. And do you know where your children are?* From across the room Marth suh-says: "Anthony, you okay?"

I howl with laughter, because everyone can see up my nose. As they say, the man who laughs last, he laughs. You would say my friends are here to stay.

You were born yesterday, and the ground is rough for your tender feet.

"Rock and roll," you say. A puff of powder leaves your nose.

Your first and fourth fingers spike up, while your thumb and middle fingers loop.

Cats! they rollick upward, meowing bubbles to freedom. A paper doll ascends; it's already partly dissolved. A sea turtle in a Marilyn Monroe wig glides past your window. You would swear it winked.

Short Story Playlist

The liner notes

Noah Charney

Earlier this year I embarked on a month-long literary voyage.

I read thirty great short stories, by thirty renowned authors, in thirty days. My intention was to read a lot of great writing over a concentrated period of time, reading with a writer's eye. What could I, as an author, learn from reading the greats? Specifically, what tactics and techniques could I gather from these masters of short fiction, that I might then apply to writing a short story myself? I've written novels, trade non-fiction, academic texts, articles and reviews, even the teleplay for a Croatian sitcom, but I haven't written a short story since college. Inspired by what may be a renaissance of the form and by the revival of the publishing world's interest in short story collections (from Jess Walter, Nathan Englander, George Saunders, Charles Baxter, Karen Russell, Wells Tower, to name a few), I thought this might be a fine time to attempt something in the genre. Short story collections have always been well-reviewed, but lately they've even been selling as well as novels. And, in the age of eBooks and digital downloads, short fiction collections may go the way of music albums, which are now available as downloadable individual songs. I imagine readers downloading Englander's "Free Fruit for Young Widows" for 99 cents, without necessarily buying his entire book of stories, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank*, which lists for \$20. Such self-curating of new literary works is not yet possible, but with eBook "singles" available for a few bucks, I believe it's just a step away. You heard it here first, folks.

My task of reading a story a day lent itself to the idea of the self-curated "playlist," hence the title of this series, which I kicked off with an introductory essay in the spring 2013 print issue of the *New Haven Review*: "The Short Story Playlist." I read each story once at night, once more the next morning, and then I wrote an informal, thousand-word response to each. My responses to the stories were posted on New Haven Review's web-site by its editor, Donald Brown, from late July to early October, stretching my "thirty stories

in thirty days” approach into a more leisurely “thirty in two months and change.”

Here is that list again, as it originally appeared, with the dates of the blog posts added.

1. Ambrose Bierce “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” (7/23)
2. Nathaniel Hawthorne “The Minister’s Black Veil” (7/25)
3. Mark Twain “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County” (7/28)
4. Edgar Allan Poe “Fall of the House of Usher” (7/30)
5. Washington Irving “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” (8/2)
6. Rudyard Kipling “Rikki-Tikki-Tavi” (8/5)
7. F. Scott Fitzgerald “The Curious Case of Benjamin Button” (8/8)
8. W. W. Jacobs “The Monkey’s Paw” (8/9)
9. H. P. Lovecraft “The Colour Out of Space” (8/19)
10. Edith Wharton “Roman Fever” (8/21)
11. William Faulkner “A Rose for Emily” (8/26)
12. James Joyce “The Dead” (8/27)
13. Ernest Hemingway “Baby Shoes” (8/28)
14. Charlotte Perkins Gillman “The Yellow Wallpaper” (8/29)
15. John Cheever “Reunion” (8/30)
16. John O’Hara “Good Samaritan” [“Graven Image”] (9/3)
17. James Thurber “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty” (9/5)
18. Flannery O’Connor “A Good Man is Hard to Find” (9/8)
19. Raymond Carver “Cathedral” (9/10)
20. Shirley Jackson “The Lottery” (9/12)
21. O. Henry “The Gift of the Magi” (9/14)
22. Isaac Asimov “Little Lost Robot” (9/17)
23. Roald Dahl “Man from the South” (9/19)
24. J. D. Salinger “A Perfect Day for Bananafish” (9/24)
25. Joyce Carol Oates “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” (9/26)
26. Stephen Millhauser “Eisenheim the Illusionist” (9/27)

27. Woody Allen “The Whore of Mensa” (9/30)
28. Annie Proulx “Brokeback Mountain” (10/2)
29. Stephen King “One for the Road” (10/3)
30. Nathan Englander “Free Fruit for Young Widows” (10/4)

Because I wrote responses to several additional stories, there are a few “bonus tracks” as well. Once I was in the groove I felt I could happily read a different story each night for a year, though even the most avid reader’s determination might be tested by following me for 365 stories and responses. The other posted responses are:

31. H. H. Munro (Saki) “Sredni Vashtar” (10/26)
32. Vladimir Nabokov “Signs & Symbols” (10/27)

I stuck to the pre-arranged list of thirty, with one exception. John O’Hara’s “Good Samaritan” proved impossible for me to find. Though one of his better-known stories, I could find no copy online or as an eBook. It does not appear in my fat *Collected Stories of John O’Hara* (to my surprise, as I remembered it there). So I swapped in another O’Hara classic, “Graven Image,” in its place.

The stories I chose would be considered, fairly universally, as among the best short fiction ever written in English. Most appear regularly in high school or college literary syllabi, and many have been anthologized dozens of times. There are few stories here that any avid reader would recoil at, wondering “Why the heck did Charney choose that?” Of course, while I do prefer the horror/thriller genre above all others, the likes of Lovecraft and Poe are not for everyone, I realize. But I found that stories not intended as works of horror often have the very elements so often found in such stories: creeping dread and a twist ending. Perhaps, then, something about the short form lends itself to suspense and dread and to an ending that, because it arrives quickly, can be truly revelatory.

We might break down our list of thirty stories in a variety of interesting ways. Rather than describing characteristics and then grouping the stories accordingly (something the reader who has read along with me might be tempted to do), let's try to make some general points. After all, this exercise of reading and writing is supposed to help me write a story. So: What are the components of the ideal short story, derived from the works in my playlist?

Character-Based vs. Plot-Focused

The main distinguishing factor that sorts the stories into one camp or another is the author's choice of whether to focus on character (which makes for the more literary stories) or plot (the more popular, often thrilling ones). The best fiction, whether short or book-length, combines developed characters with engaging plots. Fine, but most fiction falls into one category or the other. That doesn't mean that your standard paperback thriller doesn't have character development, but the reason you can't stop reading it is because of its plot. Likewise "things happen" in character-driven novels, but we spend most of our time focused on the characters, their thoughts and feelings: on their reaction to what is happening, not on what is happening.

Short stories, with less space to sprawl, tend to focus even more. Characters must be developed in several strokes, not slowly percolated over several hundred pages. There is space for a few plot points, but we mostly deal with one situation, and see how it resolves itself. Stories like "The Lottery" are firmly plot-based. We learn little to nothing about the characters involved, and the characters do not change over the course of the story. We read to see how the interesting situation, a lottery that no one wants to win because winning means you are killed, plays out. By contrast, "The Yellow Wallpaper" is a story in which very little happens—a woman is confined in a creepy bedroom with wallpaper seemingly alive—but what fascinates is the character of the woman, as we crawl inside her head (before

she crawls out of the wallpaper).

As a reader, I've learned that a great story can focus either on plot or character—whereas my inner writing teacher or literary critic seems to insist a story, to be truly great, must have both. “The Lottery” is great without character development, just as little needs to happen for “The Yellow Wallpaper” to be supremely chilling and powerful. I do not think, however, that either story could sustain itself at book length. For “The Lottery” to work as a novel, we would have to become invested in, and learn much more about, certain characters in the village, to care whether they “win” or not. And, with regard to “The Yellow Wallpaper,” it's hard, though it has been done (Emma Donoghue's *Room* comes to mind), to sustain an entire novel that takes place in one room, largely in the narrator's head. For a novel, we can certainly spend most of our time inside the protagonist's point of view, but we must also expand outward—events must take place, there must be action. In short, short stories are short enough to get away with bending the rules of “good” writing.

That said, the stories I liked best, and which most haunted me after reading them, were those that truly combined character study with plot. “Roman Fever” is a double portrait of two society ladies who share more than one of them had realized. Through their verbal duel as they look upon the ruins of Rome, we are privy to the actions of their lives, and the tug-of-war over status that they had never before articulated. “Little Lost Robot” is plot-based, following a detective-story investigation concerning which of 63 robots is behaving against its programmed requirements. But the protagonist, the robopsychologist Dr. Calvin, is so well-drawn that we remember her above the whodunit (or in this case “whereisit”) plot—she so engaged the author, Isaac Asimov, that he had her reappear in other stories. “A Perfect Day for Bananafish” and “Free Fruit for Young Widows” balance character (two very similar protagonists, in fact) with thriller moments, a moving story, and that sense of creeping dread that always gets me.

Creeping Dread

A number of the stories in this playlist (“One for the Road,” “The Colour Out of Space”) fall securely into the horror genre. But I was surprised to find that most of the stories in this project had some component of what I have termed “creeping dread.” This is the sensation that something is going to happen that you want not to happen. Simple as that. It does not have to be something monstrous, as when our narrator slowly mounts the rickety wooden stairs of the Gardner family farmhouse to see what’s left of Mrs. Gardner, who has been locked in the attic since she went mad (“The Colour Out of Space”). It could be dread at the idea that Ennis del Mar’s wife, Alma, is going to stumble upon her husband kissing Jack Twist (“Brokeback Mountain”), or that the narrator will be rude to Robert, his blind houseguest (“Cathedral”). The author intentionally triggers in the reader a dread of something unpleasant that we suspect will happen—because, given what we know, it could happen. We’re made to imagine the worst. The dread may be the dread of something truly dreadful (being attacked by vampires, as in “One for the Road”) or by setting a heroic protagonist against something we find unpleasant—such as a peppy mongoose battling cobras (in “Rikki-Tikki-Tavi”). But the dread can as easily—and more subtly—come from dread of a faux pas, or of an embarrassing secret, or of the wrong choice.

What surprised me is how stories that are not thrillers exhibited components of thrillers. “A Rose for Emily” is a character study of an ornery and mysterious southern lady. But the last scene, as guests explore her house after her funeral, is straight out of a horror story. “Graven Image” makes us ache, because we know that the mood in the bustling, glamorous restaurant is loaded with something unpleasant—we just don’t know what, or how it will manifest itself. The elderly couple’s aborted visit to see their son in a psychiatric hospital in “Signs & Symbols” is so piled with dread that we practically jump out of our seats when the phone rings back at their apartment. And then the phone rings again ...

Without trying to pick only thrilling stories, I ended up with a bunch of famous stories that have thriller components to them. This tells me that creeping dread can be a component to great stories, regardless of genre. Dread is probably the easiest emotion to trigger, more visceral and basic, requiring less space and time for development than more complex emotions like jealousy, sadness at lost love or a death. Put someone in a dark apartment, the lights suddenly flicker off, and the front door knob slowly turns. . . and you've got a little dread going on. To prompt a reaction, sparking an emotion in a reader across time and space, is a pretty powerful wizard's trick, satisfying for reader and writer alike. Many writers would be willing to saw off appendages to be able to make a reader cry out silently—or aloud, like my grandmother when watching thrillers—"Don't go in there!"

Surprise or Twist Endings

About half of the playlist stories feature a surprise twist that arrives late in the story, at times in the last line. The conclusion prompts the reader to re-read the story immediately, to see if the twist came honestly, with foreshadowing that we can now, in retrospect, recognize, or whether it was a sort of *deus ex machina*. There is not a single cheating twist in my playlist, no gods descending from on high to sort out the problems that the mortals got themselves into, while subverting the consistent reality of the plot. These are all honest twists, and some are doozies.

"An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" is the tough act to follow for twist endings. Until the last line, we think that the events in the story are taking place, only to learn that they take place only in the mind of the protagonist in the seconds before his death. By the end of "Roman Fever" we think that devious Mrs. Slade has won the verbal duel, when the last line turns the tables and we see that the demure Mrs. Ansley has in reality carried the day. "A Rose for Emily" is a solid, but perhaps unmemorable, character study of the odd

spinster Emily Grierson, until the last paragraph, when we see just how odd she was—and much less of a spinster than we imagined. “Man from the South” is a bizarre tale made more bizarre, and sinister, when we see how many fingers the Man from the South’s wife has—which we only learn in the last line. “A Perfect Day for Banana-fish” is difficult to follow until the last line, a masterpiece of tension built within a single sentence, which prompts us to re-read the story to find clues that lead to that surprise ending, and to help us understand what happened.

These twists give our hearts a little flip when we reach them. They surprise us, above all, and there is pleasure in being surprised, akin to the joy and wonder of seeing a magician pull off an inexplicable trick. We were sure that we had a handle on what was happening, until the author pulled the rug from beneath our feet. Now dismayed that we knew less than we realized, we go back through the story to make sure that the surprise ending was plausible and possible to figure out—if only we had the prescience. Like films with trick twists, from *The Usual Suspects* (who is Keyser Söze?) to *Citizen Kane* (what is Rosebud?), which we watch in a single viewing of about two hours, short stories are perfect vehicles for the employment of trick endings. Get to the end of a novel and be tricked, and we might feel cheated, strung along. I once wrote a novel in which I wanted to reveal that the protagonist was black only in the last page—my editor told me that this was too much, that readers would feel somehow betrayed to have imagined the character for over four-hundred pages and to have their image of him suddenly altered at the end. Aside from a few outliers, like Philip Roth’s *Portnoy’s Complaint*, novels do not feature last line twists. There is too much reading time to have a whole novel lead up to one twist, although multiple surprises over the course of a novel are most welcome—serialized novels were known for that. In short stories, that final kicker is more wholly satisfying, and thus a frequently-used effect.

Style: Baroque vs. Minimalist

Since I chose a selection of stories that covers about 150 years, we must take into account the writing styles of various eras. We tend to think that older stories will be more ornately written, with lots of description, abounding in adjectives and latinate words. Another surprise was how little “written” many of these stories felt—including my favorites among them. Edgar Allan Poe is famously Baroque in his writing style, while his rough contemporary, Washington Irving, is far more straightforward. H. P. Lovecraft was an intentionally decorative author (and perhaps unsurprisingly, like Poe, he was not very popular during his lifetime and did not earn much at his craft), while Edith Wharton, at least in “Roman Fever,” is quite direct. Approaching William Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily,” I was pleasantly surprised at how straightforward the text was—I only knew Faulkner from *As I Lay Dying*, which uses dialect and the thoughts of uneducated, backwoods characters expressed naturalistically—powerful, but hard to read. Mark Twain wrote out dialect, which is dangerous, as some of it requires reading aloud to catch what the characters are trying to say, thus drawing the reader out of the story.

It is common in our time—after Hemingway and Carver—to expect stories to be more minimalist, less discursive, so the more modern-sounding authors are those whose work feels less “written.” Of course, every story is written, but the question is whether the writing announces itself to the reader, or whether it’s merely a conduit, a means to tell the story, with the author receding into the background. The truly minimalist stories have barely any phrase that you want to pause over, read aloud, then write in elegant cursive on a postcard and paste it to your wall. Salinger, Englander, O’Hara, Asimov are all contemporary minimalist in their style. Their writing gets the job done without announcing itself. Among contemporary writers in this playlist, only Annie Proulx can be called Baroque. She’s a great writer and she wants us to know it, whomping us on

the head with beautiful prose, the exotic vocabulary of Wyoming flora, and specific terms for cowboy paraphernalia. A lot of writers in their youth think that conspicuous writing means good writing (I certainly used to). But this project has convinced me otherwise. Tell the story cleanly; if it contains a good enough plot, with vivid enough characters, the author can recede into the background and let the tale spin forth.

The two stories that I would rate as the “best” of those I read were J. D. Salinger’s “A Perfect Day for Bananafish” and Nathan Englander’s “Free Fruit for Young Widows.” They both combine tension, dread, and thriller moments in deep character studies of flawed, battle-scarred soldiers just after the end of their respective wars. The stories are similar in style and effect, and in the profiles of their protagonists, and their titles even have a fruity theme. Both build a story out of several linked scenes. “Bananafish” presents three scenes: a phone conversation in a hotel room, a chat between the protagonist and a child on the beach, and the protagonist returning to said hotel room to do something sinister, and surprising. “Free Fruit” contains nested stories: an incident during the 1956 Sinai Campaign between the armed forces of Egypt and Israel; a father, Shimmy Gezer, telling that story and others to his son, Etgar; and the main story the father tells, of Professor Tendler and why he was forgiven for beating Shimmy badly during the war. Salinger’s Seymour Glass and Englander’s Professor Tendler are remarkably parallel protagonists. Both bear emotional scars from their time at war. Both can kill because of those scars, desensitized to human moral interaction because of what they experienced—the main difference is that Glass kills himself, while Tendler kills others. But the narrator of “Free Fruit” makes the point that Etgar understands that only a razor’s edge separated Tendler from killing himself, as opposed to killing his enemies—a hair’s breadth in the other direction, and Tendler would have ended up as Glass did—and, until the very last line of the story, we believe Glass is going to kill his wife,

not himself. Both authors use a minimalist approach, with Salinger favoring naturalistic dialogue as a means to convey back story, while Englander employs a storytelling technique. Both are hugely effective, provoking tangible emotions, creeping dread, and dramatic tension, with sleek, unpretentious writing. Salinger features a surprise twist in the last line; Englander doesn't. They are the two standouts from a murderer's row of great writing that I feel privileged to have enjoyed over a concentrated period of time, able to juggle the authors in my head and directly compare them, thanks to the speed with which I read them.

What did I learn, to apply to my own writing? What are the ingredients to create a killer short story? I broke down what I culled from the project into a few basic rules, and a few basic decisions.

1. Keep the writing simple. Authorial fireworks are not necessary to make for a great story.
2. Choose a narrative technique. Naturalistic, dialogue-based ("Bananafish"). Story-teller ("Eisenheim the Illusionist"). Classical omniscient third-person narrative ("Brokeback Mountain"). Parody ("Whore of Mensa"). Unreliable first-person narrative ("The Yellow Wallpaper"). Classic first-person narrative ("Fall of the House of Usher"). Any can work. The question is what serves the story best, and what you as author are most comfortable with.
3. Surprise endings are worth the authorial effort. I love twist endings, whether they come in films or stories. That heart-flip when the twist is revealed is a powerful, visceral response that you, as author, can provoke in your readers. The writer becomes a magician and prompts not only a tip of the hat to your skills as a writer, but also encourages readers to reread your story—and what author would not want to enchant readers so much that they will reread your story immediately to see how you tricked them? Such twists are difficult to engineer, but the payoff is worth the effort.
4. Show, don't tell, unless your narrative says otherwise. How-to-books on writing always say "show, don't tell." We should see

how a character behaves to understand her character, rather than the narrator telling us a lot of information about the character. The only exception to this rule is with first-person or storyteller narrative techniques, where the fictional teller of the tale is present as a character. First-person narration means that a fictional character within the short story is telling you a story as part of the work of fiction. Such narration often tells us as much about the story-teller as about the story; whether the teller is unreliable (“The Yellow Wallpaper”) or reliable (“Fall of the House of Usher”), we need them to gain access to the story, through a limited perspective. Storyteller style uses text to replicate someone speaking a story to an audience, and therefore the speaker/narrator, a palpable presence, can tell, rather than just show. But the more naturalistic, and in my opinion more effective, techniques require the author to recede into the background to promote the reader’s immersion in the story. Even better if the reader needs to work, just a little, to extract the facts needed to understand the story wholly. I had to reread the phone call in the opening scene of “Bananafish” three times in order to unpick the lock that explained why the protagonist, Seymour Glass, killed himself at the end. I like that sort of story-as-riddle. The reader feels rewarded for having solved a puzzle.

5. Include creeping dread. Comic stories aside, the pleasurable sensation of concern over a character’s well-being, the hope that something bad, implied by the narrative, will not befall them, is a winning ingredient to include in any work of fiction. Our investment in the character urges us to read on to learn what happens, and grabs our insides like an invisible fist. All fiction hopes to provoke, to draw the reader into the story; a sense of dread compels us to find out what will happen.

6. Haunt. All fiction hopes to haunt its readers, though not necessarily in a ghostly sense. Authors work to make their readers remember images, scenes, characters, situations long after the book has been closed. If something an author wrote can stay with a reader beyond the duration of the read, if an image can crop up years down

the road, then the text haunts. This playlist brims with haunting images: Young Professor Tandler crawling out of a pile of concentration camp corpses; Emily Grierson cuddling, for decades, the well-dressed skeleton of her deceased husband in their marriage bed; a jumping frog filled with buckshot and a cobra-dueling mongoose; an outlaw with satyr-like feet perched in toe-stuffed boots and a homicidal floating color at the bottom of a well; a prostitute who charges for analysis of Melville and a veil-obscured preacher—hats off to the authors who haunt!

The response among authors to this project has been encouraging. Short story writers like Karen Russell, Junot Díaz, and Nathan Englander thought the project a great idea. Some readers “read along” with me, reading the short story prior to my essay about it. Most writers said that they were all for anything to promote the medium of short fiction which, as the playlist shows, can boast a diverse tradition of great stories. The short story is still shamefully marginalized due to publishers believing that story collections should sell like novels and that only collections by mega-hit authors like Stephen King can manage that. I wonder if the idea of selling short stories individually, packaged with “extras,” as an alternative to buying the whole book, might one day soon take off, so that we may one day hear of “hit” stories going viral.

Online Piracy

This brings me to one of the potential problems with selling short stories individually: online piracy. The same problem that the music industry faces would likewise be an issue here. I was able to find PDFs online of two-thirds of the thirty stories, in most cases as part of course packets put together by university professors. Some of the stories are in the public domain, others are not, but putting such course packets online for students to access has become common practice in academia. That means that a lot of well-meaning professors assist in offering for free what potential readers should really

be paying for. It's the sort of ethical dilemma that most don't realize is a dilemma at all—how many professors would equate what they are doing with the escapades of Pirate Bay? One can invoke the 10% rule: for educational or critical purposes, up to 10% of a text can be copied, quoted, or distributed at no charge and without seeking permission. This is fine for excerpts of long texts, but a single short story in a collection will account for less than 10% of the total book, and yet is a complete work, and may not prompt the reader to go out and buy the rest. And how can you expect someone to pay for a short story, if it is available online for free?

There are ways around this, surely. The music industry, for all its whimpering, is still doing just fine, but folks may be loath to pay even 99 cents for Salinger's "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" when they can get find it online for free. I believe a key to solving this problem is to add value to the purchased version, not only facilitating ease of purchase (many people like the cleanliness of clicking a button on one's i-gadget and having a file magically appear in it). How about an audio version included, the story read by the author or a name actor, plus author's comments or annotations to the story by a scholar, maybe with an additional essay about the story? Including some "extras," like those in DVD box sets, can add value to individual for-sale stories.

My ideal would have been to compile my "Short Story Playlist" by downloading, for 99 cents each, the thirty stories in the project. I wound up doing a version of that, but the stories required chasing down, and none were available to buy, outside the confines of a big printed book, or through archival access to *The New Yorker*, where a fair percentage of the stories were first published. So I cobbled together the stories the old-fashioned and unwieldy way. But my determination is stronger than ever that an iTunes-style format to sell individual stories directly to eBook readers would work, and would be popular.

Building My Own Short Story

That so many of the stories in my playlist were first published in *The New Yorker* raises the question: is the “*New Yorker*” story the ideal for short fiction? This cannot be said definitively, because *New Yorker* stories are of a certain type: literary, thoughtful, with little action taking place outside the conversations and thoughts of a small number of characters. They are off-Broadway stage plays, with a handful of people in a small number of spaces, thinking and speaking. Genre pieces rarely make the cut (sci-fi and fantasy and horror are not considered acceptable), and so the “*New Yorker* story” is a specific species. The magazine is also just about the only game in town now, in terms of a high-profile non-book venue for short fiction, and so its importance is over-weighed, compared to decades ago, when it was just one of many fine, high-end magazines. Given my penchant for writing action, and the tiny sliver of submissions ever accepted, my chances of writing a *New Yorker* story are negligible, and my strengths as a writer discourage me from trying. I like to write about actions undertaken by interesting characters, with the focus on action rather than character.

It is evident to those who followed the thirty essays in this series, that I am more comfortable with genre pieces, and sometimes don’t quite know what to say about the works that most excite English literature professors. I thoroughly enjoyed “Little Lost Robot,” while I liked but couldn’t quite wrap my head around “The Dead” (whereas my editor loves “The Dead” and was unmoved by “Little Lost Robot”). I know what I was most impressed by—Salinger and Englander—but I can’t quite picture how I could write stories like theirs. I’m much more apt to write (or should I say attempt) something like Joyce Carol Oates or Stephen King or Charlotte Perkins Gillman. I’d love to have the combination of dread and mystery of John O’Hara and Vladimir Nabokov—I love trying to figure out exactly what happened, being a bit uncertain, but enjoying the

uncertainty, a mystery beckoning but unsolved. Something you want to read a second time the moment you finish, with some 5-10% of the content requiring further quiet thought and contemplation to be grasped fully. So if I'm aiming for an Englander, with a side order of O'Hara, but my natural tendencies point more toward Oates, what pieces will I draw upon for my own story? If my ideal is Englander's "Free Fruit for Young Widows" crossed with the mysticism of the "bonus track" in my playlist, Nabokov's "Signs & Symbols," then I will be stretching myself. But nothing ventured, nothing gained.

I've already selected my plot, but nothing more. I like to use fiction to fill out plausible, but unsubstantiated, blank spots in the jigsaw puzzle of history. The story I've chosen fills in just such a spot. Joseph Stalin died under highly suspicious circumstances. On his last night, against his normal routine, he locked himself in his bedroom and instructed his guards not to disturb him under any circumstances. His guards left him for hours, scared to open the door against his orders. He was found the next day, apparently having suffered a stroke. He died shortly thereafter. It was found that one of the last things he looked at before he died was a letter from Tito. The letter stated that Tito was well aware that Stalin had sent many assassins (over twenty) to kill him over the years, but all had failed. Tito wrote that he would only have to send one. With Stalin's suspicious death, combined with his reading this letter hours before the stroke that killed him, a fascinating question is raised: could Stalin have been murdered by a Yugoslav assassin? In my story, as you can probably guess, the answer will be: yes.

Who will tell my story? This is the first, and most important, decision before the writing begins, because not a word can fall into place without knowing how the story will be conveyed. In choosing between a reliable and unreliable narrator, my instinct tells me to choose an in-between: a reliable third-person narration that chooses not to reveal everything. This is the realm of Salinger and Englander, who allow characters to speak and lace a lot of the hidden truths of the story within the patter of their mundane-sounding words. The

other option would be to choose a seemingly reliable first-person narrator, some character in the story, who proves him or herself unreliable in some key aspect by the end. Either way, I want something to be held back. I like to make my readers work a bit to dig out the good stuff.

I want to haunt, but that's not something you can simply add, like a touch of cinnamon to a recipe. That's about finding great phrases, lasting images, creating tension and memorable situations. That's about whether or not you're a functional writer or a great writer—and certainly not for me to say about myself. It remains to be seen if I can follow through on all this theory. But I can inject some creeping dread, quite a bit I think. That I know how to do. As I'll be writing about an assassination, a spy story, the nature of the beast allows for plenty of tension, dread, and thrills. One of my jobs will be not to make too much of the thriller aspect. I want the kind of literary puzzle that I admire in, say, John O'Hara. To tone things down from a thriller plot (no rooftops chases and kung fu fighting will be necessary) and make a quieter, more thoughtful piece out of it. That will be as close to *New Yorker* style as I can manage. In the world of spy stories, John Le Carré's *The Russia House* is as good as it gets. It features a (mostly) reliable narrator, is carefully crafted, and is a sort of textual chess game, played through a plot about spies. It's a good style to strive for. Though I read no spy stories in my playlist, the tone of both Salinger and Englander suits this idea—I'll just be inserting my own mysterious plot.

Now it's time for me to get to work on my own short story. I think I'll publish it online, with extras, and charge about ninety-nine cents....

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