

New Haven Review

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Exeter Book Riddle

45/47: Bookworm

trans. Maryann Corbett

The tenth-century manuscript known as the Exeter Book is one of the richest collections of Old English poetry to come down to us. It was probably copied in a Benedictine monastery, and it was certainly owned later by a bishop named Leofric, who left it to Exeter Cathedral in 1072. Among its many texts are over ninety riddles, in the tradition of Latin poets like Symphosius and Aldhelm but composed in Old English alliterative verse. They treat subjects of every kind, spiritual and earthly, learned and low, and some—such as those usually solved as “dough” and “onion”—are full of ribald double-entendre. The manuscript does not give solutions for the riddles, and some of the proposed solutions are still disputed. Many are quite clear, though, like this one, which is among the most popular and most often translated.

There are different opinions about where one riddle ends and the next begins, thus the two numbering systems.

Moððe word fræt. Me þæt þuhte
wrætlicu wyrd þa ic þæt wundor gefrægn,
þæt se wyrm forswealg wera gied sumes,
þeof in þystro þrymfæstne cwide
ond þæs strangan stapol. Stælgjest ne wæs
wihte þy gleawra, þe he þam wordū swealg.

A moth ate myth. A marvel, I thought—
a fine bit of lore!— when first I learned
that a bug had swallowed some bard's song,
a cheat in darkness chewed on the glory
of a poem's power. The pilfering guest
was no whit wiser for wolfing it down.

The Water Cycle

Matt Tompkins

When I was twelve years old, my dad evaporated. He'd been sitting in his ratty recliner reading the newspaper. I was across the living room, cross-legged on our old corduroy couch. I looked up from my Fantastic Four and he was—how do I put it? He was somehow even less present—less there—than usual.

It started with his thinning, bark-brown hair—the same hair that I inherited. It grew wispier still as it wafted away. And it continued until his plaid sweater vest, pleated khakis, pair of socks, were empty. They all just deflated, laid out flat on the still-reclined lounge. His newspaper slumped like a crumpled pup tent over top.

To be fair, my dad was always kind of airy. He was perpetually distracted. He was prone to daydream. But this was different.

A moment later, he regrouped—re-formed as a fog in the air above his chair. Then, slowly but steadily, he drifted downward, and disappeared: sucked into the belly of the dehumidifier that ran year-round to keep the house from molding.

Late that afternoon, my mom came home. Despite my loud and tearful protests, she pulled the bucket from the dehumidifier. She walked it, sloshing, out to the garage and then dumped it unceremoniously down the throat of the utility sink.

And so my dad became a fully-integrated part of the Odsburg Municipal Sanitary Water System. I had learned all about this from Mrs. Wilkins in Science class. My father would now be undergoing filtration, chlorination, and fluoridation. Then he would be pumped into a reservoir, from whence he could flow to who-knows-where within the county, to be drank, bathed in, used for washing clothes or cars or dishes, or even to fill a toilet. In any case, he'd be washed back into one drain or another, to repeat the process all over again.

Of course, there was another possibility: that he would escape. That he would break free of the open circuit that is the municipal water system. That he would become instead a part of the greater

Water Cycle—the one Mother Nature put into motion billions of years ago. We had learned about this, too.

Ways to make the transition are many and varied. They include, but are not limited to: running out of a garden hose and into the ground; becoming an outdoor puddle (as a byproduct of car-washing, lawn sprinkling, etc.); becoming an indoor puddle near a door or window, and then evaporating into the open air; finding oneself in a dog dish, and managing to be escorted outside as a trail of slobber; and the list goes on—and on and on. There are frankly too many possibilities to mention. Ultimately, by one means or another, my dad did make it out. I know because he came back to see me.

The first time, he was a wave on Lake Ogannon. I was wading chest-deep in the shallows, splashing around. He rolled directly toward me and broke just a few feet short of my face. I knew it was him because it was just exactly his corny, dad-like sense of humor: to wave to me as a wave. I could almost hear his voice: “Son, look: I’m waving!” Mom was nearby on the shore, reading a book, but I didn’t bother to call out to her. She gave me the strangest looks, and talked about doctors, any time I talked about Dad.

The next time, he was a cloud. I couldn’t think of how to say hi to him, or to let him know I saw him there. He was so high up and I was all the way down on the ground. I got so sad about it that I started crying. That turned out to be pretty perfect, actually. My tears evaporated, and rose up to join him in the sky. Then I think neither of us felt quite as lonely or as sad.

The last time was just a few weeks ago. He must have found his way back into the city water system, because he turned up in my coffee. I think this might have been his idea of a practical joke. Once I spotted him, I couldn’t bring myself to drink the coffee. Not that I think he would have particularly minded, but it was just a little too weird. I mean, it’s one thing to slap a puddle high-five; it’s another thing entirely to cannibalize your father. So instead I ate the rest of my breakfast and left him sitting there in the mug. When I was done eating, I told him a little bit about my week. The wife and kids were

already gone, to work and to school, so it was only the two of us. It was nice to just sit and spend some time together—me and my dad.

Sometimes, I wonder if I should be angrier at him for disappearing. People have suggested it often enough—my mom, my friends, my therapist. But somehow, I don't blame him—or, rather, I don't see the use in holding a grudge. He probably lost as much as I did when he went away, maybe more. And anyway, how much choice did he have—how much say in the way he behaved? Maybe we're just slaves to our nature. Maybe I shouldn't make excuses for him, though. Maybe it's just easier to tell myself he didn't choose to leave us.

Before long, I had to leave. The GroceryPlus produce section was not going to stock and inventory itself. On my way out the door, I poured my dad into the flowerbed. That way he's free to go about his business, and I know he'll find his way back when he can. In the meantime, I thought, who would want to be stuck inside a coffee mug all day?

If it ever comes to it—and let's face it, maybe someday it will—I hope my kids will have the decency to do the same for me.

Once, in a Holy Land

*On God's little mountain in
Waterbury*

Matt Salyer

For though the head frames words the tongue has none.

And who will prove the surgeon to this stone?

Geoffrey Hill, "God's Little Mountain" (1959)

The world I grew up in was impoverished, bruised, and Roman

Catholic. If Waterbury is less so now, then it is diminishing into the mere economic measure of its impoverishment, a regional statistic. Once it was a *world*, and mine, because I had little conviction that anything beyond its twenty-eight square miles of church steeples and machine shops and landlord tenements and boarded-over brick facades mattered; *world* because there the patient, sullen people of my grandfather's time displayed their lives on the back stoops of shambling "three-families" like beaten rugs. When I decided that I wanted to be a writer, it was not because I wanted to differentiate myself from this unfortunate city. It was because I had fallen in love with it and wanted to recover all its broken pieces and become them, preserve them, record them, repair them. Waterbury was hard-scrabble nostalgia and I was its archaeologist. I traced roses, run to weed in the chain-link lawns, from where they choked the streetlights' long, haughty necks all the way down to roots that cradled the head of some plaster St. Joseph, buried for luck. I found and recorded jars of nails, whiskey on high shelves, banisters run from stolen gas piping, a black crucifix.

All these relics fit together in a reconstructed past. Perhaps, because relics of Catholics, the relics bled, saturating the comings and goings of immigrant generations: Irish hands ground to nubs in the press-gears; the accidental cooking of human skin in the brass foundries; the Radium Girls, leeching their glow into the slum apartments the City made from Waterbury Clock; old J___ Z___, the

landlord with the broken nose; the tenants he hung over the back porches while his son watched, learned; Z___, the brick-shithouse Albanian who locked the doors and beat a dozen men nearly to death in the old Brooklyn Café; M___ A___ (La Mano Nera, the Black Hand man), who did business with my grandfather and walked the little girls down to St. Lucy's; the little girls at Notre Dame, scrubbed, hair brushed, fidgeting serenely in their mantillas and white gloves as the hard men put on their killing faces and led the Virgin downtown on a painted float.

Within the city, the rough granite face of Pine Hill is the highest point visible, its unapproachable outcroppings, crooked and graffiti-covered, overlooking the steeples of Saint Anne's and Saint Francis Xavier's and the flat, tarpaper roofs of brick bodegas and South End projects that huddle around them. Follow a narrow backstreet up the crags and the twenty-eight-square-mile world, exposed in miniature beneath you, begins to look like a carnival painting by Breughel. At the hillcrest, a handful of trailers houses the last pantsuit nuns of the Religious Sisters Filippini, shut behind their curtains. Past the shabby convent, there is a plastered wall, a padlocked iron gate, and a painted plaster sign announcing that you have come to Holy Land, standing at the axis mundi of Waterbury like a scrap of hair on the rim of a drain, the lights of hermetic neighborhoods splashing up the sides of the sink until they perish, falling off the horizon's edge to Neverland.

Begun in 1953, Holy Land was built over the course of forty years by a local attorney named John Baptist Greco. First-generation, a shoemaker's son, Greco had studied for the priesthood at one point but never received his ordination. Like his namesake, Saint John the Baptist, he was more hermit and folk prophet than cleric. He attended Yale Law School on a scholarship, took the bar, and returned to Waterbury, where he opened a private practice downtown. He refused to take on divorce cases or clients who would compromise his devout faith, and preached repentance on street corners

during his off-hours. In 1953, he purchased the land on Pine Hill with the idea of building a kind of Catholic Disney Land, enshrining neighborhood pieties for the postwar road-trip generation. “Bethlehem Village,” which opened in 1956, was Holy Land’s first iteration, built mostly by Greco himself. Then the blue-collar men came and helped when they could, lugging up cement blocks and rolls of chicken wire, auto salvage, broken refrigerators, scrap granite from the grave-masons, and mixing concrete and plaster, molding catacombs, painting faces of saints and sinners on more than two hundred scaled dioramas that depicted Bible stories and Catholic hagiographies, a lurid Cecil B. DeMille world on a dollhouse scale.

For decades, Holy Land drew the ethnic faithful from the same Northeastern households that tuned in regularly to watch Archbishop Fulton Sheen’s *Life is Worth Living*. By some estimates, over sixty thousand tourists a year came, upwards of three hundred buses on a given weekend. Like the red-caped Sheen, whose televised lectures defined the social imagination of my grandfather’s generation, Greco’s homespun theme park exerted an unabashed pull of showmanship and pietistic devotion, promiscuously mixed with an innocence that resists derision. The families of third-shift foremen from Trenton, New Jersey, and Lowell, Massachusetts, for example, could hardly afford the trip to Rome or Jerusalem, but they could pass through Holy Land’s gates and amble like giants through miniature reproductions of Bethlehem, Jerusalem, and Rome, and follow the Stations of the Cross up to a paved Calvary. Each year, Greco added to the spectacle, populating the Hill with dramatic martyrdoms of department-store mannequins, adding a massive Hollywood-style sign that renamed Waterbury “HOLY LAND U.S.A.,” constructing a towering Cross of Cor-Ten steel and pink fiberglass panels. To this day, the Cross, night-lit in neon, is the most recognizable feature for miles, marking the downtown convergence of Interstate 84 and Route 8 like a pin on a map. Growing up in Waterbury is to come of age, as I did, under that Crucifix’s constant whirl and radiance.

I never saw Holy Land in its heyday, but when I, an Eighties child, was digging moats and building fortifications for GI Joes under my grandparents' azaleas, Greco was still alive, still at work on his religious theme park, still the Old Man of the Mountain. I could see his Crucifix each night through my grandparents' living-room window when I kissed my grandma goodnight. Our house, nestled precariously on the rim of the world, had been built eye-level with Holy Land. In the late Fifties, when Greco was building his salvage dream-kingdom, my grandfather had been building his own, moving my grandmother and mother and uncles out of their second-floor walk-up to an enormous single-family, built from scrap and called-in favors, that overlooked the Country Club where the Masters had refused his Irish family admittance. Both men built for a future they envisioned: a respectable, aspirant, but distinctly ethnic and Catholic America that seemed just around the bend with the advent of Camelot and Vatican II.

By the 1980s, that future had become the unrealizable nostalgia that Waterbury felt for Waterbury, and through which the town held little boys like me in the thrall of the Naugatuck Valley's stubborn old men, the gigantic makers from olden times. The ninety-year-old Greco died in 1986, a day after he came down from the mountain. In his last years, he had been forced to close the park for renovations. Highway construction demolished the Catacombs; a fire burned the Garden of Eden to plastic fumes. He had planned to rebuild, living like a Desert Father in an austere trailer, trusting God, a dying man desperate to maintain the panoramic world that he had imagined, constructed, and repaired for decades. Perhaps he was not so different, in this regard, from the God of the Mountain he illustrated.

By the time I was old enough to sneak past the pantsuit spinsters, shuttered Holy Land, with its homegrown architecture of persistence and dilapidation, seemed perfectly attuned to the realities of Waterbury life. That had been Greco's point from the beginning: the tactile dioramas, made from commonplace materials taken from

the mill town, translated the epic, iconographic imaginative landscape of *King of Kings*, *The Ten Commandments*, and *Samson and Delilah* onto a human, realistic scale; the emphasis on scenes of the Holy Family invited viewers to imagine their own domestic suffering as both dignified and central to Waterbury. Crude concrete tablets throughout the theme park reminded visitors that “We Are the Body of Christ. If One Member Suffers, All Members Suffer.” Holy Land itself was an immense projection of the Catholic Mass, an elevated sacrificial altar at the heart of the city. The Old Man of the Mountain was its priest, but its local spectators were more than tourists. Their literal contribution of work and materials to the spectacle’s production expressed a Roman Catholic understanding of their human condition within Holy Land’s *Commedia*; they were *imago Dei* because they, too, were makers of little worlds.

When I first went there, more than a decade after Greco’s death, this argument seemed to have been carried to its theological conclusion. I saw the crumbling Gethsemane, eaten by the elements, the broken signage reading “Kings Tombs.” A victim lamb, cast in concrete, waited for slaughter beneath condom wrappers, old Nikes, dried puke, and coins cast for good luck. Eyes of the saints, broken in their plaster skulls, stared mutely at me through the serpentine scrub all the way to Golgotha, the “Place of the Skull,” where the God of the Mountain died. What I inherited from John Greco was not an aspirant, symbolic notion of the human person as artist, and the artist as *imago Dei*. I inherited a fully articulated Catholic model of the realist for whom rotting symbols are nothing more than the promiscuous accidents of raw observation. When I stood at the axis mundi of Holy Land, beneath the Crucifix’s murderous kitsch, I stood within a landscape that mirrored me, that overlooked the landscape that made me, we two bound together as an expression of the *felix culpa*, the paradox of being a maker of eternal symbols, ruined by time.

WATERBURY—A 19-year-old man was charged Sunday with raping and killing a 16-year-old friend whose body was found near a closed and run-down religious attraction in Waterbury. Francisco Cruz faces charges including capital felony, murder and sexual assault in the death of Chloe Ottman. Her body was found near Holy Land USA on Saturday, a day after her family reported her missing. Cruz was the last person seen with Ottman, but initially denied having anything to do with her disappearance, said Waterbury police Capt. Chris Corbett. After being questioned, [Cruz] led police to the body and confessed to sexually assaulting and strangling her, Corbett said. Cruz and Ottman, both of Waterbury, had been friends for about two years and walked together to the mostly deserted Holy Land USA on Thursday evening, Corbett said. Cruz was behind bars in lieu of \$5 million bond on Sunday and was expected to be presented in court on Monday. He could face the death penalty if convicted. (*Waterbury Republican-American 19 July 2010*)

The article frames a photo of Francisco Cruz, nineteen, of 17 Hickory Street. I remember Hickory Street, a South End side block sucked behind bricks, halfway between Daily's, the market where I bought loosies and saw my first shooting, and the halfway house where the living dead sit to wait for work. I cannot decide if I remember the face. There were so many side streets when I was a rover there, so many apartment doors, and so many little boys who answered the doors when I came to collect. I wore black leather gloves and a necktie and made a point of adjusting both when I asked for their fathers. I'd walk into the apartment uninvited and grill a sophomore sister in an oversized Tweety-Bird shirt, no underwear, sometimes a neighbor who was watching the kids stoned. I'd run a gloved finger along the laminate rim of an entertainment set while the toddlers shat on the floor. If there were a father present, this would humiliate him—not his domestic chaos but the fact that I, a man in a tie, saw—and he'd call cursing and pay his debt. If there were no father to pay, which was a two-of-three chance, I'd

return the next week and take the rent-to-own furniture. I would always give the ma'am of the house a choice between the bedroom set and the big-screen. I grew to hate looking at the blank, submissive, hateful eyes of South End sons and I continued to wonder, long after I quit looking for their fathers, what manner of men they would become.

I look for someone's son in Cisco Cruz. Like a high-school prom, the ritual of a criminal arrest does not end until the chaparones commemorate the event with an embarrassing picture. The mug-shot happens in the bowels of the Waterbury Police Department; take a left down the hall where the crack-hags get dumped to piss on the speckled floors and clamor at the ghost-faced boys in holding. At his arraignment, Cruz shuffles into the courtroom like an X-Box zombie, his customary prey. Hands and feet manacled, manacle chained to manacle, he's flanked by a pack of marshals who guide his long, awkward body to the left-hand side of the bench, jeans slung on his hipbones where they billow and bunch. Someone has sewn a patch on one of his ass-pockets, emblazoned with bright-thread dollar signs. He's straight g on down *from da rapes 2 da napes*, but waist up, he is only Francisco, and every bit the boy who avoids mama's calls when he walks his girl Chloe up Washington Street to the Holy Land gate, bullshitting and sweating and curling his awkward body under his coat-hanger spine as he stumbles to pace her.

For such Lost Boys, the enduring appeal of a simulated life online is its abrogation of hard scrabble ghetto cause-and-effect for the psychological repose of living unscathed within an empyrean of constant gamers, Facebook friends, and simulacra avatars. When I found him on Facebook, long after his arrest, Cisco was not Francisco Cruz, nineteen, of 17 Hickory Street, but a photo, a ghost, the fiction that he wanted to be long before he had even contemplated raping and killing Chloe. On his homepage he is *Cisco Ninjaa*, which is to say *no one*. His profile photo shows a body poised for action, covered head-to-toe in tight-wound black cotton. The face has been

replaced preemptively by a black mask and a photographer's shadow, obscuring the eyes that stare back at you until they're black-masked, too. Wrenched from his mama's South End living room, Cisco Ninjaa's dream-kingdom has been calculated for appropriate contrasts: the picture's background is a nondescript white room with a white faded carpet, white pulled curtains stained tobacco-tan where the sun pushes against them from the other side. The antagonism is not between the sun as fatalistic time and the speaker's desire for ebullient life; it is between the sun's illumination of a real, uncontrollable world and Cisco Ninjaa's anonymous living-room fantasia, which extends the triumph of death as far as mama's curtains.

It's as if a child, having cut the ninjaa's outline out of mama's curtains, discovers no illuminated world behind it, but only a black cutout in the room, positioned in a *Mortal Kombat* fighting stance—*like in the movies, bend the front knee more, shift the weight, good, arm over head, so he's holding a katana* (a ninjaa needs a katana)—an avatar as a bogeyman that can be stepped into and through. Those friended learn the bogeyman is from Bridgeport, Connecticut, lives in Waterbury. Its favorite films are *Ninja Assassin*, *Phantom of the Opera*, and *The Last Airbender*. It reads Stephen King, romance novels, and *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*. Its favorite quotations include the phrase “for now,” Kuja's lines from *Final Fantasy IX*, and the admonition: “Whether your words are lies created to deceive me or the truth I have searched for all my life, it makes no difference. You will rot.” It's a fan of pages such as *when I say “what are you doing today” I really mean “let's hang out”* and *I Hate It When People Take What You Say Completely the Wrong Way* and *Guys Who Will Like You For You And Not What You Will Do With Them*. It even makes “emotive” faces at you, :} ;[:o, like that.

How different the arraignment face is. It sags with the grandiose burden of girls from the Brass Mill Mall who want to just hang out, winces before the somber existentialism of unaffordable tattoos, attempts the tortured appeal of a Barnes & Noble Café Rimbaud. See

it, Francisco? That's Cisco. When they arrested him, they photographed his face for you. From the front, the long capital V of his jaw mimics the sharp neckline of the drab green T-shirt below it. A razorline wisp of moustache rests like eyeliner along the edge of the soft, almost feminine mouth. The nose's long bridge droops with the weight of a bulb where the nostrils flare, and on either side the deep equidistant almonds, the plaintive doe eyes, hang glassine beneath slick eyebrows. Crisp lines scar the tallow skin, all hues and murkiness save where the brow breaks with blood-brown acne and deep blemish. He is, after all, mostly a teenager, not quite twenty.

In the police photograph's unyielding wound of time, he has already raped Chloe and forced his thumbs down on her throat. He has already driven his knife slant through to touch the place that his thumbs pressed. And when she was dead, the initial reports believe, he raped her again. And when he was done, he hid her in overgrowth near a doll-sized Jerusalem, a junkyard for lost saints. Where is this on his face, a map of lines sunk in a handful of skin cream? From the front you see only brown and black acne and deep blemishes, and the wide shoulder bones that he hasn't grown into yet, the boy who knows he's a boy.

In court, he wears his Brooklyn black-rims, unsynchronized to the unblinking machismo of Waterbury. He wore them to the big-box mall that the speculators built when they tore down Scovill Mill, and where, suburban rumor has it, teenagers lurk under cars in the parking lot to cripple your ankles with razors. He wore them homeward through South End haunts to mama's fire-escaped kitchen, his glasses an epithetical sign of difference, of his misconstrued heart that could only articulate itself through alt rock, iPhone apps, anime films, zombie survival guides, and the backstories of role-playing games. In the South End, they knew who he was by reading that courtroom face, the way he moved it, the way he carried it above his bone shoulders: *look at this mari, fucking maricon; nah, nah, son, my boy Cisco, he's just into all that cartoon shit*. He kept aloof from

the stark, night-lit world of The Street and they left him, in turn, to his own devices: plans for Chinese tattoos drawn in the margins of secret notebooks, G-chat extraterrestrial cosplay, and the unsexed companionship of Hot Topic parochial girls whose fathers had five-to-go for municipal pensions.

When Cisco started to grope Chloe under the Cross, she struck his glasses. “I got so mad at her,” he recalls. “I hate when people hit me on the face.” Maybe it wasn’t only sexual rejection that prompted his rage. Chloe’s spurn enunciated the raw fact of Cisco’s existence in *this* world, wiring the limitless possibilities of his fantastical inner life of online games and Facebook posts to a single irreversible circuit of bodies in time. The long, less-travelled lines of the Metro-North cling to so many industrial necropolises, and each one is home to its full share of Ciscos, covered in hand-me-down mange, Lost Boys whose sadomasochistic propensities bear only a surface resemblance to the violent commonplaces of urban life, a simulacra of the bonelike eloquence that makes neighborhood vernaculars of honor and blood-exchange cohere and remain within their long-proscribed bounds. When he declares “I hate it when people hit me on the face,” Cisco is not articulating the social code of an underclass. He is confessing, however unawares, that he is not hard enough to flourish within the dozen or so blocks that bound his walking-distance world. But the blood-tongue of Waterbury manhood, familiar to me and Cisco both (although, for better or worse, it came more natural to me than him) is no mere macho strut. The Street shows a visceral contempt for such sensitive, inquisitive, Byronic misfits precisely because a Cisco’s violence is often the least predictable and the most pathetic.

Before Chloe died, “she gasped for air like two different times,” Cisco admits. Perhaps each successive brutalization of her took on the character of a killer’s revision, a rapprochement of the limit-experiences that he so desired to get right in the avatar-world. In one sense, it is precisely this paradoxical admixture of egocentrism

and self-abnegation that makes Cisco such a thoroughly postmodern killer. A day prior, Cisco Ninjaa was full of ebullient aimlessness, the impotent exhilaration of his own power games. Recast as his avatar, unhinged from real bodies in meaningful time, he was the latent inverse of what we often seem to imagine as the great positive license of post-modernity, the Foucauldian promise of reconfiguring culture, tradition, and ethics as a “free play of signifiers,” a circuit of endless self-projections unburdened by shame. Black-masked, Francisco became a dropped pin, a place holder of the human:

16 July 2010 at 17:30

Cisco Ninjaa: Whats everyones plan for today?

MM: nothing same as usual! lol

Cisco Ninjaa: Gotcha

ML: Nothing ... hahaha ima kidnap u :p

K-JK: dunno lol

Cisco Ninjaa: O.o.

MM:

A dance of pictures, hahaha, a gap like a missing daughter.

O.o.

I have thought about Chloe’s murder for four years, partly

because its thematic contentions, reversals, and paradoxes are almost unbearably novelistic. On one level, her violent death presents me with a skeleton outline for the only novel I want to write, but that novel is not really about her. The basic crime narrative involved simply provides what Edgar Allen Poe would describe as a convenient “unity of effect”—theme, setting, plot, tone, characters, and so forth—for articulating something about the growth, imaginative stagnation, death, and nostalgias of a Catholic Northeastern manufacturing city. In fact, the illustrative value of the Ottman case is so high in this regard that a realistic account of the events and key ac-

tors surrounding Chloe's rape and murder at Holy Land can only be articulated through the communal, symbolic terms established and tightly-held by this cultural landscape.

I suspect that this makes both Waterbury and Chloe seem less real, more melodramatic, and more gothic, to middle-class readers for whom realism is the business of describing Connecticut suburbs to Brooklyn—the quiet desperation of Shoreline commuters, the high-toned bird wives who listen to *All Things Considered* in showroom kitchens, the white clapboard houses in Litchfield where spindling olden-time candles describe the season to the season through the windows. But because I, in turn, cannot quite fathom the existence of real lives in Cheever Land, I am not concerned foremost with the moral problem of narrating to *them*, stories of the outsiders and the unwanted, the unreal. But Chloe's life-world, both subject and setting, is also an unwilling audience, and I am bound to its public moral landscape in a way that the “purer” artist, Francisco Cruz, was not. “The death ... of a beautiful woman,” Poe remarked, “is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world, and equally it is beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such topic are those of a bereaved lover.” But I do not love Chloe Ottman. I think I might have seen her once or twice in passing, nothing more. Nor do I think I would have fallen in love with her when I was seventeen. However, I cannot turn her into a character without separating myself from what I *do* love in spite of myself, the real polis of the living and remembered dead for which Holy Land was the great communal expression, and for which Chloe's death was a real communal tragedy.

Almost immediately after the story broke, mourners built and subsequently abandoned a makeshift shrine of votive candles near the padlocked gate and someone left a rose bouquet to die near the Crucifix wiring. Chloe was—or became—much loved and grieved, but like most tragedies in Waterbury, this one was meant to be buried as well as remembered. Nevertheless, countless Facebook memorial pages canonized her selfies in a pastel heaven, her unquestionable

salvation sealed with emojis and sentiments written in a cursive tattoo script. And when Investigation Discovery covered the murder on an episode of *Frenemies*, pages like “Happy 17th Birthday Chloe Ottman” began to attract the distant and occasional bereaved who debated vengeance and forgiveness beneath pictures of a doe-eyed girl learning to look doe-eyed for a camera phone. Most uttered sentiments like “Tragico!!!” or “In my opinion Francisco should be kill because of what he did” or “Always in our hearts.” A contractor from Neelyville, Missouri, given to reposting memes of squirrels that read “PROTECT YOUR NUTS,” wrote, “You never met me. But I seen your story on tv. I can’t believe what happened to you. I will keep you alive in my family.” Similarly, a man from Hamilton, Ontario, wrote: “Please her friends dont let this woman be forgotten like the rest. I don’t know u Chloe but I even miss u.”

Less than a month after Chloe’s murder, I returned to the foot of our town’s famous electrified Cross, her last place. I had not been there since I was close to her age, and my big surplus-booted feet crushed the rosehips and white-cotton cloves against its concrete base like a centurion. I thought about James Agee, who wrote that “a house or a person has only the most limited of his meaning through me: his true meaning is much huger. It is that he *exists, in actual being.*” *Once, that seemed like enough reason to write. Writing, after all, is a kind of forensics.* At Francisco Cruz’ sentencing, the presiding judge, Richard Damiani, described what happened to Chloe Ottman as “the most horrific statement of fact that I have ever come across.” But although Waterbury is unflinching in its acceptance of the fact that the horrific, the sadistic, is often life as it “*exists, in actual being,*” it is also *unflinching in its proprietary silences. What little remains of the Old Man of the Mountain’s culture of faith is its ethos that* “We Are the Body of Christ. If One Member Suffers, All Members Suffer.”

Not surprisingly, the State Attorney’s Office in Waterbury, which has handed down a disproportionate number of Connecti-

cut's death sentences since 1989, plea-bargained Cruz's case to a sentence of fifty-five years. No one wanted a lengthy appeals process, a media trial, a public defender's narration of Chloe Ottman's brief life. Because a victim is "much huger" than whatever might be said about it, we must be cautious about whom we disclose its presence to. This is as much for our sake as it is for others, for the victim we show also discloses much about who we are and who we are not. I am not the great realist that James Agee was, nor am I a clever fabulist like Francisco Cruz. I wish that I could have been a saint like the Old Man of the Mountain or the eighth apostle. I am not. But I am a good dog to station beneath a Cross. I will wait for my master and bury the bones of our pack.

Two Poems

Anzhelina Polonskaya
trans. Andrew Wachtel

Anzhelina Polonskaya was born in Malakhovka, a small town near Moscow. Since 1998, she has been a member of the Moscow Union of Writers and in 2003, Polonskaya became a member of the Russian PEN-centre. In 2004 an English version of her book, entitled *A Voice*, appeared in the acclaimed Writings from an Unbound Europe series at Northwestern University Press. This book was shortlisted for the 2005 Corneliu M Popescu Prize for European Poetry in Translation. Polonskaya has published translations in many of the leading world poetry journals, including *World Literature Today*, *Descant*, *Modern Poetry in Translation*, *Poetry Review UK*, *The Ameircan Poetry Review*, and *International Poetry Review*, *Boulevard*, *The Iowa Review*, *The Massachusetts Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Barrow Street*, *The Journal*, *Poetry Daily*, *AGNI*, *New England Review*, and *The Literary Review*.

In October 2011 the *Oratorio-Requiem Kursk*, the libretto of which consists of ten of Polonskaya's poems, had its debut at the Melbourne Arts Festival. In 2013, *Paul Klee's Boat*, a bilingual edition of her latest poems, was published by Zephyr Press and was shortlisted for the 2014 Best Translated Book Award and for the 2014 PEN Literary Awards. Anzhelina Polonskaya has been awarded a Rockefeller Fellowship and her work has also been translated into German, Dutch, Slovenian, Latvian, Spanish, and other languages. Polonskaya continues to live and work in Malakhovka, where she is preparing a new volume of poetry for publication. She works as a poetry editor at *Russian Switzerland*.

Голосом Каллас

Оборвано. До аккорда.
Расстались. Распались, как половины плода:
на мякоть и косточку.
Один лишь выстрел. Самоубийственный.
Порох сажает ожоги, как розы садовник.
Прощай надолго.
Мы разлетелись на миллионы атомов.

Мария Каллас:

«Ари, мой голос упавший ты будешь слышать повсюду,
он станет звучать во сне, лишит рассудка, заставит
сдаться,
потому что умеет брать любые крепости».

Мой голос, тебе он мешал, не так ли?
Не ты ли сказал: «Дорогая, поэзия — неполноценна.
Мне нужна женщина —
плоть от плоти, кость от кости земная, моё подобие».
Конец связи.

Мария Каллас:

«Ты не верил, что я могла умереть от любви.
Знай же — я умерла.
Мир оглох. Голос не перенёс
низости твоей пощёчины.
Но боги Греции, он отомстит за меня».

Мария, всё повторимо. В парижской квартире
ли, в русской провинции.
Матери отрекаются, не то что — любовники.
Зачем им подлинники, зачем богини — им,
когда есть копии из ребра.

In the Voice of Callas

Cut off. Before the final chord.
We've parted. Separated like a ripe fruit:
flesh from stone.
Just a single shot. Suicidal.
Gunpowder plants burns, like a gardener roses.
Farewell for a long time.
We've fissioned into a million atoms.

Maria Callas:

"Ari, you'll hear my broken voice everywhere,
it will sound in your sleep, drive you crazy, force you to
surrender,
because it can conquer any fortress."

My voice somehow bothered you, didn't it?
Didn't you once say: "Poetry, my dear, is not enough.
I need a woman—
flesh of my flesh, bone of my bone, just like me."
End of the affair.

Maria Callas:

"You never believed that I could die of love.
Well you need to know—I did.
The world's gone deaf. My voice could not survive
the meanness of your slap.
But the Greek gods will avenge me."

Maria, everything can be repeated. In a Paris apartment
or in the Russian provinces.
Mothers give up their children, to say nothing of lovers.
Why do they need originals, or goddesses
when they can make a copy from their ribs?

Дождь

Дождь шёл весь день.
Стучали капли по железным скамейкам,
и мне вспомнился Чехов на каком-то старинном диване,
больной.
Я не вставала тот долгий день с постели.
От снотворного отяжелевшая, словно облако.
Мне казалось, что существует всему предел.
Но любовь прошла, даже тоска отступила,
словно шакалка, предчувствуя и скуля.
Ровным счётом ничего не осталось — комната.
Дождь поливал, пока не стемнело.
И вдруг я порезалась гудками ночного поезда
и заплакала.
Оттого, что словами нельзя.

Rain

The rain came down all day.
The drops clattered against the iron benches
and Chekhov, ill, sitting on some sort of old-fashioned sofa
came to mind.
That long day I never got out of bed.
I felt weighed down by the sleeping pill, like a cloud.
There's a limit to everything, it seemed to me.
But love passed and even yearning faded,
like a jackal, baring her teeth in anticipation.
In sum, nothing remained—just my room.
The rain poured down until it got dark.
And suddenly the whistle of a night train slashed through me,
and I started to cry.
Because words can't say it.

Off

Jonathan Nehls

Paul Brake squints through the prickle of late afternoon sun, needling over the Front Range. It's Friday, payday, and like every Friday, he needs the money. He's a month into a deck project, a wraparound deck that overhangs the patio of a walk-out basement. He looks to the deck, ignoring the man next to him, whose toe scrapes at the gravel. The deck limps to one side. The human eye, Paul knows, can see an imperfection as small as one thirty-second of an inch. Now touch can sense an imperfection down to a thousandth. He feels his hip. He shifts his weight and clutches his thigh. Thinks of the pebble there grinding between bone like a mortar and pestle, but the bone too soft, too brittle.

Aaron Skeens, the house owner and his employer, stands next to him with his arms crossed, toeing gravel. He looks at the deck and then at his foot. He holds his hand up and shades his eyes and tilts his head as if to gauge the line of the deck's beam. On the horizon, the Flatirons are in shadows—the view Aaron described to Paul when he contracted him. The vista, Aaron claimed, it's just beautiful, he meant, so beautiful, he worked his whole life for it—little more than ten years, if Paul had to guess. They stand with their backs to the vista, their backs to the fourteenth hole of Legacy Ridge, the immaculate fairway sloping up to Aaron's property.

There have been some problems with the project, a number of problems. And today the deck's skeleton is up, but it seems to angle off to one side, off level, and Aaron Skeens goes on with his misgivings, his arms and hands flitting about.

"This," he says, "This, this, I mean." He clucks and bunches his head into his shoulders. "It's just that, well, I know you can do this, and, I don't mean to say it's not what I asked for, it's just that, the way it settles, it just seems off. I'm not blaming you, I just should've, I mean, you're just one man, and this job, well, it's a lot for one man, and well ... you could have used some help." He glances at Paul and

then looks at the deck where Paul now glares. Aaron Skeens is thirty-six, a good fifteen years younger than Paul, some hotshot in computers, and apparently, an expert in construction.

This is the problem with contract work. Everybody is an expert. These people Paul works for, they watch one episode of *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*—a thousand people gather and build a house in an hour, free, from the goodness of their hearts—and suddenly they're Bob Vila. Plumbing, electrical, drywall, they could do it themselves if only they had the time. And they never lose an opportunity to tell you what's wrong. They leave passive aggressive notes: *Screws 8 in. on drywall!!! Don't forget the weatherproof flashing. Did you mix in the grout sealant?* but hardly ever say it to your face. These people are always watching.

His eyes, Paul's, he doesn't blink, his eyes are vacant and dry. He doesn't respond. He thinks about his breathing. He thinks, serenity now.

Aaron busies himself, finding a place for his hands, crossing his arms, then at his pockets feeling for something, and then finally stops, his right hand holding his left elbow, and his left hand at his face, over his mouth.

"Look, look," Aaron says. His glance darts from the deck to Paul. He turns and looks at the fairway. "You do good work. I've seen the work you did for Tom, he recommended you. It was good work, beautiful. The marble countertops, the cabinets, what was that, oak?"

Paul turns and looks at Aaron Skeens. "Maple." He stares.

Aaron avoids Paul's glance. He stomps the ground and checks the underside of his shoe. "Yeah, yeah, right. It's just first rate." He holds his elbow and a hand rubs at his face, the kind of gesture a woman would make.

Below the deck, Paul notices Aaron's daughter at the window of the walkout basement. The sun going down sprays a glare on the window. From inside, he thinks, she can't see them. She wears only a bra and panties. She dances. Her body is thin and boyish. She is

only thirteen, maybe fourteen, maybe younger. She moves her body, snakes like she's trying to take off her clothes with no hands. She turns her back toward the window and slides her arm down her back, butt, down her thighs, and bends over. She's done this a few times before. Danced like a stripper, like she was enticing him, like she wanted Paul to enter and do something about it. Paul glances at Aaron, to see if Aaron sees what he sees.

That's the problem with Aaron, the man's clueless; can't keep track of his own daughter. Can't control his own household. When Aaron and his wife would leave for the day, the girl traipsed about the house in short shorts and tube tops, sometimes just a bikini. Paul would catch sight of her through the sliding glass kitchen door or in the basement—not that he made any effort—she was just there, wanting to be seen. She acted as if Paul didn't exist, that the sputter and roar of his power tools hardly whispered, that his lumbering presence made no shadow.

A few days into the project, while Paul kneeled, unscrewing the deck boards before the kitchen door, dismantling the small landing and staircase—a platform inadequate to Aaron's vision—he got a whiff of perfume and heard the chatter of voices inside. The sun smeared over the window, he could see nothing but the glare. The door opened. He expected to see the girl, scantily dressed, maybe naked, holding out a hand to invite him in, and this would be his trial, his temptation—he detested weak men, men who abused their power, and he refused to be such a man. But he looked up and saw a peeled tomato.

It was a boy, fifteen or sixteen. His face was patched bright red, nose swollen from so many zits. Zits rashed on his cheeks and forehead, on his chin. A knob, a piercing the size of a car lighter, mushroomed from his earlobe. Black hair gelled and spiked. Too much cologne, too much gel. You could smell him coming. He wore basketball shorts, flip flops, and a black T-shirt with an American flag, but the flag was black and white. The print ragged as if the flag

had been dragged fifty miles on a dirt road. The boy looked bored, put out like Paul had asked him for help.

“Whatcha doing?” the boy said. The girl sat at the kitchen table and giggled.

Paul knelt with an elbow on his knee and a hand above his eyes, shading the sun. The tone of the boy’s voice was like a child, a smart ass. Paul didn’t answer.

“What are those, screws?”

“That’s right.” It was an act. The boy acting a fool for the girl. He’d play along. “You ever work with your hands?”

The boy turned to the girl and snickered. “You like crack?”

“What?” He thought of his own son and all his failed appeals. Any interest shown was insincere, patronizing, almost mocking. Pat you on the head and say that’s nice, dad. Work with your hands as a hobby not a way of life. These days you didn’t need to know how things work. Someone else could do it. Maybe a thousand people would gather and do all the things you should have done yourself.

“Screws and crack, huh?” The boy turned to the girl, smiled and the girl laughed.

Paul ignored it. He was just a kid. “Why don’t you pick up a hammer and help out?”

“You like that, screws and crack?”

Just breathe. Paul had the urge to put the boy in a headlock and pinch his blistering whiteheads—tell him to shut up, not say a word, listen for Christ’s sake. Every word was bullshit. Trying to get a reaction, piss you off. The boy stood there smirking. Paul said, “What the hell you trying to say?”

The boy laughed silently, turned to the girl who laughed behind her hand.

Paul felt the sun on his lower back, his shirt worked up and pants slumping, his butt crack, no doubt, exposed. He pulled his shirt down, pants up. “Why don’t you ...” He stopped before he said, go fuck yourself. He took a deep breath, put his knee down, and sat back on his boots. He looked up at the boy and said, “Don’t you have

anything better to do?" He waited. "Like I said, I could use a hand."

"You probably could," the boy said, and added, "Pedophile." And then shut the door.

Paul sat back on his boots, suddenly nauseous as if he'd been found out for some terrible, secret crime. The pain grinded at his hip. What the hell was that supposed to mean? In his day, if he talked that way to anyone, his mother or a priest, they'd cuff him over the head, box his ears, and he'd have accepted it, invited it. A well deserved correction: that's what the boy needed. Paul stared for a second at the blinding wash of sun over the window and thought of them inside watching.

All he had done was see—he couldn't help but see. Anyone in his place... The girl didn't seem to notice. It wasn't anything he wanted. The girl danced and he wasn't supposed to see? He looked down at the drill gun, at the screws, the screw holes and their splintering rims.

Over the next few weeks when he looked to the house, he didn't see her dancing, but the boy's tomato face shining coarse and scoured, and the girl somewhere near. It wasn't Paul's place to say anything. If Aaron didn't care, if Aaron was a pushover who had no control over his own daughter, who was he to judge? She wasn't his daughter. But he knew there was something fundamentally wrong. He knew the danger of a girl and a boy. Alone, with the whole summer before them. They watched him from the windows like he was a thief, or worse. They talked, conspired. Paul was no one to be talked about. It angered him to think what they might be saying. That he couldn't say, couldn't control, could only guess what went on between them. And what went on? She wasn't his daughter—not that it made it any easier.

If it had only been that, Paul would have said nothing, but every step of the project, Aaron pried his way in. He insisted the concrete footers be dug an extra foot deep—48 inches, overkill, to Paul's thinking, but he didn't mind, it just pushed the timeline back a week. Later, Aaron decided he wanted a pergola, and again, Paul

had to adjust the design, postpone. It wasn't that he minded, he understood, Aaron expected perfection, and deserved it, but Aaron didn't know the difference between cement and concrete, and each day, as Paul listened to Aaron's misgivings, he thought about the tomato faced smart ass giving it to Aaron's daughter.

Paul tempered himself, let it let slide. They could watch him, criticize. Either way he got paid. He even laughed to himself when he thought about the poor kid and his inflamed acne. Scrawny, awkward, ridiculous. He was just a smart ass kid getting kicks, showing off. The boy was restless, obnoxious, that energy aimed at power, and as any boy knew, power came through humiliation.

One day, as Paul was fitting a joist into a hanger he realized he needed a lever to prop the joist level, and as he shouldered the joist, poised on a ladder, he smelled cotton candy and burnt tobacco. He looked down and there was the boy, his face oily, red and scarred. The boy said nothing. Paul could forgive, overlook, he was trying to impress the girl. "Alright, son, you want to help out?" Paul took the bait. "I could use a crowbar in the tool chest over there."

The boy blinked his eyes at him, and went to the chest. He picked up a crescent wrench.

"No," goddamn it, Paul thought, "that's a crescent wrench." This was why he preferred to work by himself, the aggravation, the stupidity of some people. "I didn't say in the bag."

When he got down from the ladder the boy held a nail gun. "What are you...?" Breathe, he thought, breathe. "You think you're cute?"

"You think I'm cute?" He leveled the nail gun at Paul's crotch.

The boy wore a tank top and there was no place to grab him. His throat was thin, scrawny; he grabbed him like a beer can.

The boy gargled and spat, choked and flailed his arms. Paul had hold of him for little more than a second before letting him fall. The boy cowered pathetically. Paul took the nail gun. "If you were smart enough, you could kill someone with this." The boy had a barcode

tattooed on his shoulder. “You’re lucky I don’t call the police.”

A couple days later, his Sawzall went missing.

The following Friday he stood with Aaron, their backs to the golf course, regarding the deck’s progress. Aaron had expected it’d be further along. Paul could never keep track of his demands, all the nitpicky bullshit added on last minute. When Aaron mentioned the possibility of screening off the porch, Paul blurted out, “I’ve had just about enough.” He thumbed his upper lip and breathed. “I didn’t say anything before—it wasn’t my place. A man oversees his own house. Every man’s got a right, but goddamn it, I can’t take. I don’t deserve this.”

“What are you talking about?”

“First it’s one thing then another. I just find out they stole my Sawzall.”

“What? Who?”

“That’s just it. I don’t tell another man his business, poke in where it’s not my concern. But this goddamn kid—this smart ass, thief. He stole, I know it.” Paul squeezed his hand in to a fist. “Pushes my buttons. Goddamn it.” Goddamn it, he thought again.

“Who? What?”

He jabbed a finger at Aaron. “I don’t deserve that.”

“I don’t understand.”

“This kid, when you’re not home. He’s in there with your daughter.” Paul slid his tongue over his teeth, made a sucking sound. “Don’t know what they’re doing, but I could guess.” Paul looked at the poor guy. Paul crimped his lips, thinking, your own daughter, taking it. Some little punk kid. It’s what these liberals do. Live and let live. “I suggest you pay a little more attention to your household. I see them in there. He’s got tattoos. An earring the size of a finger. It’s a distraction I can’t deal with.”

Aaron held his elbows, a hand rubbed. He looked off to the golf course and back to the house, squinted as if he saw in the windows something he didn’t want. “I’m sorry,” Aaron said.

The crack of an iron echoes from the fairway and a ball hurtles down and crashes in the bushes at their back. Paul looks sideways at Aaron who turns to the sound of the ball, and shakes his head, annoyed. “Like I said, just top notch ... I mean, real quality work.” He seems to lose his train of thought. He turns to the fairway. “I swear. I love it here, great location, but sometimes.... Two months ago I had to replace a window.”

Paul grunts, and glares at Aaron’s back, challenging him to turn and look him in the eyes, thinking, get to the point. It isn’t anything that can’t be fixed. He doesn’t get paid to listen to Aaron ramble on. Waste his time. He looks back to the girl and watches. She flips her blonde hair and tosses it and wriggles.

A golf cart hums and parks near the conifers at their back. “Sorry,” the golfer yells over the hedges. “I’m just looking for my ball. Did you see it?” Aaron waves to give permission. The golfer scrounges in the bushes behind them, swatting the branches with an iron, making his way nearer.

“Skinny?” the golfer says. “Skeens? I thought that was you.”

Aaron reaches out a hand to Paul. “You’ll have to excuse me a second.”

Paul watches the girl dance. She puts a thumb in the waistband of her panties, pulls it taut and then smacks her thighs and pumps her hips. She tosses her hair. He looks back to see if Aaron sees, and he feels something he knows he shouldn’t and has to clear his throat. He doesn’t want to watch anymore—but she dances. She won’t stop dancing.

Paul watches the girl and overhears Aaron and this golfer’s conversation. They talk about their family, their business, their slice—“You just have to roll your wrists. Like this.” The golfer comments on the deck. “That’s nice,” he says. “Beautiful view. Just beautiful.” He pauses. Paul turns to see the golfer tilting his head. “I’m no expert but, from this angle, it just seems to go,” he glides a hand down his chest, “you know, a little, off. The line. It doesn’t look right.” And Aaron says, “Well, yeah. I see it. It’s not a problem. We’re taking care

of it as we speak. I got to go. Got to go now.”

Everybody’s a critic.

Aaron Skeens sidles up to Paul. He jerks a thumb toward the fairway. “Sorry about that.”

Paul crosses his arms and sockets his hands in his armpits. He presses his lips together. The pain in his hip tingles and he can feel his leg going to sleep. He shifts his weight.

“Where was I?” Aaron says.

“I don’t know.”

At the window, the girl stops to look at the sunset, and notices the men outside. She yelps and covers hers breasts then her panties. She takes off upstairs.

Aaron looks at Paul as if to see if Paul saw what he saw. He runs a hand through his hair and rubs the back of his head. He looks at his foot scratching the gravel. “Anyway, like I’d been saying. You do great work. It’s just, well, you know, we just feel it would be better if we went another way with it, for now at least.”

Paul thinks about the girl, how Aaron knows he’d seen her—lets him know with a look. A look of judgment. He didn’t quite catch what Aaron said. But as Aaron talks he catches on.

Aaron talks. He finally finds what he’d meant to say, and tries to find a way to unsay it. He talks, using his hands like he’s putting things on a shelf, in order, like somehow this explains the problem, like somehow his criticism had ever constructed anything. Now his hands, flat like they’re files, like bookends, bounce up and down across his chest. He brings them together.

Paul had heard, it would be better if I went another way, and now understands what Aaron meant. He glares outright now, watching Aaron’s fingers scrape like rake prongs, now circling, now digging, like somehow by riling the air he might imitate a tool, and convince Paul he’d ever done anything with his hands at all, other than masturbate. Aaron needs a pie chart, a computer screen, numbers with letters and symbols—moron, he needs to make Paul a moron, as an excuse, and his hands are nervous, trying to shut the case, try-

ing to compress everything, because Paul has no recourse to logic or reason. Asshole, Paul thinks. Aaron's hands hypnotize and his voice titters, because he's afraid. It isn't the sun blazing on Aaron's face. Aaron is afraid and Paul's not convinced. This guy built a clock in an eighth grade shop class so he can tell you how to do your job. You work with your hands and you're a moron. That's his point, the long and short of it.

Aaron makes himself small, so in your rage you don't feed him to death with his own body parts. You wouldn't hit a man with glasses? There are technical matters someone of your mental capacity just can't fathom, there are regulations, codes. Aaron talks using his hands so Paul won't hear what he's saying. "It's just, I mean, I'm going to have to hire some guys to get this fixed, and well you can come back when they got the foundation all set up."

Paul's lips crack. "The foundation is set," he says. "I don't know who..." he pauses, wants to say, who the fuck, but holds it in, "...who you think you're talking to." Paul's hands are hard set in his armpits. He shifts his weight to his good leg, and winces. "I've worked in the sciences. I have a degree in geology." Paul likes to point this out. It was a choice he made. He isn't just some construction worker. "And you think you know better than I do? You? Or is it one these piss ants you'll bring in here? Those guys aren't even certified. I've dealt with those people. They don't even speak English. You know they're illegal." The blood flushes on Paul's scalp and colors the salted, tight-cut, horseshoe of hair purple.

"Okay," Aaron says. "Let's calm down here. I mean, technically, you're not certified either ..." A shot cracks in the distance, and comes crashing down into the bushes.

They all try to pull this shit. Paul prices his jobs at cut rate because he's not certified, but his work meets code. His work is sound. He takes pride in his work. Place his work next to anyone, it stands up. They always like to throw it in your face, bust your balls, and drive down the price. He's always upfront, never skimps, never cuts corners. If something goes wrong, he fixes it. He takes a cut, but he

always finishes his jobs, always makes right.

"All I'm saying is," Aaron goes on, "that for this stage of the project, I mean, I'll have these guys come in and do the deck part, and then you can come back, and finish the door and the railings, you know, the cosmetic stuff." Aaron jerks around toward the bushes, says to the foraging golfer: "Did you get your ball?"

"Got it," the golfer says. "Thanks."

Cosmetic stuff, Paul thinks. "There's nothing wrong. I'll just put a few shims up, under that post, and it's fixed. Structurally it's sound, there's nothing wrong."

"But that's like four inches off."

"I'll just shim it up."

"No. I know you know what you're doing, I just don't feel comfortable with that, and considering the problems we had with the cement. I want everything to be up to code."

Paul twitches a shrug and jerks his head. "It's up to code. I had the inspectors in at every stage." He rubs a jabbing finger under his nose. "Ask them. They'll tell you."

"Well, I ... I did. I did some asking around, and they said, it's not, it shouldn't be like that. It's just that I would feel more comfortable ... with, with more workers. More hands on the job."

"Fine then. Fine. If that's what you want. Pay me for this week, and I'll come back and do the rest." He wants to say he washes his hands of this mess. The goddamned kid. The goddamned aggravation. Every goddamn time.

"That's the other thing," Aaron says. He holds his hand to his face as if to ward off blows. "It's not fair, I mean, I have to hire these guys to redo the work, so it's only fair, it's not like I'm trying to be unfair, but I figure, just for this week at least, I'm not going to pay. And the materials, they'll have to take it down, start over, you have to consider that cost."

"So you been planning this then? That's eight hundred dollars you owe me. Good. Great. See how this works out for you. When are they supposed to be done?"

“By the end of next week they said.”

“They already did the estimate?” He glares at Aaron who nods sheepishly, toeing the gravel. “Alright.”

“You can leave your tools here, they’ll be fine, you know, and come back next week and finish.”

“You know I can’t just lose a week’s pay. I have a family. I have bills to pay.” He shakes his head, thinking, he has to take this from him, from this man-boy, who raised a slut for a daughter.

Aaron escorts Paul out front to his cargo van. Paul stalks alongside, trying to maintain some decorum. Paul gets in the van and puts his hands on the steering wheel. Aaron stands at the window and rubs his hands as if to squelch the need to have them flitting about. “I’ll let you know when to come back,” he says, raising his voice to be heard through the van window. “It’ll work out.”

Paul doesn’t reply, doesn’t nod. He puts the van in reverse and notices the Obama sticker on the bumper of Aaron’s BMW. Change, it says. Obama, Paul thinks. “I’ll come back,” he says as he drives off, taking in the near mansion houses, the opulence. “I’ll come back. I’ll come back, you cocksucker.”

On his way home Paul stops off at the 7-11. He contemplates the 40’s: Colt 45, Miller High Life, but what’s the use? They’re 3.2 percent, all he’d get is diarrhea. The travel mug he had brought in is the size of a router. He fills it up with cappuccino from the machine, it barely fits under the spout. He microwaves two burritos. He eats in the van and works out the comeuppance, what he should have said, and grumbles, scraping out curses. He says fuck to God and damn, God fucking damn, fucking cocksucker, God damn, sipping cappuccino, and spitting up burrito in between. The illegals. Barack Obama. The girl and that punk ass kid. The moral fiber of this country. *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*.

He rarely thinks about why people get what they get. Why some get more than others. Why God would allow it. Why he couldn’t have more—at least what he’s owed. He thinks this as some kind of prayer, God listening, acknowledging. He even puts his hands

together for a second on the steering wheel, and closes his eyes.

At home, Paul parks his cargo van out front, and thinks about what he would tell his wife. There's the vacation they've planned and the garage door that needs fixing. The kids are still at home, a couple years out of high school. His daughter would be out with her friends, and his son holed up in his room, working over a video game controller or at something he'd have to hide if you'd knock. His wife would be thumbing through the community magazine, picking out course offerings. If he goes in, she'd say, wouldn't this be nice, a ceramics class? Yoga? Tai chi? A class on paper art greeting cards—think how much money we'd save. Look, ballroom dancing—you promised. Paul, you promised.

As it is, the jobs are sporadic, a bathroom for a week, a kitchen for two, a basement for a month. There's never an overlap, never a surplus of work, always a week, sometimes two or three between jobs. He watches the house and gnaws a scab on his knuckle. They make due because of his wife. She's a nurse. He decides against telling her. He never gets out of the car.

Rain begins to fall. Ten-foot rain at first, one drop here, another ten feet away. The sky purples, and then goes black. Hail falls, thunking off the roof of the van. He watches the house through the rain. Paint blisters at the corners of each window. He can't even keep his own house from going to shit. A marble sized ball of hail bounces off the windshield and cracks a splinter in the glass. "God-damn it," Paul says. He calls his wife and tells her he's gonna be late. Paul starts the car and heads out, feeling his way through the fog.

He calls the Skeens' house from the payphone at the Diamond Shamrock. The rain has weakened, dies down as sudden as it came. The daughter picks up. "Nick," she says. She breathes into the receiver, and Paul hears. She breathes: "Nick, is that you?"

Paul hangs up. He calls back and when the girl answers he says, "Sorry to bother this time of night, but I'm with Citi Bank. Are your parents home?" She says no, they're not. "Sorry to hear that," Paul says. "Sorry to bother. I'll call back another time."

When he gets to Aaron's no one seems to be home—the lights are off. The rain sprinkles down. He backs the van into the driveway, kissing the garage door with the bumper. He backs off enough so he can open the doors. A light comes on in the upstairs window of the house. What would they do about it?

He finds the gate locked and has to climb, wobbling over the fence. He goes down the hill toward the walkout basement. The backdoor won't give. It's a sliding glass door, the door where he saw the daughter in her panties. His newly bought Sawzall lies there on the floor. His circular saw and saw horses. He yanks at the handle. A light goes off in the house.

He turns away from the house and sees a golf ball lying in the yard. He squishes out in the grass, squinting at the rain, and picks it up. He turns to the house takes aim, heaves back and slings it at the window. It bounces and shoots back at him and scurries off into the darkness.

He sets about gathering his tools from the shed in back and stacking them up by the gate. The mushy grass and mud sucks at his boots, and flicks his pants knee-high with mud. The rain damps his clothes, and every now and then, he wipes the rain from his face and flings it. He looks up at the dark sky and says, "Son of a bitch." Each trip he wipes the mud from his boots with an anchor stake, on the slope down toward the basement, hardly able to keep his balance.

His phone rings and he lets it ring. It keeps ringing. It's Aaron. Finally he answers. "What do you want?"

"What are you doing at my house? I should call the police. My daughter's inside freaking out, thinking someone's trying to break in. She saw your van in the driveway. What are you doing? We have an alarm system."

"I'm just getting what's mine, what you owe me."

"I don't owe you anything. I did you a favor. If you don't leave my house right now, I'm going to call the police."

"Where are you?"

"What does that matter? I mean, you need to leave. Stay away

from my daughter.”

“Your daughter? I’ll leave when I’m good and ready. We done with this then?” Paul hangs up. “Asshole.”

At the gate, he rummages through his tool chest and pulls out his drill, and removes the hinges from the gate. He pushes it from the hinge side, and the gate angles over and hangs from the lock. He rolls out the tool chests and loads the van.

There’s one last load, a wheelbarrow filled with nails and bolts, a couple bags of cement wrapped in a tarp, and a few other things he plans to take as payment, though it’s well short of what he’s owed. He crosses below the deck skeleton, and climbs the slope to the wheelbarrow on the other side of the house. The load is heavy and veers as Paul tries to get it going, keeping it from swerving into the posts. The wheel barrow noses heavy into the wet grass, bears down and gets stuck every so often. When it stalls, he heaves forward, and the weight of the load carries it onward.

It hits him, the wafting scent of cologne, faint then overpowering. He hears the slosh and suck of feet in the mud. A blow thuds at his lower back. He staggers forward. The wheel barrow thrusts ahead out of control and the wheel sinks in a hollow and the load pitches forward. When it hits, the wheelbarrow cranks off to the right, and the load slides out, throwing the handles upright. Paul tries to control the crash, and hugs at the load as it falls. The butt-end of the wheelbarrow slings up and strikes him in the chest, and catapults him. He tumbles into the bushes beside the deck. He feels the suction and pop of his thigh bone come loose of the hip-joint. Sprawled on his back amongst the bushes, he swallows cries, and tries to move, but the pain is too much, so he just lies there, whimpering.

He lies there. His only view is the careening deck beam. His eyes search the shadows. Nothing. The patter of rain. All he sees is the corner of the deck angled off. It seems to fall at him.

The phone rings. It keeps ringing. As he is, Paul can’t angle himself to answer, and he would, he would answer. The rain picks

up again, and the sprinklers come on. Sometime later, he hears doors slam shut out front. There is a murmur of voices. He hears the static of walkie-talkies, and can just make out the heads of two police officers who peek around the corner, on the other side of the yard. They stand there with their hands on their hips, waiting for the sprinklers to stop.

“My leg,” Paul says, groaning, groping. His leg is bent and twisted. He can’t feel his foot. He paces his breathing to keep the pain from shooting, but it shoots, up and down his spine, and even whispering, “My leg,” again makes the pain pulse and torque, in his ribs, down his spine, grinding at his hip.

And then they’re standing over him, two policemen looking stern. Aaron stands behind them with what looks to Paul to be a smile, holding his fist to his chest, rubbing it with the other hand. The policemen appraise him but say nothing. Aaron steps forward, edges past the policeman. “Oh, God, Paul,” he says. “What happened? Are you all right?” He kneels down.

“Don’t touch me.” Paul breathes slowly. “It was that goddamn kid.”

“The kid?”

If he could move, if he could roll over, he’d pull Aaron down into the mud. He’d ask him, The cosmetic stuff? You know? The kid that’s fucking your daughter, you know about that, you cocksucker? But he can’t. He just lies there with his hand on his hip, gritting his teeth.

“Paul?” Aaron rubs his leg as if he can feel the pain. “Paul? I’m sorry. This isn’t...”

“My leg,” he says. He leans forward slightly and runs both hands down his thigh, making a show of his pain. He says, “It’s my leg. The hip, my leg,” as if to explain, as if to say sorry. “My leg,” he says. “My leg,” and he means it now as a threat, an accusation. These people, he thinks, these goddamn people.

“Paul, this can be fixed.” Aaron winces and his tongue sizzles between his teeth. He turns to the policemen and sort of sniffs, dismissing them. “There’s an ambulance.” He nods to the policemen.

“It’s on its way.”

Paul notices a light inside the house, deep in the basement near the stairs. Through the dark windows and the night’s hollow reflection, he can just make out a figure. It’s the girl. She stands at the window wearing a sheer nighty that hardly touches her hips, standing over his Sawzall. She poses, it seems, as a woman in a lingerie ad. Paul inhales deeply, and takes a series of shallow, wheezing breaths. He looks at the girl, shoots a glance at Aaron, and returns his gaze to the girl. She isn’t dancing. She won’t dance. Dance, dance for Christ’s sake, he thinks. She stands lifeless as a mannequin, as dull, as cunning, and watches. She stands and watches him and there’s nothing he can do.

Back to the Garden

How we dream about the family farm

Julia Boss

My grandparents Floyd and Alva became migrant workers in

1937, the year after my mother was born. They had been tenant farming in North Dakota, were choking on dust and doctors' bills after my mother's underweight birth (less than three pounds, as my grandmother always told it, though Alva was not known for her strict adherence to the truth). Like many rural families before and after them, my grandparents gave up the farm, sold the workhorse, piled the older kids and their tiny baby into the Model T and headed west to Washington State to pick other farmers' crops.

If their life in the Yakima Valley wasn't exactly *The Grapes of Wrath*, it was only because my grandparents were too conservatively Midwestern to reimagine themselves as part of an enlightened Steinbeck-style rural labor movement. They dreamed of owning a proper farm with a proper house, and for the next twenty years their family did little else but work to realize that dream. Along the way they picked pears and cherries and apples; Floyd tended orchard smudge pots so other farmers' fruit trees wouldn't freeze; Alva put on a hygienic white cannery uniform to put up other farmers' pears and tomatoes; my mother cooked and cleaned while the boys weeded the garden, milked the cow, tended the pigs, steers, and chickens that would later end up on the table. Every once in a while they took a night off, sat down and listened to a brother-in-law play his fiddle. By the mid-1940s, my grandparents had bought five acres in pasture just north of a dusty one-stop-sign town called Hara. They put up a white-painted clapboard house—two rooms down with a ladder up the wall to the kids' attic bedroom, water from a pump just outside the kitchen door—and then they kept working. Only in the late 1950s, after two decades of relentless effort, were they able to build a bigger house—four rooms, and their first indoor plumbing.

By the time my grandparents had finally labored their way to that dream farm, my mother could think of nothing else but getting

away from it. The minute she hit her twenties, she headed for an office job in the nearby town of Yakima. Then followed the futuristic glamor of Seattle, where she could drink mai tais at Trader Vic's, click down office corridors in pointy-toed high heels, and look out her apartment window at the Space Needle, just built for the 1962 Seattle World's Fair and pointing its metaphorical way to a technofuture where food would grow and cook itself, machines would clean the house, and meat wouldn't be a matter of tearful goodbyes, just a product shrink-wrapped onto styrofoam trays. She looked homeward only as often as Thanksgiving and Christmas demanded.

My mother's move to the city wasn't entirely the generational rebellion I make it out to be. Her mother Alva had dreamed of owning a farm because the only alternative within reach was working on someone else's. She had also dreamed, all her life—while helping to wash and dress and feed her seventeen brothers and sisters, while picking cherries and canning pears—of a half-Hollywood, half-*True Story* magazine life of shiny cars and appliances and romantic adventures. My grandmother was caught between two different versions of the American dream: the one where we want to own land, and the one where we want to get away from working it. What we really crave is that Edenic ideal, the garden that produces without human intervention, the place of abundance without labor. Since what we've got instead is the real-world necessity of working hard to help things grow, we split the dream in half: on the one hand, abundance, land, and labor (in other words, farming); on the other hand, ease from physical labor, but the rootlessness and dependence that come with our modern suburban-dwelling existence. Most of us, given one extreme, will pull toward the other. Consider Cain, the first-ever Boy Who Couldn't Wait to Leave the Farm. Angry that his foolish parents had traded the good life for a single apple (a bad farming decision if there ever was one), hating the vicissitudes of postlapsarian agriculture (he toiled endlessly in the fields, but his best customer still passed him over for the guy selling grass-fed

meat), he threw it all away in a single fratricidal instant. We know Cain's story ends badly, in a lifetime of wandering exile and desperate yearning for the life and land he'd lost. But still we cycle on and off the farm—even though, whether farming or not-farming, we never really make it back to Eden. My mother and two of her brothers grabbed the get-off-the-land half of Alva's dream and moved to cities; the other brother caught onto the coattails of his parents' land yearning, bought a farm of his own, raised horses and dairy cows and drove a back-hoe on the side to make ends meet. Now my farming cousins have grown up to leave their farm—and I, in turn, dream of going back.

I didn't always have this dream. When I was a child, my mother taught me that farming was hard work and heartbreak. She talked about sweating through the long summer afternoons when she tied up young hop vines, crying as she said good-bye to "her" steer when he grew big enough to butcher, trying to bottle-feed a Yorkshire piglet after its large white mother broke its leg, struggling with her family to make their way out of poverty. She never mentioned her fiddle-playing uncle. Raising her own daughters in the city in the 1970s, my mother continued the hard work of farming; she had done so much for so long that she didn't know how to stop. Sure, on sunny days we could see the Space Needle from our Seattle backyard, but we saw it while planting lettuce, weeding carrots, and tying up the tomato plants that edged the stairs marching down to a dark basement where we stored potatoes and onions. In the summers, my grandmother timed her visits for the weeks when berries were ripe. She and my mother, my sister and I would all pile into the Chevy Nova in the dewy daybreak hours to drive to the U-Pick farms an hour outside the city. We would spend our mornings in the hot sun picking and our afternoons in the hot kitchen canning a year's worth of strawberry jam or blueberry syrup. I learned to cook and sew and knit and make do, and caught from my mother the fear of idleness—the fear, period—that Depression-era farming built into those who

lived through it. I learned about the hard work of farming, but never about the abundance, the richness and rootedness of living on the land.

My husband, who spent long stretches of his childhood in the countryside of southern France, learned a very different lesson about rural life. Les Vidaux, in the Var region of Provence, is barely even a village, what the French call an *hameau* and the English a hamlet: a knot of houses centered on a patchwork of fields. It's such a tiny place that its single street and stone houses were not named and numbered until France joined the European Union in the 1990s, and sufficiently isolated that when my husband was a boy the old people still spoke Provençal, not French, as their primary language. Charles's grandfather spent his life in the country, cultivated pears and bamboo (which he sold to make fishing poles), and was a member of the local *coopérative vinicole*, where the small growers took their grapes to be fermented on shared equipment. When he came of age Charles's father left for the city, but he and his cousins brought their families back to the country on weekends and all summer long, not just when the strawberries were ripe.

Charles had the farm's abundance without any of the farm's hard work. In the arcadian days before the arrival of street names, the fields were full of bees and butterflies and lavender. Unless one of the local farmers was out on his Marshall Plan Massey-Ferguson tractor, a wandering boy could lie down in the rows of grapevines, look up at an impossibly blue *provençal* sky, and listen to the perfect stillness of southern France in summer. In those days, fruit trees were still scattered through the vineyards, and he would climb up whichever ancient tree had the ripest fruit and eat cherries or plums straight off the branches until his mother rang the bell to call him home. Sometimes he would fish. Sometimes he would trap or shoot small birds and roast them in a wood-fired clay oven he built himself. Sometimes he would bicycle to Pierrefeu, the nearest large village, to buy bread from the artisan baker (still there—this is France, after all) and watch the village blacksmith at work with his

coal-fired forge (long gone—even in France). While my grandparents had neither abundance nor ease, Charles's grandfather had both. He paid the French and Portuguese equivalents of Floyd and Alva to prune his vines and pick his grapes, let them live for the few weeks of *vendange* in Les Vidaux's own migrant worker housing. Unfortunately for his descendants, he maintained this abundance-and-ease rural lifestyle primarily by selling off land.

Charles still owns part of an old stone farmhouse and a dozen or so tiny vine-filled fields scattered around Les Vidaux. But given a simple mix of modern-day agricultural economics and partible inheritance, we can't live there. Even in Charles's childhood, it wasn't all arcadia; conventional vineyard practice, especially once those Marshall Plan tractors hit the fields, meant and still means chemicals (though the farmers no longer use the arsenic formerly favored as an anti-fungal), depleted soils, and more than a little hillside erosion. There aren't many bees and butterflies these days, and the old cherry and plum trees have fallen before the god of efficiency. The vineyards are still productive enough for the farm's co-owners to lease them to a neighbor, who grows for quantity, not quality, and takes the grapes to the government-subsidized cooperative to produce a mediocre sparkling rosé *vin de table*. The income is sufficient to pay taxes and upkeep on the old stone house, but not nearly enough to support a family, even if the multiple owners of that little stone house and its dozen fields could be persuaded that the income should support ours. This generation's version of Eden, meanwhile, is just across the road: a biodynamic winery with cover crops bursting up green between the rows of vines, a restaurant-guesthouse that's a new star on France's agritourism map, and a fermenting and bottling room filled with an utterly unattainable million euros' worth of gravity-controlled fermentation and filtration equipment.

When Charles and I married in 2000, we started dreaming about a farm of our own. We had figured out, by then, that most walks of life involve hard work, that life off the farm wasn't the stuff of my grandmother's Hollywood-and-magazine dreams. Crunching

the numbers on someone else's spreadsheet or teaching someone else's college seminar wasn't so very different from tying up someone else's young hop vines, except that the number-crunching and teaching happened in a climate-controlled box and the hop-tending under open sky. By then we had both moved more times than we could count; we wanted the place-specific farming life, the concrete joys of nurturing abundance on our own land. Not surprisingly, though, we thought about a farming life that would be more like Charles's grandparents' and less like Floyd and Alva's. A little less village, a little more *villeggiatura*. And that's where the dream took a wrong turn.

There's an expression in French, *le mieux est l'ennemi du bien*—the perfect is the enemy of the good. You can't have your cake and eat it too, try to have it all and you may end up with nothing. We might, at that time, have started saving to buy a farm. With a down payment and a mortgage, Charles would have had to work away from the farm, drive a long commute to pay the mortgage while I tried to jump-start a market garden—but at least we would have been on our own land, planting our own trees, building up our own soil. Unfortunately, in the generational determinism of our respective families' on-and-off-the-land cycle, we had been raised to see education as the answer to every problem. Even if all those carrots and tomatoes, butterflies and bees had formed the backdrop against which our childhoods were staged, the principal actors in our American and French family dramas were parents who had grown up dreaming of getting off the farm and who, in our childhood years, wanted the same bright urban-industrial future for us. We weren't farmers' children, we were farmers' children's children: both my mother and Charles's father dreamed that their offspring would have educations, professional careers, lives where we would never need the farmers' skills they couldn't help teaching us.

We had already followed those dreams to a lot of education, if not to ease and prosperity. My years in Yale's history Ph.D. program had led to a collapsing and geographically impossible academic job

market; Charles had received a free *Grandes Écoles* education as an officer in the French army—that’s the kind of French professional formation that sets you up for lifetime employment, long lunches, six weeks’ annual leave, and a predictable pension—but then he left the army and left France. His French military engineering degree didn’t give him much security in the American job market, certainly not the geographical security that could guarantee a job in the same place long enough to pay off the mortgage on a farm. So we pushed the dreams of our parents’ generation to their logical extreme. We took a huge bite from the shiny apple of American higher education, fell hard into the temptation to borrow now against promises of greater economic security later. We took out massive student loans; Charles went to law school; I stayed home with babies and tried to write a doctoral dissertation in my nonexistent spare time. This turned out to be the home-economics equivalent of “We had to destroy the village in order to save it.” Trying to reach a perfect modern-world garden (a farm backed by money earned doing something else), we drove ourselves so far away from the good-enough garden that it’s now unclear if we will ever make it back. We turned ourselves into an overeducated twenty-first-century variation on Floyd and Alva in the 1930s: undermined by this century’s version of global economic crisis, moving rootless over the landscape to follow work, and only dreaming of a day when we might be able to settle permanently on our own land.

Why don’t we live on a farm now? Because we are too heavily indebted to choose where we live. After Charles graduated in 2007—especially during that first year, when law firms stopped hiring and he worked as a lobbyist for a Darfur-based Sudanese opposition party that couldn’t afford to pay him—our family economy looked like Argentina in the 1990s. By 2012, we had managed to pass Greece (debt-to-GDP ratio then 127.8 percent), and now we’ve set our sights on the United States, depressing as it is to describe the appalling U.S. debt-to-income numbers as a target, especially since the IMF doesn’t care about micro-economies like ours. Charles has found

a career niche advising in construction disputes for the resource industry, which means he needs to work, and therefore to live, in places where huge corporations are developing petroleum and iron deposits. We spent two years in the dust-stormed desert near Abu Dhabi, then moved to Perth, Western Australia, an isolated outpost on the western edge of the Great Australian Desert. We are damned souls wandering in the wastelands of the global oil economy: could we possibly travel any farther outside the garden of rural sustainable living?

I didn't start out talking about my grandparents because I think I'm entitled to compare our struggles to theirs. We're not Floyd and Alva. The twenty-first century has produced its own crop of desperate rural migrants, pushed off the land by North American agribusiness and trading their farm skills for substandard wages and housing. We're rootless, yes, but we have enough to eat and pay the doctor; we have indoor plumbing; our children aren't tying up hop vines or mucking stalls for wages to support the family; we can afford to buy organic eggs, right now, though only if we keep paying interest on something else. We can't clear our debts by selling a horse, it will take us years to climb back up to zero, and we won't be able to buy a farm for years to come. But on a daily basis, our life isn't too hard. My husband's skills have a solid market value (the global economy is less interested in my specialization in French North American history), as long as we are willing to migrate whenever and wherever that market dictates. Are we like my Depression-era grandparents? Only in our dreams.

Dreaming about farm ownership is easy. You can dream your way to a different farm every night. You can imagine your life in super-modern modular eco-housing, in an old stone house, a converted water-mill, a log cabin, an earth-sheltered concrete bunker (that last is my husband's version)—the variations are endless. You can produce organic flowers and vegetables, heirloom chickens and free-range eggs, raw-milk cheese and biodynamic wine. On my dream farm there is a freestanding writing studio. On our teenage

daughter's dream farm, the stable backs right onto her bedroom window, and draft horses do all the hauling and plowing. After our years in Abu Dhabi, our environmental debts are high, too, so we sketch in solar panels, wind turbines, and geothermal heating. If you're going to dream, why not dream big? We're in the wintertime, seed-catalog phase of the calendar: for the moment, we can grow and be anything we want.

The hard part is figuring out how to live right now. Do we rent cheaper housing far out from the city so we can save money and be closer to working farms, and then burn up more time and money and carbon driving for work and the food we can't grow or buy from neighbors? Do we live close to work, and close to public transportation, gaining more family time and reducing our carbon footprint but paying higher rent, and thus postponing the day when we can be free from debt and save enough to buy our own farm? Do we go home to visit grandparents, when the price of four Perth–Seattle plane tickets could be a solid down payment on five acres of undeveloped land in Washington State? If you are saving to buy a farm someday, do you opt for eggs from the conscientious farmer who, Joel Salatin–style, lets his chickens be chickens, or do you buy the cheap battery-hen eggs in the grocery store and bank the \$2.50 you just saved? If you live in a desert, does it make sense to build up soil from sand or use desalinated water to grow kale? Can you commit to animals when you work in an industry so volatile that you don't know where you'll be living a year from now?

Failing to understand the power of our instinctive human yearning for a unified state of rootedness, productivity, and ease can lead to some highly counterproductive decisions: our family is now much farther outside the garden than we were ten years ago because we had internalized our parents' resistance to the hard labor and potential financial downside of farming. Now we're living an extreme version of the twenty-first-century's deal with the devil: education as a precursor to physical ease, but also to debt, dependence, and rootlessness. We're obviously not the first Americans struggling to

find the good-life balance: a nineteenth century's worth of utopian agricultural experiments, and the more recent successes and failures of the 1960s back-to-the-land movement, show how difficult it can be to balance our competing desires for abundance and ease. Inspirational back-to-the-landers Helen and Scott Nearing complained that many people who showed up at their homestead in the 1960s and 1970s didn't understand hard work was part of the deal. Even American suburbia itself—the life that many neo-farmers were and are rejecting—can be seen as an unsuccessful attempt to reconcile natural abundance and physical ease, with its illusory rootedness (on average, Americans now move every five years), and the illusion of effortless abundance that emanates greenly from its many quarter-acres of unproductive lawn.

Life on the outside, when you're trying to get back in, is full of frustrations and contradictions. Sometimes the farming dream pushes you to the right action for the wrong reason: I do buy the right eggs. I buy local organic vegetables and farmer-direct, free-range meat and eggs from happy hens. And, yes, there is a little bit of slow-food movement rational thinking involved in this decision: the consumer is a co-creator in a more sustainable food system; my food dollar is helping to build someone else's dream farm on someone else's five or ten or fifteen acres; I'm supporting an economy I might eventually hope to enter as a producer. But truly my trips to Perth's farmers' markets are anything but rationally motivated. I'm there for a vicarious taste of other people's connectedness, searching for the you-are-what-you eat moment when I can pretend that eating traditional brine-cured olives from Redtail Ridge Farm connects me to their land in Mumballup, Western Australia, that cooking organic broccoli and brussels sprouts from TurnOrganics gets me closer to a farm in Cookernup. Industrial-agricultural conglomerates know all about our collective farming nostalgia, which is why they paste cheery watercolors of red barns and windmills on packages of CFO-produced beef and eggs from caged hens. That same nostalgic yearning can, of course, also support small-scale biodynamics and all-but-certified organics. If I'm going to be the

food-economy equivalent of a symbiotic nitrogen-fixing bacterium latched on to someone else's roots, I can choose to give my nitrogen to the kind of farm I dream about. But the bacteria aren't motivated by altruism, and neither am I.

More problematic is when the pull "back to the garden" makes you do the wrong thing for the right reasons. In fertile North America, you know it's good to grow some of your own food, at least to eat local greens, since the calories they contain are dwarfed by the calories typically burned up to chill and transport them. But what does it mean to "grow local greens" in Abu Dhabi, especially if you don't live there long enough for your compost pile to finish cooking? It means building up beds with imported peat moss and imported soil—and watering with desalinated water in a country where annual rainfall is less than an inch, where the groundwater supply is entirely depleted, where water reserves will last the population only two days if the desalination plants break down. Growing any kind of vegetable in Abu Dhabi is like filling your car with ethanol—doing something that feels green but really has a net-zero or even a negative environmental impact. Since the vegetable alternatives in Abu Dhabi are either European and American world-travelers or the products of local air-conditioned hydroponic greenhouses, there's really no blameless way to eat greens there.

I did grow kale and lettuce in Abu Dhabi—and Charles and our daughters planted Omani melons, Saudi date palms, and other plants less morally problematic because more drought-resistant—not because it made economic or environmental sense, but because the simple act of planting helped us feel closer to a place where growing our own food would be good both for us and for the world. More logically, our Abu Dhabi farming experiments should have been about keeping chickens, which, like the insects they eat, thrive in the desert heat. Many Emirati families have completely free-ranging flocks—unfenced and unwatched—which means that a drive through certain residential neighborhoods is a joke in perpetual motion, at every turn a chicken wondering why it crossed the road.

But I was reluctant to add harvesting the chickens to the long list of good-byes that our children must say whenever we move, and I never managed to get past the local dealer's rooster-with-every-hen pullet policy. Thankfully now, in Western Australia, although the soil is still poor and sandy, we can grow the same plants with more rain and less guilt; I still haven't committed to chickens but still think I should, especially since Perth farmers understand that their customers don't need or want back yards full of roosters.

Most dangerous of all—and hard to escape, whether you are living on or off the land—is the false dichotomy in which one is either geographically rootless and ruthless, excluded from the garden and therefore not bound by its rules, or geographically grounded and therefore reconnected to the natural seasons and cycles of life. That logic says I should only buy the cheap eggs now, that it doesn't matter how I get to my dream farm as long as I get there quickly, that I can't live a more grounded life until I can do it on my own piece of ground. I can't always get outside that dichotomy, not after a lifetime of exposure to a commercial world that considers any unfulfilled desire a problem to be solved as quickly as possible (American advertising screams, *Cain, drive your way straight back into Eden in this brand-new Ford F-150 pickup!*—and I want to hitch a ride). I know, too, that there are real-time farmers who think nothing I do matters—except perhaps as a cautionary tale—until one way or another I've bought the farm. But on my best days, those blue-sky days when the birds sing and there's still a loaf of sourdough spelt bread left when I get to New Norcia Bakery, I remember what my grandparents could have told me decades ago if only I had been listening: waiting is part of life's natural rhythm.

Even in our current exile—and I hope that “our” might embrace the many people who dream of farming but for reasons much better than mine can't yet make the leap—we are already reconnecting to a natural cycle that America forgot during the decades of easy credit, a cycle where people wait for their dreams to reach maturity, wait with the patience of the oak tree or the date palm that may bear

fruit only after a decade. In the seasons of life, most of us have fallow wintry periods when all we can do is save and plan and dream; some of us may live through longer winters than others. My grandparents' migrant worker life gave way only very slowly to the tiny house with the pump outside, and only after many years of waiting and working did they find their way to the very outside edge of most Americans' field of dreams. In my university years I learned many things my grandparents never knew, but now I can learn from them how to wait, how to be grateful about what I have and patient about what I don't, how to stop working from time to time and listen to the fiddle. That's the greatest challenge in a life of debt and dreams: learning to keep one eye on where you want to be, and the other on the beauty of where you are right now.

Three Poems

Sarah Kirsch

trans. Abigail Wender

Sarah Kirsch grew up in communist East Germany (GDR), as did many of her generation's distinguished post-World War II writers. In her early poems, she explored traditional lyric subjects—love, nature, and loss—and began soon to express her more non-conformist social and political views, albeit indirectly, coming into conflict with GDR authorities. Nevertheless her poetry garnered numerous prizes early in her career, including honors from Western Germany—the Heinrich-Heine Prize for *Zaubersprüche* (1973), her third volume, and the Petrarch Prize for *Rüchenwind* (1976), her fourth. Before her death, she had published more than thirteen volumes of poetry in addition to translations, prose, novels, and children's stories, garnering The Austrian State Prize for Literature, the Friedrich Hölderlin Prize, and the Georg Büchner Prize, among the most notable.

Born Ingrid Bernstein on April 4, 1935 in the Southern Harz region, she changed her name from Ingrid to Sarah while still a teenager in protest against the anti-Semitism rampant after World War II. Changing her name certainly must have tweaked her elders. In 1938, a law had required all Jews to change their official names by signing all correspondence and records with “new” Jewish names. Every woman was given the name “Sarah” and every man was called “Israel.” Kirsch graduated with a degree in biology from the university of Halle, studied literature at the university of Leipzig, where she was married briefly to Rainer Kirsch, and began earning a living as a writer and translator.

By 1968 her writing had grown increasingly less acceptable to authorities and she came under suspicion of the state. At the East Berlin Writers' Congress in 1969, the poem “Schwarze Bohnen” was attacked for its nontraditional form (no rhyme, no meter, no punctuation), as well as for its subjective subject matter. In “Ich wollte meinen König töten,” a subversive, feminist poem, Kirsch managed

to address a personal breakup (a marriage one suspects) and also allude to political rebellion and the disintegration of government. After Kirsch joined a group of dissidents protesting the expulsion of writer and singer Wolf Biermann in 1976, she was thrown out of the Writer's Union. She was granted an exit visa in 1977, initially moving to West Berlin. After she left the GDR, Kirsch traveled and taught extensively, making her home in a remote village in Schleswig-Holstein, where she remained until her death on May 5, 2013.

Schwarze Bohnen

Nachmittags nehme ich ein Buch in die Hand
Nachmittags lege ich ein Buch aus der Hand
Nachmittags fällt mir ein es gibt Krieg
Nachmittags vergesse ich jedweden Krieg
Nachmittags mahle ich Kaffee
Nachmittags setze ich den zermahlenen Kaffee
Rückwärts zusammen schöne
Schwarze Bohnen
Nachmittags ziehe ich mich aus mich an
Erst schminke dann wasche ich mich
Singe bin stumm

Black Coffee Beans

Afternoons I take a book in hand
Afternoons I put down the book in hand
Afternoons it occurs to me there's also a war
Afternoons I forget about all war
Afternoons I grind fresh coffee
Afternoons I put the ground coffee
Back together, beautiful
Black beans
Afternoons I dress myself naked
First make-up my face, then unmake it
Sing, am silent

Ich wollte meinen König töten

Ich wollte meinen König töten
Und wieder frei sein. Das Armband
Das er mir gab, den einen schönen Namen
Legte ich ab und warf die Worte
Weg die ich gemacht hatte: Vergleiche
Für seine Augen die Stimme die Zunge
Ich baute leergetrunkene Flaschen auf
Füllte Explosives ein—das sollte ihn
Für immer verjagen. Damit
Die Rebellion vollständig würde
Verschloß ich die Tür, ging
Unter Menschen, verbrüdete mich
In verschiedenen Häusern—doch
Die Freiheit wollte nicht groß werden
Das Ding Seele dies bourgeoise Stück
Verharrte nicht nur, wurde milder
Tanzte wenn ich den Kopf
An gegen Mauern rannte. Ich ging
Den Gerüchten nach im Lande die
Gegen ihn sprachen, sammelte
Drei Bände Verfehlungen eine Mappe
Ungerechtigkeiten, selbst Lügen
Führte ich auf. Ganz zuletzt
Wollte ich ihn einfach verraten
Ich suchte ihn, den Plan zu vollenden
Küßte den anderen, daß meinem
König nichts widerführe.

I Wanted to Kill My King

I wanted to kill my king
and be free again. The bracelet
he gave me, the one with the lovely name
I left it behind and threw away the words
I had made: Similes
for his eyes, voice, tongue
I arranged empty bottles
filled them with explosives—that ought
to chase him away forever. To finish
the rebellion utterly
I locked the door behind me, mingled
among the people, sought
friends in various houses—yet
freedom would not grow
This thing, Soul, the bourgeois part
not only remained, it mellowed
danced while I ran head long
into a wall. I went around the realm
investigated the rumors against him, collected
three volumes of misconduct, a folder
of injustice, his lies
I myself compiled the list. In the end
I simply wanted to betray him
I sought him out to complete the plan
kissed a different man, that my king
nothing would befall.

Bei den weißen Stiefmütterchen

Bei den weißen Stiefmütterchen
im Park wie ers mir auftrug
stehe ich unter der Weide
ungekämmte alte blattlos
siehst du sagt sie er kommt nicht
Ach sage ich er hat sich den Fuß
gebrochen eine Gräte verschluckt, eine Straße
wurde plötzlich verlegt oder
er kann seiner Frau nicht entkommen
viele Dinge hindern uns Menschen
Die Weide wiegt sich und knarrt
kann auch sein er ist schon tot
sah blaß aus als er dich untern Mantel küßte
kann sein Weide kann sein
so wollen wir hoffen er liebt mich nicht mehr

Near the White Violets

Near the white violets
in the park where he asked me to meet
I stand under the willow
Unkempt aging leafless
You see, she says, he's not coming
Oh, I say, he's broken his foot
he swallowed a fishbone, a street
has suddenly vanished or
he can't escape his wife.
All of us struggle with so many things
The willow sways and creaks,
Could be that he's already dead
looked pale when he kissed you beneath the cloak
Could be, Willow, could be
so let's hope he loves me no more

My Life as a Late-'90s Ska Kid

*A retrospective
appreciation*

Brian LaRue

When I was living in New Haven, working as a music journalist, in the mid-to-late '00s, I had a favorite one-liner I'd apply, vocally or only in my mind, to so many of the ultra-cool indie rocker twenty-somethings I'd run into around town: *I remember your teenaged ska band. That's the shit you can't hide.*

In New Haven in those days, it was considered extremely fashionable to be into psych rock and alt-country. For musicians, sometimes bearded and stoned or whiskey-drunk, to strum lackadaisically on their guitars and avoid giving off the appearance of trying too hard. For people in the audience at shows to stand six feet from the stage and chatter while nursing cheap old-man beers, wearing shaggy hairdos and tight jeans and messenger bags. But I'd look around at those faces, and I'd remember. I'd remember when they were just a little bit younger, guitarists grinning giddily while jabbing quick tempos on their instruments, as a swarm of laughing kids danced maniacally and crowd-surfed practically on top of the stage monitors. I remember because I had been one of them.

Oh, sure. All of us who grew up with ska grew onward. We developed more "mature" interests, perhaps an interest in modes of creative expression that employed a bit more shade, subtlety, and nuance. A lot of us tried to brush our ska periods under the rug, to write off those days as kid stuff. I certainly tried, too, for a while. Almost immediately after the dissolution of my own teenaged ska band, I came to think of my ska phase as a bit of youthful naivete that could be erased with Stalinesque precision. It was silly, to my mind, and not something worth getting nostalgic over as I got my own adulthood on.

Eventually I realized I was wrong. There's no sense in shame. For one thing, way too many of us were involved with ska for any of us to feel embarrassed. For a period in the late '90s and very early '00s, the ska scene was practically unavoidable for any young person in Connecticut who was into alt culture. Punks and hardcore kids

got in on it. Kids who otherwise should have been ravers got in on it. Burgeoning reggae heads got into it. Kids who were into the more melodic side of whatever was left of alternative rock radio—kids who later realized what they were really into was garage rock and powerpop—got into it. Even some of the hippie kids got into it. And a lot of kids got into it who weren't big music heads and who had no countercultural interests. Many of those kids had no idea about the musical or cultural context they were stepping into, but they knew the music was fun and upbeat, and they could dance to it, and their friends would be at the shows. Ska wasn't a niche youth subculture in Connecticut at the time. It was a rite of passage.

If you were in a ska band on a good bill of six local or regional ska bands at the Tune Inn in New Haven in 1999, you might easily find yourself playing to 150 boys and girls of every skin tone you might imagine. If you kept playing in indie rock bands for another six or seven years, you might never play again to a crowd as large and as diverse as you did when you were in a ska band during the height of the Connecticut ska scene. There's no shame in having been in a ska band. It was a heroic experience, and those of us who did it should own it.

Before we go deeper into all this ska talk, let's take a minute to define terms and paint a historical and cultural picture. Ska is a form of dance music played with live instruments: electric guitar, bass, drums, sometimes piano or organ, and often a brass and reed horn section (most commonly, saxophones, trumpets, and trombones). It was originally developed in Jamaica in the 1950s and 1960s. The apocryphal though not entirely true story is that Jamaican musicians at that time had become keenly interested in American rhythm and blues, and they tried to copy it, but came out sounding way more ... Jamaican. While rhythm and blues digs heavily into the downbeat—that is, if you'd count out the beat, one-and-TWO-and-three-and-FOUR-and—the Jamaican players ended up hitting hard on the offbeats: one-AND-two-AND-three-AND-four-AND. As with American rhythm and

blues, Jamaican ska often used simple three- or four-chord patterns, walking bass lines, and bawdy lyrics sung with a bluesy lilt. It was music meant for local dancehalls. As the '60s progressed, Jamaican musicians dug deeper into those ska grooves, slowed down the tempos and put more space between the rhythmic accents, which gave way to the development of rocksteady and reggae.

In the late '70s, when punk rock exploded in the UK, it became extremely fashionable for a certain sort of punk to be interested in reggae, rocksteady, and ska. Part of it was the shared simplicity between punk and those Jamaican styles—just a few chords and a lot of feeling. But for some politically minded punks, being into Jamaican music was a statement in and of itself. The UK had seen a huge influx of Caribbean immigrants over the previous few decades. Political punks wrote songs about the experiences of the working poor, often because they *were* the working poor, as were many of their neighbors who were first- or second-generation Caribbean immigrants. Some of the key socially conscious UK punk bands of the era were wont to cover or write songs in a reggae or ska mode (say, The Clash or Stiff Little Fingers). Other young musicians formed bands around a more explicit mission to specialize in ska and to fuse it with punk and contemporary pop. They played ska accents over four-on-the-floor beats, and they played faster than the '60s ska bands did, because people involved in punk wanted to play everything faster anyway. Some of the leading ska revival bands—The Specials and The (English) Beat, for two—formed around intentionally integrated lineups. The premise of black and white musicians playing together, wearing snappy black suits and white shirts, led The Specials to name their own record imprint 2-Tone Records. By extension, the whole second wave of ska is often referred to simply as the 2-Tone Movement.

Ever since the late '70s, certain punk bands have nodded toward ska and reggae in their music. You have to keep in mind how even though punks are supposed to be thoroughly iconoclastic, they're essentially traditionalists when it comes to anything that

defines what it means to be punk. Punks look back for aesthetic guidance to that Ground Zero moment around 1977 or 1978, when so many of the most influential bands of the first wave of punk were making their first records. If it were permissible for a punk band then, a band could do the same thing now and still be punk. If a great punk band did it in '77 or '78, it would be a good idea, as far as a lot of punks are concerned, to repeat it as often as possible. So, even after the '77-era punk bands broke up, after 2-Tone fell out of favor commercially with record-buying audiences, punk bands kept messing around with ska fusion. Why would a punk band in the United States in 1985 incorporate a ska break into a song? Well, for one thing, because it's fun as hell to play, and for another thing, because The Clash did it on their first album.

And that's how the third wave of ska came about—primarily from young U.S. punk bands in the late '80s and early '90s getting off on those accented upbeats and walking bass lines. Because punk and hardcore at that time was heavily regional — almost completely absent from commercial radio or MTV, with every local or regional punk scene spreading the word about its own set of heroes through hand-made 'zines and small batches of 7" records — it's impossible to trace the third wave to one clear Ur-moment. But if you'd asked ska kids in the '90s and '00s where the third wave started, you'd see a ton of fingers pointing toward the San Francisco Bay area in the late '80s, and the band Operation Ivy in particular. The Bay Area's pop-punk bands of that era became a national export throughout the '90s, thanks in part to the wide distribution of Berkeley label Lookout! Records and the attention brought to that scene through the explosive fame of onetime Lookout! band Green Day. If anything, Operation Ivy was emblematic of the third wave of ska in just about every way except that it was a stripped-down four-piece band, and eventually it would become typical for ska-punk bands to come with three or four horn players. But Op Ivy did what most ska-punk bands did: They took the tempos of the second-wave ska bands and sped them up even *faster*. If '77 punk often sat somewhere around

180 beats per minute, hardcore punk, as it developed through the '80s, had nudged tempos up toward the 240 BPM level. The third wave of ska was full of songs where the band held back, hitting those off-beat accents and walking bass lines during the verses, between which the choruses raged with the intensity of your average punk band. While there were plenty of bands in the '90s that tried to bring ska back to its deeper, groovier roots, third-wave ska was mostly bands playing outrageously fast, hypermelodic music for overstimulated kids to freak out to.

If you talk to a person in the United States born between roughly 1975 and 1990 who had ever experienced a ska period, they're almost certainly talking about the third wave. All around the country, this stuff has been bubbling up in just about any city of any size since the early '90s, and it's never really gone away. But for a brief moment, from about 1997 to 2000, the third wave was massive. Ska was everywhere, and it was the closest to anything that could be described as a "commercial juggernaut" to come out of the rock underground. There were a lot of black-and-white checkered band stickers around. There were a lot of caps with little peaked brims. There were a lot of thrift store polo shirts, and a lot of T-shirts with jokey slogans. There were a lot of kids coming to shows at punk clubs who had never been to punk clubs before and maybe never would be again. For a lot of otherwise bored kids who passed through that era at just the right age, ska was one of the incontestably coolest things you could do with your time—which was especially appealing if you were one of those kids who had never been cool at all.

Let me tell you a little about where I grew up. Bristol, Connecticut is a former factory town where most of the factories had moved away by the time I was born. Bristol somehow managed to be both idyllic and terrifying. Housing prices were low enough for young newlyweds to buy a well-preserved pre-war home without much trouble, but there were also neighborhoods where street gangs ran amok. My mom would actually send me next door to borrow a cup

of sugar (“a cup of sugar” being a stand-in for any kitchen ingredient she was short on), and there was a house around the corner where one tenant ran a brisk drug-selling operation. We had an excellent school system that included a rigorous and diverse performing arts program, and I was twelve years old the first time a classmate pulled a knife on me in a gym locker room. It took city officials forty years to decide to extend a branch of interstate highway through town, and when it was finally built, it had stoplights on it. Bristol is that kind of town.

I discovered punk rock when I was in high school, mainly through articles in then-contemporary music magazines that drew a line from ’90s alt-rock to late ’70s and early ’80s punk. When I started my first band, during the summer before tenth grade in 1996, I was adamant that we were going to move in basically a ’77 punk direction. I had found The Ramones, The Clash, Buzzcocks, and the Pistols, and the anthemic, melodic roar they generated was everything to me. Now, over the course of the following two years, I would come to realize this was problematic for a few reasons.

First, we were the only teenaged ’77-style punk band in Bristol in the late ’90s, as far as I could tell. Bristol didn’t really have a punk scene. Bristol had a hardcore scene. It was a different beast. This wasn’t the lightning-quick hardcore punk that arose in the early ’80s in places like L.A. and D.C. This was its later, chuggier, more metallic variant, which gained notable traction among kids, mostly boys, in Connecticut towns in the ’90s. I was into bands that played fast and had mostly broken up years ago. The hardcore kids were into bands that played *heavy* and put on shows at the local skatepark. The Bristol indoor skatepark was booked by, among other people, a guy named Jamey Jasta, who was and remains the vocalist for Hatebreed, a band that is now probably Connecticut’s most valued gift to the national hardcore scene. I liked the hardcore kids at my school, but I wasn’t one of them. They were impossible to miss, on account of their distinct appearance—closely cropped hair, black T-shirts, probably baggy jeans, and big plain canvas bookbags that sometimes

had big Xs written on them in black marker (a sign that they'd chosen to abstain from drugs and alcohol). They looked tough, but they were mostly friendly, honest guys. It's important to note they were mostly *guys*. Hardcore was aggressively macho. I was into aggression, but not machismo. I didn't necessarily feel like the hardcore kids excluded me. In fact, a few of them, when they found out I was into punk, tried their damndest to reel me in by lending me cassettes by their favorite hardcore bands and encouraging me to come to shows. But the music didn't inspire me, and I was never convinced that scene would give me what I was looking for.

Second, I thought I was positioning myself as a '77-style punk until I met other punk kids from other towns, and I realized I had it wrong, and I wasn't a real punk either. Punks spiked their hair or shaved their heads. They wore denim jackets emblazoned with patches bearing the names of street-punk bands. Their hygiene was often questionable. They were tough kids, usually with nothing to lose, frequently alienated from their families and dedicated at a young age to operating outside "the system." By contrast, I was kind of normal. I might have existed apart from the herd in a psychoemotional sense, but I wanted to get into a good college and eventually lead an upstanding middle-class life. I liked the same music the punk kids liked, and I liked their politics. But I wasn't ready to follow through with the same lifestyle, or even the same look. Later on, I might have become a kind of punk rocker—the collegiate radical, the kid who'd show up at a party in a threadbare shirt and with messy hair who would talk about socialism all night. But as a high schooler, I wasn't there.

Third, I was a marching band geek. Thanks to the rigorous and diverse school performing arts program I mentioned earlier, I'd picked up the trumpet in fourth grade. In high school, for academic credit, I played in two jazz bands, an advanced symphonic winds ensemble, a brass chamber group, and the marching band. While I never thought I was all that great a trumpet player, or all that disciplined, I somehow managed to become the first-chair trumpet

player in every school group I played with by my junior year. I was the drum major of the marching band during my senior year. While punk rock is supposed to be, in part, about unlearning everything you know about playing music and starting anew from scratch, I knew a lot for a kid, and I wasn't really sure at that point how to unlearn it. In spite of my weirdo ideals as a musician, I was, in effect, kind of a traditionalist.

Ska, more than anything else, would give me the platform to transition from the musician and countercultural person I was equipped to be as a teenager, to the one I really wanted to be.

Sometime in the spring of 1998, I was in my high school's band room, as was my wont anytime I had any time to kill. More than anyone else, the band geeks were my tribe. We were weird and artsy in a wide variety of ways, and we shared experiences of playing in school bands together and excelling at something most other kids made fun of us for. My friend Jen, a flautist turned French horn player, appeared from somewhere and beelined to my face.

"Brian," she said. "*do you like ska?*"

Well, of course I did, so I said so. I'd known what ska was, and what it sounded like in its third-wave form, for a couple years at that point. Ska-punk was exploding all over MTV and alternative rock radio. I liked The Mighty Mighty Bosstones at the time. I liked Rancid, the punk band with ska flourishes founded by two of the guys from Op Ivy, which had totally eclipsed their old band as far as record sales were concerned. Tuning into alt-rock radio, you'd have a hard time missing stuff like the novelty ska-punk singles Reel Big Fish were turning out, or Sublime's seemingly endless run of frat-boy ska/reggae trifles. If anything, by my senior year of high school I was starting to think of ska as being a little played out. I found the chipper *chk-chk-chk-chk* guitar patterns irresistible, and as a trumpet player, I found it very edifying to hear trumpets, trombones, and saxophones on songs that had any fire to them recorded more recently than the classic soul era. But MTV's unflinching focus on

So-Cal pop-punk and ska was starting to chafe. It all sounded so sunny and so simple, and I was past the point where punk and ska was so new to me that I wanted nothing more than for it to be fast and catchy. I kind of wanted something that felt like it was *mine*.

Jen dragged me into our band director's office, where the stereo could be commandeered by any of the band kids on a first-come, first-served basis, and slammed a cassette into his tape deck.

"I *love* ska," she said breathlessly, "and there are a *ton* of *local* ska bands, and some of them are playing a huge ska show at the Webster next month, and *this* is one of the bands playing, and they're called Sgt. Scagnetti, and you should come."

In retrospect, I think when Jen said I should come to this show, what she meant was that I should *drive her* to the show. But she also had cause to believe she was tipping me off to something I'd want. She liked weird shit. I liked weird shit. And I was into this Scagnetti demo. The tone and the tempo were hypercharged and playful, but the songs settled around minor keys, and the horns sounded straight-up sinister. They were clearly a band of skilled players, because they sounded tight as hell on a demo, and compositionally they had something going on, with all of these subtle, sophisticated melodies popping up here and there. And they were based in, of all places, Seymour, CT, a small riverside town roughly halfway between New Haven and Waterbury.

"How much are tickets?" I asked Jen.

Whenever the topic of one's senior prom comes up in conversation, and I find it comes up with increasing rarity over time, I mention that I went to a big ska show instead of my senior prom. This is only partially true. It suggests there was a big ska show the same night of my senior prom, and that part is entirely true. That was the Ska Wars night—one wonders how many hundreds of ska shows have been dubbed Ska Wards, or Skamageddon, or Skalapalooza by their promoters—at the Webster Theatre in Hartford that Jen brought me to. It also suggests I was presented with a choice, to

go to the prom or to a ska show, and I chose the ska show. This part is hardly true. Like *hell* I was going to the prom. I was still smarting from being dumped by my first real girlfriend six months earlier. I didn't have a date. I was convinced I must have been dumped because I was hideous and unappealing, and in any case I was too heartbroken to consider the prospect of dating, or even to temporarily sustain the charade of dating that the prom more often typifies. I was also still pretty burned by the four or so years, roughly sixth through ninth grade, during which dozens of my classmates were dedicated to steadily ostracizing, mocking, and physically assaulting me, and I didn't feel much like being in the same room with any of those people if I didn't have to be. Simply being born in the same calendar year, I thought, really wasn't enough to bond over.

As such, I was more or less set on spending the night of my senior prom very much the same way I'd spent the night of my junior prom: lying on the floor of my room, listening to The Smiths in the dark, and feeling like shit. Once Skalapalooza was on the table, it just sounded like a better option all around.

That Skalapalooza was the first full ska show I'd ever attended, and as is the case with a lot of firsts in one's life, I spent the next couple years in large part dealing with the fallout of its detonation. There were probably six bands on the bill, and a few of them became bands I'd follow throughout the course of my ska phase. There was Sgt. Scagnetti, of course, with their carnivalesque horn section and their brash, audience-baiting singer, a guy fans just called Steve Scagnetti, who would intro songs by shouting things like, "*this song is about smoking crack!*," or "*this song is about having sex with dead people!*" There was Big D & the Kids' Table, a young band from Boston with relentlessly upbeat songs that included a husky singing flugelhorn player wearing a boat captain's hat. And, hailing from New York, there was Mephiskapheles, another act that was uncharacteristically dark for ska—their singer was dressed entirely in black and sang lyrics peppered with cheeky Satanic references—and that was made up of guys who seemed impossibly adult, visibly older

than every other band on the bill and audibly in a different league of professionalism and chops.

Jen and I reached the cavernous, dim Webster Theatre early, well before the first band took the stage, and I watched as the room gradually filled up with kids. There were kids decked out in goofy thrift-store duds (as I was), there were kids in punk regalia, and there were kids who looked basically normal, whatever that means. There were white, black, beige, and brown kids. There were a lot of girls, far more than I was accustomed to seeing at local punk and hardcore shows. And once the music really got swinging, I saw the whole front of the room erupt in kids doing the skank, the distinct ska dance. I edged closer and closer, watching the skankers intently and bobbing my head along self-consciously. Eventually a pretty blonde girl with round cheeks, maybe 19 or 20 years old by my estimation, noticed me watching her, smiled, and grabbed my arm.

“Come on,” she said.

And so, nervously, I started skanking myself. After about a minute, I realized it was remarkably easy. On the one, you stomp on the floor with your right foot, lift your left foot a bit, pull your fists close to your hips with your elbows pointing back and lean forward slightly. On the two, you release, straightening up and arching your back, jerking your left knee up and raising your right fist to about shoulder height. Then you reverse that on the next two beats, doing exactly the same thing with the opposite sides of your body for each motion. Anyone could skank! I looked around and saw kids skanking in countless varieties, waving their arms around and swiveling their feet and hips however they saw fit. It just seemed so democratic—the easiest dance in the world, easier than the twist, and anyone was welcome to put his or her own personal stamp on it. Er, pun recognized, but not intended. I skanked that night until I couldn’t breathe and had to sit down. Then I got up and skanked some more.

It was one of those nights where everything clicked. I realized I could go out and see bands made up of people who didn’t seem so dissimilar from me, and I could whip myself into a euphoric frenzy

and probably look like an idiot, and I'd still be not only welcomed for my behavior, but encouraged. Sometimes that first high keeps driving you out time and again to try to replicate it. That's definitely how it was with me.

That fall, I went off to college at Southern Connecticut State in New Haven, finally free from the acts of asking permission and abiding by curfews. That's not to say I was interested in traditional collegiate wilding. I identified as straight-edge in those days. That's the punk way of saying I didn't drink, I didn't smoke, and I didn't take drugs, and I avoided all of those things by choice and not out of scarcity. All I wanted to do with my free time was go to shows and freak out. To that end, there was the Tune Inn, New Haven's de facto punk club, a skuzzy room with a capacity of about 300, where every local punk, hardcore, or ska band aspired to play. There was the significantly larger Toad's Place, where my friends and I would go to see more popular national bands. There were other rooms around the state where we'd trek to see punk and ska bands, in particular the El-n-Gee in New London, the aforementioned Webster Theatre in Hartford, and the perhaps surprisingly buzzing Newtown Teen Center.

Ska fueled an untold number of extremely wholesome nights during my first year of college. I'd pile into a car with friends, and we'd head off to a show, blasting Op Ivy or the Bosstones on the stereo. We'd arrive at the venue early—always early—and would position ourselves at the front of the stage, where we'd soak in every band, the greatest to the crappiest. Sometimes the piece de resistance of the evening would be an exceptional local like Scagnetti, or Spring Heeled Jack, the irrepressible kings of the CT ska scene, who maintained a chronically positive presence and message. Sometimes it would be a great touring act, like Mephiskapheles or Big D or Mustard Plug or MU330 or Metro Stylee or The Pietasters or The Suicide Machines or even the Bosstones themselves. Sometimes it would be one of the local also-ran. In particular, I'm thinking of

Jiker, a shambolic CT ska-punk act whose calling card was that it played songs about being pirates. I never saw Jiker twice with the same lineup, and I don't think I ever saw them play a single song through to the finish before the band lost the thread, fell into chaos, and eventually stopped playing. (I really liked Jiker, and I very much respected their ability to get onto good bills in spite of the fact that they were outrageously unprofessional.) Whatever the headliner or the lineup, I'd skank breathlessly through every band. Sometimes—and I should add I'm on the small side, 5'8" and weighing about 130 pounds in my late teens—my larger friends would pick me up and swing me around in circles to clear room in the pit, or lift me up and force me to crowd-surf. I would become a disgusting mess over the course of the night, covered not only in my own sweat, but the sweat of who knows how many equally sweaty punk and ska kids. After the show, my friends and I would ride back to the dorms. I'd throw my clothes in a putrid pile on the floor, exhaustedly shuffle off to the dorm showers, rinse the filth of the night off of me, and walk back to my room to sleep as soundly as I ever had. I never snuck a drink. I never smoked a cigarette. I never made a move on a girl and subsequently spent the rest of the night sulking over her rejection. All I needed was the relentless *chank-chank* of the ska guitar, to do that stupid ska dance for several hours straight, to be soaked in a variety of people's sweat and the company of friendly strangers, and I would have the best night I could hope for. I went to bed after those shows feeling more euphoric than I did after 90 percent of the Saturday nights I spent at the bar when I was twenty-five.

One of the great revelations of third-wave ska was how kids who had previously considered themselves, and had been considered by their peers, to be patently uncool suddenly had this platform in which they could be seen as cool, as doing a cool thing, as bringing value to a cool culture. Lyrically, third-wave ska celebrated the ordinary. Traditional rock'n'roll bands might have written songs about getting laid, standing outside of society, and facing psycho-

logical demons. Ska bands wrote songs about junk food, TV, comic books, science fiction, boredom, awkwardness, and going to ska shows. One of the core values of punk rock is that everyday life, boring and unsexy as it is, is always worth writing about. Third-wave ska took the same premise and removed punk's self-righteous anguish and malaise.

If you were a ska kid, you could take your non-ska friends to ska shows without explaining what you were getting them into. By the end of the first band's first two songs, they understood that this was party music, dance music, and if they were 17 years old and maybe bored and quarantined in the suburbs, they'd be on board with you, the band, and the rest of the audience, because they'd be hungry for the ecstatic release ska promised. If you were a punk kid or a metal kid, you couldn't just take your non-punk or non-metal friends to a show without explanation. You'd have to set them up. ("Okay, the music will be very loud and very heavy, and it might not always sound like music. It will look like people are trying to hurt each other, but it's all consensual and what they're doing probably doesn't actually hurt much. A lot of people will look intimidating, but it's mostly theater.") Ska had a code of its own, and a rich history of its own, but the barrier to entry was close to nil. A person could like it without knowing *what* they were liking. A lot of people did.

Ska was party music created by an awful lot of people who, as high schoolers, probably didn't get invited to many parties. A lot of kids who went to ska shows didn't look much further beyond their recognition that this was upbeat music that was fun to dance to. But for an essentially nerdy kid, it was a big deal that the message behind these songs was so often essentially nerdy. A suburban comic book geek could hear a ska singer singing about comic books and imagine himself or herself on the stage, without altering or masking her or his core identity or main interests. It shouldn't be terribly surprising that when I finally joined a ska band myself, that band was named Dr. Device, after a fictional laser gun in space from author Orson Scott Card's young adult sci-fi novel *Ender's Game*.

For marching band kids, ska was something of a game changer. I'd known plenty of school marching band or concert band kids who had taken up the guitar or bass and formed bands. But with ska, if you were already a brass player, you were in demand. A trumpet, trombone, or sax player could join a band as a trumpet, trombone, or sax player. You could transform from a dorky kid in a school band uniform to a kid on stage, playing that same previously dorky school band instrument along with a full-on, raging dance band, doing something that everyone in the room perceived as being unequivocally cool. Being a brass player in a ska band wasn't just a new way to be cool; for the uncertain psychological makeup of your typical nerdy high-schooler, it felt revolutionary.

In all of my years of playing in bands, rarely have I seen a single band as mismatched as Dr. Device. My friend Rex, the guitarist and founder of the band, who lived across the hall from me in the dorms during our first year of college, was a rock 'n' roll traditionalist who had little interest in contemporary punk music. I played the trumpet, and I was actually far more interested in 2-Tone than I was in third-wave ska. Funky Joe, the bassist, would have preferred to have been in a punk band, but, to his credit, never said so. John, the drummer, was a Frank Zappa freak with jazz-rock aspirations. My brother Craig briefly was the sax player, even though he had never expressed interest in being in a rock band and never would again. His replacement was my high school friend Ryan, who would have rather been in a prog-metal band, even though he didn't realize it at the time. We never had a full-time dedicated singer, leaving me and Rex to alternate on lead vocals during our shows, though that wasn't because we didn't try to find one. The closest we came was when a singer named Sean Kenobi sat in with us. (For the record, that wasn't his real surname, but a relic from his tenure with the band Obi Ska Kenobi.) We dismissed Sean on account of his habit of "chickening" — that very ska habit of exclaiming mid-song things like "*Hut! Hut! Pick it up! Pick it up!*" — which we thought was cheesy, as if we were ones to talk.

Under most circumstances, there would be no reason for us to find each other and think being in a band together would be a remotely good idea. But each of us made it in for one important reason: We liked ska, and we liked going to ska shows. This consensus was enough to sustain about a year and a half as a band and the creation of about 10 original songs. As a band, we were, objectively speaking, pretty bad. We didn't know how to listen to each other, and the sax players and I never really memorized all of our horn lines. We all composed parts that were beyond our technical ability to play. Basically, we did a lot of things that very young bands do.

Except we also landed good gigs, better than we realized at the time. We opened at least two shows that were billed as Jiker's last show—Jiker couldn't even manage to get breaking up their band right—which brought out big crowds. Every show we opened for Sgt. Scagnetti, which was a few, had us playing to a nearly packed room. We always made gas money, and we made enough dough to buy a rudimentary practice PA and fund misguided recording sessions, with an engineer whose sensibilities were far heavier than our sound was, for an EP we never released. I remember one show we played at the Tune Inn, when a couple of kids, probably two or three years younger than us, came up to us and raved about our set.

"We're starting a ska band," one of them said, "and we're going to be called the Flaming Tsunamis!"

I don't recall what Rex and I said in response, but it was something along the lines of "aw, that's great, kid." The Flaming Tsunamis ended up becoming not just the leading CT ska band of the next wave of kids, but one of the most respected U.S. ska-punk bands of the latter 'oos.

If I were to be honest with myself, I would also clear up anything that sounds like a suggestion that because I wasn't getting laid from being involved in the ska scene, anyone else by extension was not getting laid. If you were a guy in a ska band, there was a chance you were dating someone who was cuter than anyone you'd date in the next ten years. If you were a girl in a ska band, you had every boy

in the audience eating from the palm of your hand. The ska scene was a unisex scene, and because of that characteristic, it got a lot of people very laid. Dr. Device eventually accumulated a following made up mostly of teenaged girls, whom I was told at the time would hang on my every word when we were offstage and acting like normal people. I was too self-conscious and hung up to have any idea this was happening when it was happening, but now that my old adolescent self-loathing has lifted, I at least remember it happening. I never made a move on any of those girls, but I remember experiencing brief flashes of understanding, for the first time in my life, that I probably could. And Dr. Device was a terrible band.

It is in the nature of teenaged bands to break up, so I shouldn't see any significance in how Dr. Device's breakup aligned with the demise of the CT ska scene. But we were right in tune with the zeitgeist when we threw in the towel. Of the local ska bands we cared about, Scagnetti broke up first, in 2000. The dominant rumor at the time was that the band was being courted by national labels and its members were split on how to respond. That was the narrative kids wanted to hear. It played into the idea that someone wanted to make our local heroes rock stars, and it played into prevalent '90s punk ideals that suggested there was a dichotomy between selling out to big-label interests and remaining true to one's independent roots. Later reports from the Scagnetti guys themselves implied a more standard band narrative. They'd reached a creative impasse and weren't getting along on a personal level.

Spring Heeled Jack, long the biggest drawer of crowds and the most commercially successful of the CT ska bands, split in the spring of 2001. For that band, label drama actually was a factor. They'd come up in the mid '90s putting out records through New York City's influential Moon Ska label, but were scooped up later in the decade by Ignition Records, a subsidiary of a major label. In 2000, Ignition went out of business. The Mighty Mighty Bosstones hired their trombone player, Chris Rhodes. Spring Heeled Jack were

barely active as a live band for months before their 2001 final blow-out at Toad's Place. The club was packed, but Rhodes wasn't there. He was playing with the Bosstones on David Letterman's show that night. The next year, the band's founding drummer, Dave Karcich, died from a brain aneurysm.

Dr. Device disbanded unceremoniously during a routine rehearsal in my parents' basement in 2000. We got to talking, and we realized we were unhappy with much of our old material and unconvinced the new material each of us was writing separately would make for a coherent set. It was as though we were writing for five different bands. We agreed we were, and so we went upstairs, ate a hearty meal of linguine and homemade sauce my mom had prepared, and decided to promote our next show at the Newtown Teen Center as our last. Within weeks, each of us had a new band or a solo project in the works. None of them were ska-related.

There are people I knew then and rarely kept in touch with who asked me, seven or eight years after Dr. Device broke up, whether I still played ska. I told them, mildly offended by the suggestion, that I did not, as I'd progressed through punk rock, post-punk, garage rock, powerpop, and indie-pop. But I recognize now they were asking not because they expected I was stuck in a rut, but because they had seen Dr. Device and gone to ska shows at that time, even though they were not otherwise the sort of people whose idea of a good time involved going out at night to see bands.

With the demise of the bands also went the all-ages punk clubs that had been so crucial to the ska scene. The Tune Inn closed in January 2002. The El-n-Gee in New London closed in 2003. The larger clubs, Toad's Place and the Webster Theatre, remained, but they seemed reticent to build bills around local ska or punk bands after that. Punk comes out of basement shows and rented halls. The smaller all-ages clubs gave punk bands the opportunity to graduate to legit venues. Demonstrating the ability to draw a crowd of 200 kids at a small club gave larger clubs the incentive to book bands

that could. Once the Tune Inn and the El-n-Gee were gone, the punk, ska, and indie kids scattered. A host of quasi-legit small all-ages clubs, often deeper in suburban territory, opened up to fill the void. Certain punk and indie rockers convinced bars in New Haven and New London to book their and their friends' bands. New DIY booking and promotional entities descended upon American Legion halls throughout the state. If anything, the rash of new performance venues that appeared in the early '00s demonstrated the degree of sheer ambition and creative output in need of a stage throughout Connecticut. But it also led to the creation of countless niche scenes in a small geographical area, from which regional critical mass was nearly impossible.

In any case, by the time the El-n-Gee was shuttered, the air had long gone out of the CT ska scene. Very soon, there would be a huge shift in the tastes of suburban Connecticut teenagers. The kids wanted emo, a particular strain of punk and hardcore that can be traced back to the mid-'80s. It preserves the velocity and volume of punk, but plunges to emotional depths, going for the most painful, vulnerable, personal material possible. In the mid-'90s, emo was the domain of especially sad punkers, kids who were often unkempt, socially awkward, and straight-up physically unattractive.

"The emos are the kids who go to punk shows and cry," a friend explained to me in 1998. But through the late '90s and early '00s, more girls became drawn to emo, and emo strayed from its hardcore roots into something more melodic. By the time the CT ska scene was collapsing, a lot of emo had become virtually indistinguishable from pop-punk, except for its lyrical content. Emo ceased being the domain of ugly, inept kids and became a means for punk rocker boys to get laid. And it was massive in the early to mid '00s, not just in Connecticut but across the country. Teenagers of that era went through emo phases in much the same way teenagers in the '90s went through ska phases. But it wasn't entirely analogous. The people in emo bands were predominantly white and predominantly male. Emo of that era was about the male gaze more often than not.

Boys sang about girls they longed for and girls who had wronged them. The kids came out in full force to the shows, but to suggest those shows had anything like the democratizing effect of ska—the effect that anyone could be onstage, or that the day-to-day matters of one’s dumb life were worth singing about—would be naïve at best.

There have been times when I’ve spoken dismissively of my ska past. With the benefit of hindsight, I now understand there is no reason to. In ska, we were heroes. I don’t mean just those of us who were onstage. Audiences, bands, promoters—we were part of a heroic movement. No matter what instrument you played or didn’t play, no matter what your daily life was like, no matter what gender you identified with or what color skin you were born with, you could belong to ska. To anyone reading this, I can only hope you knew something in your life, especially at a point when you were young and vulnerable and wanted desperately to belong to something, about which you could say the same. If not, I hope you find it—and if you do, try doing some stupid dance to celebrate.

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Jesse Nee-Vogelman

As a kid I asked strangers with beards to read to me in parks.

When my mothers split up, Moss Henry asked me if it was because I didn't have a father figure. I always thought Moss Henry was a weird name for a therapist.

"I have this recurring dream where a wolf breaks into my house," I told Moss. "And then I chase it out with a baseball bat and we both run over the edge of a cliff."

"Do you think you have to chase the wolf because there isn't a male role model to defend your household?"

I think Moss has a crush on my mom. Mom 1. But at that point, only Mom 2 was dating men again.

"I was never a lesbian," she said, putting on a second nicotine patch. "I just played one for eighteen years." I think that's probably why I'm a good liar, until I remember we're not genetically related.

Mom 1, though, was still playing the part. She still belonged to the Lavender Stork Society, with all the other lesbian mothers. Jo and Kerry Ann. Kirsten and Kathleen. Marlene and Scotty. In pre-school I started a fight when I insisted that playing house required two mothers. A counselor tried to correct me and I gave a black eye to the boy who would be father.

Jo and Kerry Ann have a daughter and I loved her. Our parents said we were planned together, which I mistook to mean we were engaged. But then I learned you cannot plan for love. But then I learned that love does not solve everything. Of course, those things came later.

The daughter's name is Kaylie, and she held me when I was born. I was a Caesarean two months premature, wrapped in wet floppy robes of loose skin. In her own tiny hand I resembled the red blind baby of a marsupial that had left the pouch to die. There's a

picture on my fridge of her crying as they took me to the respirators. In all the photos of her at that age she has beautiful skin. Looking at those photos of her as a child, I still want to undress her. Once, outside her living room on the porch, we played tit-for-tat, but I felt cheated because when she pulled down her pants there was nothing to see.

I told this story to Moss while we played games together: Rock ‘Em Sock ‘Em Robots and Mouse Trap and war with those giant foam swords they give to anger therapy kids and catch with two frayed mitts in the clinic parking lot. They were the most expensive playdates I ever had, until college when I began giving away drugs to my friends.

Then, Moss asked me when I felt most betrayed. “When Kaylie made me watch the Star Wars movies out of order.” I didn’t realize at the time how fixating on Darth Vader’s “I’m your father” reveal would only feed Moss’s theories.

Every memory I have of Kaylie’s home is sunny. The grass is dry and they have fruit. Fresh tomatoes in mesh wire cages. Strawberries in ordered plots framed by uneven pieces of driftwood. They’d floated downstream during the ’86 river flood that had fertilized their fields and killed my friend John Wilson’s sister before he was born. She and her friends had tried to raft through the storm. There were apple trees. Trees with pregnant peaches. A row of blackberry brambles that divided their property. From inside the bushes we ate unripe berries in secret that I picked on tiptoes from the highest thorns until our clothes turned brown and pink from the dirt and the blackberry juice. Through the soft canopy of leaves I could see the six full-sized porcelain bathtubs filled with flowers. Jo arranged them length-wise in a crescent circle, like half the rays of an exploding star. A bathtub of roses. Of daisies. Of begonias. Bathtubs of herbs. In the brambles, the smell of basil and thyme arrived to us, dry, so unlike the wet smell of blackberry mush and the sticky sweat of our bodies.

In the middle of a family dinner at Kaylie's house, over brussels sprouts, my mothers had another fight. This brought on a fresh round of sessions with Moss. Whenever my parents got upset, they sent me to a therapist. It reminds me of the stories Mom 1 used to tell about her grandmother yelling at her from across the street back in 1950s Jewish Brooklyn. "*Marshala*, put on a *sveater*, I'm cold!"

"Hey Moss," I said. Today we were playing video games. "Have you ever been in love?"

"Yes," he said. We both agreed it is terrible.

Kaylie has a little brother named Kevin who wore a bumblebee dress. Sometimes we dressed up in silk scarves and danced like the maidens in Aladdin. "Hey everyone," I'd yell and stand in a corner facing the wall with my arms embracing myself and my head slightly tilted so that from behind it looked like I was kissing someone. But Kaylie was outside already, playing princess to daisies. She was wearing a sparkling cone on her head with a purple tassel, and when she opened her arms fields of yellow weeds bent over in the wind.

On Christmas, Kaylie and I kissed inside the orange plastic slide in her backyard. The light shined through the plastic like hot grease, turning it yellow and translucent where the sun shined brightest. When we emerged, it was cool and grey. Off my chest beat the bright terror of sparrows. Climbing the slope to her home, we saw them trapped in the collapsed rubble of the birdhouses we made that week for Crafts Night. When her mother asked at the doorway, we had to say that no, we did not feel the earthquake.

The next day I forced Kaylie and Kevin to watch as I threw baseballs in the air and swung at them with my dented teal and aluminum bat. On the third swing the ball jumped like a shot into the neighbors' yard and tore down an old California sycamore. As the tree fell we screamed and ran back to the house laughing until our sides split and we collapsed in a heap at the base of a hill in a pile of dog shit left by their one-eyed terrier named Buster.

I didn't tell Moss about what happened behind the bushes. I'm not even sure exactly because Kaylie blocked the way.

"Only I can go back there, because I'm their doctor."

She had a toy stethoscope in her ears. She listened to a tree and then to the palm of my hand.

"You're dying," she said.

"Come on, let me see."

Kevin and Harriet made some noise through a thick wall of leaves, but I couldn't understand them.

"How does it work then?"

"You take off your pants and rub together."

I felt intuitively that this was true, but something about it didn't add up. "Wait! You don't even have anything down there to do it with!" But Kaylie was already back behind the bushes again, preparing her stethoscope.

We took baths together and slept together. We jumped together on trampolines, and lay together on the prickly weeds when we tired. In the pictures of us at this age, she is the beautiful one. Her hair more golden than mine. Her freckles neater and more purposefully arranged. She drew well and liked to cook and make things out of clay. Behind the bathtub of begonias we ate tomatoes and she carved my face into the dirt with her nails. From above her head she took a tomato and squeezed it. The pulp covered her hands in a red translucent jelly studded with seeds. She rubbed the juice onto the dirt, covering the cheeks of my likeness in a dark rusty red, like the color that smears onto your fingers after holding an old brick.

"Am I bleeding?" I asked, feeling my skin. "No," she said. "You're covered in tomato."

As I got older, I stopped crying when I left her house. I could always say goodbye, as long as I got a plastic baggy of pretzels for the ride home. Moss called these transition objects. When I woke up, we were already there. While Mom sat outside alone in the red Toyota, I went inside and fell asleep in a bed shaped like a racecar. In all my dreams, I go very, very fast.

This week, Moss and I played the question game. Fifteen questions for fifteen minutes of Nintendo.

“Do you like Mitch?”

“We went to the Giants game together.”

“Does it bother you that your mother is dating men?”

“I like him better than Gary.”

“Gary gave you that orange dinosaur?”

“Mitch gives me cherries. He buys whole crates of cherries and bikes them back to our house. He sells them by the road with a sign I painted in daycare.”

“Have you seen Mitch this week?”

“He’s with mom.”

“At the clinic?”

“Yeah.”

“How is living with Kaylie’s family?”

“They give me a calendar for every holiday, no matter what.”

“What are you going to be for Halloween?”

“A welder. I’m going to wear Mitch’s welding mask and overalls.”

“That’s a very unique costume.”

“That’s not a question.”

“How is your other mom?”

“Birth mom?”

“Yes.”

“She’s okay.”

“Is she still not getting out of bed?”

“No. Maybe.”

“When do you go back with her?”

“Tonight. She says she’s fine now.”

“When are you moving?”

“When mom’s out of the clinic.”

“When will that be?”

“I don’t know. Soon.”

“Will you miss Kaylie and Kevin?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“What’s New York like?”

“It’s very nice.”

“Do they have fruit?”

“I think so.”

“Good. This is your last question.”

“Is your other mother dating anyone?”

“No. No, I don’t think so.”

Mom 1 and I picked up Mom 2 from the clinic.

“How are you?” Mom 1 asked. They had not seen each other in a month, but Mom 2 needed us to pick her up because Mitch found out he has two kids in Seattle and left.

“All clean,” said Mom 2. “How are you?”

“Can you please not smoke in the car?” she said.

Two days later when we showed up at Mom 2’s apartment the U-Haul was already outside. The inside of the trailer was big and for a while I hid behind the boxes so I didn’t have to help pack. When I got bored, I went to clean the apartment, and I knew that Mom 2 had been acting again because as I carried the trash to the curb it jingled with the light melody of glass on glass.

We’re not genetically related, but I inherited some of her tendencies. After the move East, the taste of the Big Apple unraveled some the sinner in me. It happened during middle school, when we developed nicotine patch habits. City taxes made cigarettes too expensive, though I sometimes kept a crumpled pack under my shirtsleeve for the look. I ate fruit only at breakfast, and then only bananas. I’ve heard the Cavendish is going extinct, though.

It was rough for a while, but by the time I was arrested for drinking on my 18th birthday, I’d managed to kick off most other chemicals. Kaylie had to drive me home from the police station because she was the only person I knew could drive and was sober. The next time I was arrested, she didn’t pick me up. By then, I’d been ed-

ited out of the YouTube video showing the success of children raised by same sex couples.

But that was years later, after I'd given up on it all and returned home to her yard, where the earth had frozen with unseasonable cold. Of the two cats we'd given them to look after in our absence, only Scriba remained, though like Buster she'd lost both her sight and her desire to defecate in discrete locations. Maggie had crawled under the house and stayed there until she died and neighborhood boys dug out her bones to make fake Indian jewelry they sold to tourists.

That whole summer I did yardwork for them, to help pay off the accident. There wasn't really all that much to do, and I think they employed me out of some combination of loyalty and pity. At the time I wasn't allowed to drive so I rode my bike on that path past the vineyards along the creek covered in balloons of mosquito eggs. At a cluster of trees that smelled like semen, I'd watch a homeless woman thrust a long aluminum claw into the brambles in search of ripe berries, as wild quails wandered like children beyond the fence. Light bushels of grapes twined over and through the chain links to darken in the sun like slow bruises. Sometimes, when I had time to kill, I stopped with the woman and picked small handfuls of grapes through the metal diamonds in the fence. Their tight skin stretched and burst the juice down our throats, and for less than a second before the bitterness and cottonmouth set in, I tasted only their natural sugar.

When I got to the yard, I dug holes. I cut down trees and cut the trees into smaller chunks of wood to be sold or composted or used as firewood. As I replaced the driftwood that lined the strawberry plots, I found the large corporate stamp of Wilson Construction on one log's underside. I remembered that news story about the raft and fifteen-year-old Cecilia Wilson and those two dead boys. A group of Mormons going door to door at the river homes had found them all drowned with their pants around their ankles. That probably made

it difficult for them to swim. After I finished the trees, for two weeks, they paid me to get rid of the blackberry bushes. “We never wanted them. Blackberries are invasive. They’re weeds.”

I bled when cutting through the roots. I scratched my skin on the thorns until it looked like I’d tried to hold my old, blind cat. This all amused the small crowd of tent dwellers that had appeared in their yard that summer to advocate simple living. They lived under tarps and in miniature cottages bolted to trailer beds. Kaylie, who had grown fat under her ambitions to be an artist, dubbed them the Tiny People, and when we were speaking she showed me her sketches of them under orange, apocalyptic skies. When the blackberries were gone, though, the Tiny People looked naked and went home to camp in the Nevada desert, leaving only the bathtubs sprouting tall stalks of dead fruit and flowers, because I hadn’t been able to stop the locusts that had fled all the way from Florida during a heat wave last spring.

By contrast, Mom 2 had never made it out East. Somewhere around Missouri she hit a cold front and turned the U-Haul around to go home. I heard that Mitch came back and one day while biking to his cherry stand an ambulance pinned him to the side of an alley, so that he spent the next eight months with needles the size of my forearm sticking out of his leg. Mom 2 took care of him, but when the Giants lost the World Series, he got out of the wheelchair and went back to Seattle. The Mariners had won 116 games just the year before.

When these things became clear, Mom 1 married Hank, who had a beard and looked like other fathers. I had to teach him how to play catch in the streets of Alphabet City, but we fell in love anyway. He was good at horseshoes, and once when we were back in California for Fourth of July, he beat us all in the place where Kaylie and I used to lay under the trampoline and watch Kevin bounce until his heels touched our noses through the thin layer of black mesh.

Hank taught me to drive, so in a way he killed himself. It’s not right for me to place blame though. It’s not right for me to lay these

things on anyone. I have a little money, now, from selling the apartment so I have a lot of time to figure it out. I try talking to Mom 2, but she runs AA meetings now, and I can't fuck with that yet. Instead, I talk to the old men who sit next to me at the new casino, out past the cow field where I heard Harriet dumped her baby after her dad found out and tried to beat it out of her. I play the card slots. I have a system.

On Thursday, Moss came into the café where I work outside of town, and ordered a latte and two cheese omelets.

"I'm sorry, I don't remember you," he said.

His daughter was very polite. She even put down her makeup to move seats so I had room to pull over another chair and sit down.

"Do you still have all those games?" I asked. "The robots and the swords and those special therapy versions of Monopoly?"

"We have an Xbox now too."

"I always thought those games were bullshit," I told him.

A small line had formed at the counter. I didn't mind keeping them waiting because I spit in the food anyway. Next to me, I caught his daughter looking at the scars on my hand.

"They're from a windshield," I told her.

"Excuse me, is there something you need?"

Moss Henry is probably the ugliest man I've ever met, and I told him so. Then I asked him if he knew that Kevin had replaced the bumblebee dress with a Lebanese boy.

"His boyfriend doesn't mind the limp," I said.

"I'm sorry, I don't remember who you're talking about."

His daughter flinched a little when I touched her under the table, but she didn't move away.

"You used to treat me for these dreams," I said.

"They stopped?"

"No. But now, before I get to the cliff I catch the wolf and beat it with the bat until I'm covered by blood."

"Is that the end of the dream?" he asked.

“Sometimes, before the dream ends, I change into a clean corduroy suit. How’s the omelet?”

“Good,” he said.

Then I told him my mother died.

“Which one?” he asked.

But I wouldn’t tell him.

Moss didn’t say anything to that, so I took the opportunity to ask his daughter for her number.

“We should be going now,” said Moss, so I called his daughter a spiteful bitch.

She seemed offended, but when dates call me a misogynist, I explain that I had two mothers, so they must be wrong.

I went back to the counter and gave all the customers who were waiting free croissants. Then I took off my apron and went outside to light a cigarette. Moss and his daughter were still outside, looking confused. I apologized to them, but after I wiped my tears away, I realized I still had chili on my fingers from cooking the omelet. I fell on the concrete. I slammed my back against the glass storefront so the customers could see there was nothing wrong with me. Then the smoke from my cigarette got in my eyes. I prepared myself for the two pains to amplify each other and merge into one giant unbearable pain. But they didn’t. They remained separate. Like all great uniquely flavored heartbreaks, each hurting me just a little in its own distinct way. I’m sorry, I said again, and prepared to repeat myself when Moss’s daughter took pity on me by asking for a drag.

“I’m quitting,” she said.

I said, “I already quit.”

“Then why are you smoking?”

“Because I loved quitting so much the first time, I thought I’d do it again.”

To get the cigarette she stood next to me. She put her knees beside my head.

Moss came over and squatted in front of me. They surrounded me like we were a family again. He played a game we used to do in

therapy, where we spoke gibberish to each other. His daughter bent over and pinched the cigarette in my hand with her fingers. The fingers were very clean. When she did this, the bare skin under her skirt pressed into my hair. I turned my head slowly to feel the soft tug at my scalp, like a father lifting me by a fistful of hair. Stand up and be a man. So I opened my hand and let go.

As she stood up and stepped away, I told them that when I close my eyes, I still see myself saying goodbye to Kaylie behind the bushes. Her lips are red from eating strawberries. It's still summer. She's wearing a white children's blouse, and my hair is curly yellow, though it's already begun to darken and straighten in a premonition of my adolescence. Kevin is behind us somewhere on the trampoline, wearing his bee dress. We can't see him, but we hear the rusty creak of old springs, like an opening coffin on that recording of "Monster Mash."

She's bleeding. She's cut her hand on an jagged scrap of aluminum fencing we'd found in the tall grass at the edge of her home, fallen out of the line that separated her yard from who knows what. She'd taken it and we cut down the bathtub tomatoes and decapitated the begonias and carved our names into the side of the porcelain. We climbed inside the tub and we rode it like a ship. Then she mutinied and we capsized the tub. She screamed and threw fistfuls of dirt into the air and as the worms rained into our hair she grabbed my arm and dragged me to the shadows behind the bush line, where I am now looking at the grey corners of her eyes. She notices her blood on my hand and wipes the back of my fingers on the side of her face, reddening her cheek in blush.

"We should get a bandage," I say.

"No, it's alright. I'm a doctor."

We practice medicine together. Even as children the whole affair is innate and visceral. In the brief flash of our converging bodies we discover a rhythm, which matches the rusty squeal of a little boy bouncing on an old trampoline, as if with each pulse we caused the world to move.

After Kevin screams and the bouncing stops, we hide in our place behind the made-up forest as our parents call our names. Sometime after they leave to take him to the hospital, we emerge to the setting sun and tickle each other's feet as the sky changes colors. That was the summer I taught myself not to be ticklish, but when they brought Kevin home in crutches she had me pinned to the dirt with laughter. At that point, I was still too sensitive. Then, I hugged her mothers goodbye and took a bag of pretzels for the car ride, but I finished them well before we reached the airport. As the plane rose Mom 1 and I turned towards the window and together we linked fingers and waved goodbye to the state.

Six Poems

Jakuzen

**trans. Patrick Donnelly and Stephen
D. Miller**

Between the early tenth century and the fifteenth century, the

Japanese emperors ordered the compilation of twenty-one anthologies of poetry. These anthologies contained anywhere from a few hundred to several thousand poems. The poems below by Jakuzen, a 12th century Buddhist priest, were collected in the *Shinkokinwakashū* (*Shinkokinshū* for short, “New Collection of Ancient and Modern Poems”), the eighth such anthology, commissioned in 1201 by retired emperor Go-Toba and officially presented in 1205.

The compilers of the anthologies, in addition to arranging the poems under thematic headings (seasons, love, grief, travel, etc.), gave many poems a short prose preface. These prefaces, which addressed the poems’ thematic content or the occasions of their composition, are now considered aesthetically inseparable from the poems themselves. (In the *Shinkokinshū*, some prefaces are quoted directly from Buddhist scriptures; this is the case with many of Jakuzen’s poems.) In our translations, to join preface to poem in a way analogous to English poetry, we’ve presented prefaces as the poem’s “titles,” while retaining their prosy quality.

The Japanese originals of these poems (like most poems in the imperial anthologies) are *waka*, the thirty-one syllable form that was primary in Japanese poetics for over a millenium. Because Japanese poetry is written in vertical columns, there are no “lines” as such, but in *waka* the syllables are broken into groups of 5 - 7 - 5 - 7 - 7. These groupings are often rendered as five lines in English translations, but we chose to let the syntax in English take precedence over the poem’s original form. Likewise, our translations don’t imitate the syllabic form of the originals, on the reasoning that there isn’t a strong tradition of syllabics in English poetry. In part, this is because English, unlike Japanese, is a language in which the alternation of

strong and weak stresses is important, a fact that gave accentual rhythm precedence over syllable-counting in English prosody. Our goal was to create interesting English poems that convey the emotional and spiritual arguments of the Japanese originals.

The author of these poems, Jakuzen, a priest of the Tendai sect, resided outside the capital of Kyoto in Ōhara. His two brothers, Jakuchō and Jakunen, were also poet-priests. Together, the three were known as the Ōhara sanjaku (the three “jaku” of Ōhara). Jakuzen left behind three manuscripts of waka poetry, and forty-seven of his poems were published in several imperial poetry anthologies of the late 12th century and later. One of his most famous collections, *Hōmon hyakushu* (*One Hundred Poems on the Dharma Gate*), consisted of one hundred waka based upon short sections of various Buddhist texts, followed by contemplative prose afterwords.

***Shinkokinshū* 1952/1953**

kumo harete
munashiki sora ni
 suminagara
ukiyo no naka o
meguru tsuki kana

A bodhisattva is a pure moon playing in a sky supremely empty

because clouds cleared,
emptying the sky—

the MOON cycles round

the sad world glistening
and alive

***Shinkokinshū* 1953/1954**

fuku kaze ni
hana tachibana ya
niouran
mukashi oboyuru
kyō no niwa kana

And with a wind scented by blossoms of sandalwood

one can scent flowers

on the wind—orange blossoms
probably—reminding me
of one long-past yesterday

O in the garden of today

***Shinkokinshū* 1954/1955**

yami fukaki
ko no moto goto ni
chigiri okite
asa tatsu kiri no
ato no tsuyukesa

**When he had delivered these teachings, he returned to another
realm**

on root and trunk of every tree,
deep shadow where

a vow was made:

morning mist that hung,
lifted, left a dew-flow

of traces

***Shinkokinshū* 1959/1960**

oto ni kiku
kimi gari itsu ka
iki no matsu
matsuran mono o
kokorozukushi ni

Hearing the Name, longing to be reborn

when my dear lord may I come
where rumor says you are?

the pines of Iki—

though it's *you*
who exhausts your heart with waiting

***Shinkokinshū* 1960/1961**

wakarenishi
sono omokage no
koishiki ni
yume ni mo mieyo
yama no ha no tsuki

Heart of longing, revering the Buddha path

longed-for face
from which I've been parted

come, appear even in dreams—

lip-of-the-mountain
moon

***Shinkokinshū* 1962/1963**

ukigusa no
hitoha naritomo
isogakure
omoi na kake so
oki tsu shiranami

On the prohibition against stealing

don't hope for
even a single secret leaf

of floating seagrass—keep off

the beach you pirate
white waves

Eliot House

*Building a life in letters
from the past*

Robert Boucheron

In September 1970, I entered Harvard College. My parents and I drove from Schenectady, New York to Cambridge, Massachusetts, where thirty years earlier my father had attended the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and they delivered me to Pennypacker Hall. I fetched linen per the orientation checklist, and I made my bed on the creaky metal frame as my mother instructed. We did a little sightseeing in the stifling heat. We ate dinner at the Wursthaus, a cheap restaurant in Harvard Square, which had several at the time.

A seedy place clogged with traffic and buses, Harvard Square was a terminus of the Red Line, part of Boston's subway system. Facing the subway kiosk was a campus bookstore and general emporium called The Coop, while shops like Leavitt & Peirce, a venerable tobacconist with a museum of pipes and smoking gear in back, lined Massachusetts Avenue. Someone was always passing out political leaflets, while Hare Krishnas wrapped in saffron-tinted sheets chanted and chimed their finger cymbals. The raucous sound of the place, with the smell of diesel exhaust from the buses, merged in my mind with the taste of freedom.

Whatever pride or misgivings they may have felt, Mom and Dad left the next morning with scarcely a word, or so it seemed. A thin, nervous boy who wore glasses and permanent press shirts, I was too excited to notice. I had gotten my wish to attend a prestigious university in a big city. Harvard was then affordable for the family of a mid-level executive, and it offered a monthly billing plan. My parents would pay the bill for tuition, room and board, and I would cover all other expenses—books, travel, clothes, and whatnot. I earned money from part-time work and summer jobs.

The proctor in Pennypacker gave the most memorable talk of the week, a practical guide for what to do when caught in a riot. In April 1969, Harvard students had occupied University Hall, the main administration building, built of pale gray granite in 1813 and

elegantly designed by Charles Bulfinch. The Vietnam War was at issue, and students at campuses across the United States felt that universities were complicit. Cambridge police raided the building at dawn, and students boycotted classes for a week in protest. A graduate student, the proctor had witnessed the events. “If the police come after you,” he said, “don’t ask questions or try to defend yourself. Just turn and run.”

My roommates in the two-bedroom suite were Andy and Fred. Like me, they came from public high schools. Andy, a lively, gregarious joker, was from Wilmington, Delaware. Fred, a quiet, almost morose young man, was from White Plains, New York. Andy arrived first, so he claimed the best bedroom. Fred and I shared a narrow cell, and we all shared a living room that faced north on an alley. Pennypacker was an old apartment building from which the kitchens had been removed. Each student was provided with a bed, desk and dresser.

I wrote letters from Harvard to my parents and to my older sister Charlotte, who saved them and later returned them. Here is one from October 5, 1970:

There is a girl living in Stoughton Hall. This is perfectly alright—the parietal rules state that we may entertain young women in our rooms at any time. But Stacy is an unusual girl. She is 22, a college graduate, sings beautifully, is quite attractive, and has a Great Dane named Bridget. She is also, in the words of Ralph, totally liberated. She undresses at the slightest provocation. We found her in Room 46, lying naked in a sleeping bag on a couch. I petted Bridget. The proctor in Stoughton says that Stacy can be seen as a “dorm mother.” She says that she is looking for a job and an apartment.

Ralph was a new friend who lived in Stoughton.

Roughly one third of students came from elite private schools, it was rumored, and a smaller fraction from foreign countries. The preppies, with their air of entitlement, set the social tone. But my

plebeian peers and I felt lucky to be in this exalted realm and eager to make the most of it. Harvard was full of famous names like John Kenneth Galbraith, and some professors made their lectures into a performance. Students hissed or applauded—another Harvard custom, and one that visitors found disconcerting. That first year I took a heavy course load that included a survey of Greek literature, taught by John H. Finley, Jr., a patrician in a gray suit, and a gifted lecturer who spoke extempore. Once, as he strutted across the stage, Finley thrust his briar pipe into a jacket pocket, then batted the air distractedly as a veil of smoke rose around him. We tittered. Realizing at last that he had set himself on fire, Finley extracted the pipe to a burst of applause.

Many of my classmates called themselves “pre-med,” meaning they would go to graduate school in medicine. If we had less political fervor than the students of the 1960s, there was a genuine interest in doing something with our lives to benefit society. In a lukewarm way, I too said I was pre-med, but in truth I lacked direction. Thrown among hundreds of fiercely bright students, each from the top of his or her class, I did not consider the competition. Nor did I foresee that my indiscriminate thirst for knowledge would be a handicap. My grades suffered, and all four years I stayed in the second rank.

Apart from studies, the Harvard Band was an absorbing activity. I rose quickly to become the first chair soloist on clarinet, the concertmaster. Contacts with musicians led to invitations to perform in orchestras for musical shows, which Harvard produced in abundance. In my five years in Cambridge, I played several Broadway musicals, including *She Loves Me* and *Most Happy Fella*. I substituted in the Hasty Pudding Theatricals orchestra, where I managed a little flute and saxophone. At Radcliffe, I played all of the Gilbert & Sullivan operettas. Always subject to stage fright, I was shocked when another clarinetist told me: “When you play a solo, I can relax, knowing that you won’t blow it.”

At the start of sophomore year, students were asked to declare a major or “field of concentration.” Toward the end of freshman year, therefore, academic departments conducted question-and-answer sessions, and they vied for talent. With a blithe disregard for the future, I did not consider any of the sciences. Nor did I think of art or music, though archaeology had a romantic appeal. Instead, I weighed English, History, and Classics, which meant Latin and Greek. The Department of English and American Language and Literature offered a better deal in terms of personal instruction—the famed tutorial system—so I picked that.

Also in the spring of 1971, we had to choose where to live. In the 1920s, Yale and Harvard had adopted a residential system modeled on the English universities of Oxford and Cambridge, where each student lives in a College. The Harvard Houses were named for Harvard presidents dating back to the school’s foundation: Dudley, Lowell, Mather, Winthrop, and so on. Including existing buildings and Radcliffe dormitories which had been absorbed into the system, there were thirteen Houses, mostly arranged as suites with two to four bedrooms, a private bath, a living room, and often a wood-burning fireplace. The Houses varied in prestige and popularity. Students formed groups, filled out applications, went to interviews, and anxiously waited to see if they got in. The process was much like applying to college all over again—it was later replaced by a lottery.

Feeling shortchanged by Pennypacker Hall, I was determined to live in one of the better Houses. Andy and Fred had made other plans, so I roped together three friends, two of whom were in the Harvard Band. Leigh was tall and thin, much like me in appearance, and he played drums. Alex, the son of a Harvard geology professor, was a solid sort with a crewcut, very unfashionable at the time, and he played trumpet. Karl had a compact build and a sardonic wit; though we never became close, he was always up for a prank.

We four got into Eliot House, one of several red brick buildings built in the 1920s and 1930s in a Neo-Georgian style. With slate roofs punctuated by dormers, chimneys and white-painted steeples,

they had green courtyards and endless variety. From *Survey of Architectural History in Cambridge*, a 1973 report by Bainbridge Bunting and Robert H. Nylander, here is a description:

With the munificent assistance of Edward S. Harkness . . . Lowell returned to the early Harvard concept of “cohabiting for scholasticall communication,” an attitude which produced great efforts to house students and faculty so they could live and study together. The Houses along the river form one of Greater Boston’s majestic sights. Looking more like palatial residences than college dormitories, the structures are set among trees . . . Because there is so little evidence of monotonous repetition, it is hard to imagine that all were designed by one architectural firm within a sixteen-year period.

The survey of American literature was taught by Alan Heimert, an expert on Herman Melville. My paper on *Moby-Dick* caught his attention. Heimert was also the Master of Eliot House, which allowed some casual encounters. Seeing a copy of *The Autobiography of Benvenuto Cellini* in my hand, he asked: “Are you reading it for a course?” “No,” I said, “for the hell of it.” He shook his head. From then on, I was “a person who reads books for the hell of it.”

Our suite in Eliot House, just below the House library, overlooked the busy intersection of Memorial Drive along the Charles River and Boylston Street, now called John F. Kennedy Street. A transit railroad yard called the “car barn” lay across the street, since replaced by the Kennedy School of Government. Poised between campus and city, between the lovely architectural park and the gritty industrial landscape, I was moved to explore. Alone, or, rarely, with a friend, I took the subway into Boston to different stations, got out, and walked. I also walked from Harvard along the river, through Cambridge, across bridges, and around the deserted downtown. Although I started with no agenda, these walks became a self-education in architecture and city planning.

The Government Center project had cleared a swath of old buildings in the 1960s. New construction was in a concrete Brutal-

ist style and along great, sweeping curves. Boston City Hall, built in 1968 and designed by Kallmann McKinnell & Knowles, was controversial. A kind of inverted pyramid, it was either ultra-modern or extremely ugly. The vast brick plaza was still under construction. At the time, I thought the design was an aggressive attack on Boston's sense of style and history, and that some of the paved area should be planted as green space.

Nearby, the State House, Faneuil Hall, Quincy Market, and Custom House were historic and monumental. I followed the Freedom Trail into the North End, where Paul Revere's house stands, and saw Colonial churches. I walked through Boston Common and the Public Garden, and on through the Back Bay, a masterpiece of urban design. Beacon Hill was a marvel, a preserved enclave of nineteenth-century brick rowhouses. Other expeditions took me to Trinity Church, the Boston Public Library, and the Prudential Center, where the tower was completed in 1964. At 52 stories, it was the tallest building in Boston. The Christian Science complex, which married the dumpy "Mother Church" and its huge Renaissance "Annex" with the sleek modern lines of I. M. Pei, was then under construction. Several times, I visited the Museum of Fine Arts, a huge, granite, neoclassical structure built 1907-1915, and, nearby in the Fens, the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, inspired by the Palazzo Barbaro in Venice. To me, the buildings were as interesting as the art they contained.

On a stair landing in Harvard's Widener Library, one of the great national libraries, I found scale models of Cambridge as it appeared in the 1700s and 1800s. The twenty-two acres of Harvard Yard were assembled over centuries, and the precinct is now a prime example of a "superblock." Around 1901, a wrought-iron fence and monumental gates defined the perimeter. Twice during my years there, the gates were locked due to riots—the fence was for more than show.

In addition to walking, I bought and read books on cities and urbanism. Two that made a lasting impression were *Town and*

Square: From the Agora to the Village Green, by Paul Zucker, and *Boston: A Topographical History*, by Walter Muir Whitehill. The Boston book informed what I saw on the ground with a wealth of facts related to land, water, building, development, and how the face of the city had changed. The idea of “topographical history,” encapsulated in the phrase “cutting down the hills to fill the coves,” was a revelation. The city itself was a text that could be read.

Though I cannot locate the exact moment in time, I can picture myself standing in the main reference room of Widener. I had emerged from the stacks, a dim labyrinth that seemed to organize and enshrine all human knowledge. In a flash, I felt that I had learned enough to be able to tackle any research topic, pursue any question, even to the point of learning that there was no answer. I had reached a threshold of information, or more importantly, of intellectual skill. True or false, the belief stayed with me.

As an experiment, a few women moved into the Houses, just as a few men braved ridicule by moving to Radcliffe. The most audible woman in Eliot House was Benazir Bhutto, daughter of the President of Pakistan. Colorful and vivacious, she was known as Pinkie, a common nickname from her part of the world. Pinkie had a passion for the books of Yukio Mishima and a poster of him in her room. In the dining hall, she made a dramatic entrance, and her voice carried easily over the chatter. She was said to be partial to jocks, and since Eliot was the closest dormitory to Soldiers Field, it was a magnet for them. Among the student athletes, Pinkie was madly popular.

A university boathouse faced the courtyard of Eliot House. Crews practiced on the river in narrow, eight-man shells that rode low in the water, as a coxswain at one end chanted “stroke, stroke” through a megaphone. I tried rowing a wherry, a small single boat, one cloudy afternoon. With no experience, and with no one at the boathouse to tell me how, it was a struggle. I also tried running along the river, on a paved path. I did not know enough to stretch or pace myself, and I was quickly winded. Blisters and sore muscles

brought an end to this exercise. Swimming laps in the Indoor Athletic Building pool did not last, either, though I passed the swim test required of all students. Walking was my thing.

The fall of 1972, our junior year, Leigh and I moved to a double suite, as Alex and Karl paired off with others. In September, however, administrators told us that due to overcrowding, Leigh and I would have a third roommate, a man from Haiti named Philippe. I was the last to arrive in Cambridge that fall, and Philippe was already installed in the living room of the suite. I suggested that we toss a coin for the two bedrooms, but Philippe, a genial soul, the son of a physician, insisted that he didn't mind the lack of privacy. Leigh and I thought nothing of the arrangement, but others looked at us askance. Harvard was making an effort to boost the number of black students, but interracial mingling was rare. In January, Philippe moved to a double with a friend.

At age twenty, I fell in love for the first time. The object of my affection was Smitty, a year behind me, also in English and in Eliot House. A white boy from Compton, a downtrodden part of Los Angeles, Smitty smoked cigarettes, played guitar, wore a mustache, and had an easy social manner. I felt confused. He did not return the sentiment, which made matters worse. I groped in the dark of a depression, skipped classes, and tried to avoid him. One evening, in the archway entrance, he cornered me: "What is your problem?" I forget what I said, but we remained friends. The only scholarship student I got to know, he gave me a glimpse of Harvard from the working-class point of view.

My broken heart healed, apparently. The letters record a game of whiffle ball in the courtyard, playing with a Frisbee—"Leigh perfected the behind-the-back catch"—and a fire one night in Eliot House.

Leigh, Yolanda and I watched from my window. No fewer than five fire trucks came, complete with firemen, hoses, ladder, axes, and bullhorn. The fire was in a third floor suite. I lit a cigar that happened to be lying around and blew smoke out the window, hoping to

confuse watchers below. Leigh brought his pipe, and Yolanda tried that and the cigar. But the wind was against us.

To satisfy the last of my pre-med requirements, I studied organic chemistry, but found the lectures on organic chemistry dull, the reading and homework taxing, and the laboratory assignments impossible. On February 26, 1973, I wrote:

I am definitely not going to medical school. I don't think I'd like it there any more than I have liked the science departments here. I also am sure, but less so, that I don't want to go to any sort of graduate school. I am fed up with academics, the fantasy world of rewards and punishments. I may graduate just in time to avoid dropping out. I want to get a job after graduation.

For the rest of my time at Harvard, I followed scattered interests. One of these was writing poetry. The English department offered a seminar, limited by application to ten students, and I was accepted, one of a few undergraduates. Incredibly, this is what I wrote:

Elizabeth Bishop's poetry course is very disappointing. I haven't learned anything, and it's almost over. She is definitely an old woman, repeats herself. One oft-heard remark: "If you can find a new rhyme for love, you'll win the Nobel Prize." I don't think she likes to teach. She conducts the class listlessly and saves herself work by not assigning it. Few really good poems have come out—we read each other's during class—and those that do are no thanks to her. Maybe you can't teach poetry.

To her credit, Bishop used tact and kindness with us. Then aged 62, she was a soft-spoken, stout figure with coiffed gray hair. She insisted that we read aloud in a natural voice, and her critiques were common sense. At the end of the semester, she gave each student a

personal interview. She dodged my question “Do I have talent?” and suggested I move beyond traditional forms.

The summer of 1973, between my junior and senior years, I returned to Schenectady as usual. I got a job at a nearby K-Mart unpacking clothes, putting them on the sales floor, and packing unsold clothes to ship out. Midway through the summer, my aunt Dorothy and her daughter visited, fresh from a trip to Europe. I came downstairs the next morning and announced that I wanted to travel. From a business stay in Paris, my parents had brought home a large map, a bird’s eye view from the early twentieth century, showing the Seine, the *Île de la Cité*, major buildings, streets and trees in minute detail. I had spent hours gazing at this map, tracing the boulevards, and memorizing the layout. My grandfather had been born in Paris. I had enough money saved to pay for a few weeks, and my parents agreed I could go.

My father’s office arranged a plane ticket, and I managed to get a passport in days. I flew to Orly airport and spent two blissful weeks in Paris—in August. I stayed in a cheap hotel near the Père Lachaise Cemetery, walked and rode the Métro all over the city, and made a side trip to Versailles. Somewhere, I picked up a bad cold. Exhausted, I lay on the grass in the Bois de Boulogne one hot afternoon and fell asleep. I decided to move on to London. Arriving by overnight train and boat, I felt sicker, so I took a train to Oxford. There I recuperated for a week in a bed-and-breakfast and strolled to take in the tourist sights. A few more days in the English country, then a few in London, where I walked diligently to see art, architecture and history, and it was time to return. I sent postcards, and from Paris an *aérogramme* which included this:

Most of the historic buildings are crumbling and grimy, often divorced from their original setting—the *Sainte Chapelle*, for example. Restoration is going on in the *Place des Vosges*, and nearby is a masterpiece, the *Hôtel de Sully*. I stumbled into it, as into so many places. Entrance was free to students that day.

Senior year began strong. In letters dated October 3 and 10, 1973, I listed my courses: ancient Greek, Victorian literature, a survey of Western art, a history of Japan taught by Edwin Reischauer, the East Asian expert and former ambassador, and this:

Senior tutorial, for which I write a thesis, which is necessary for honors, which are necessary for who knows what. I will heap some 40-odd pages on the Ode to Psyche by Keats. One of the foremost Keats scholars, Walter Jackson Bate, lives in Eliot House, and I have eaten a few meals with him. His table manners are deplorable. It's likely he will read my thesis, so I should get to know him better.

The previous year I had won a university prize for an English translation of an ode of Horace, a few hundred dollars. I used the money to buy Leigh's old stereo, as he bought a new one. He let me borrow his records, and I began to buy some, starting with symphonies by Beethoven and Brahms. My bank account was dwindling, so I took part-time jobs. I delivered newspapers to dorm rooms, which meant dashing up and down flights of stairs. I graded physics papers for the course I had taken. And I did lettering or calligraphy, posters for concerts and small custom jobs.

The depression returned. I disliked my assigned tutor and dropped the senior tutorial. I dropped out of the Harvard Band, though I continued to play clarinet in orchestras for shows, including *Kiss Me, Kate* at the Loeb Drama Center. Ancient Greek proved to be as difficult as people said, and I stopped at the first half. By the final semester, I was taking only three courses, as I had accumulated extra credits toward graduation. I read novels by Flaubert. I read Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, "which has expanded my conceptions of literature and life and art and stupid jokes." I walked in the gloomy winter weather. I worried about what to do after college. In my bedroom, "I built a cathedral out of 3x5 index cards and Elmer's glue, 13 inches long, 10 inches high, complete with nave, transept, choir, crossing tower and flying buttresses," and

a hexagonal baptistery of stiff paper.

The bright spot that spring was a course taught by James Ackerman on the history of urban design. I devoured books by Lewis Mumford and Steen Eiler Rasmussen, learned how Venice coalesced from a group of swampy islands, and admired the Baroque achievement in Rome. I wrote a paper based on what I had seen in Oxford, and I drew a hypothetical plan of the earliest city, founded in the tenth century. I had doodled imaginary maps and city plans for years.

In May 1974, I pursued job leads in publishing, teaching in private schools, and a project in the Harvard University Development Office, the fund-raising coordinator for the college and graduate schools. I filled out applications, got letters of reference, and went to interviews. I looked for a place to live in Cambridge. High rents in the Boston area meant that I would have to find a share in an apartment. I interviewed with a group who said they wanted someone who could sing bass in their madrigal ensemble. Another group was strictly vegetarian.

Leigh was admitted to Johns Hopkins Medical School. I read more novels, played clarinet, and fretted. At the last minute, the Development Office came through—my job would start July 1. My parents returned to Cambridge for Commencement in the middle of June. The next day they helped move my belongings to Dana Street, just east of Harvard Yard, where I would share an apartment with graduate students.

The Development Office was then located in Holyoke Center, a 1950s ten-story modernist block by Josep Lluís Sert that loomed over Harvard Square. My assignment was to continue a project that began a year or two before, a series of reports on foundations and charitable trusts, especially those that had given to Harvard in the past, and those with Harvard alumni on their boards. The young man who was leaving trained me in his research methods, handed over his notes, and introduced me to the dozen or more people in

the office. The one I worked with most closely was a librarian named Vickie, who wore the same severe outfit every day. From August 20, 1974:

She is a good soul, very helpful, patient and alert. But she asks personal questions when I least expect: "Do you do your own cooking? Are you going home for Labor Day?" She volunteers advice that I need but would prefer to ask for. She has an odd, gasping, little-girlish laugh. She is about 50 and unmarried. There are two more just like her in the office.

The sources I used were newspaper clippings, *New York Times* obituaries, Standard & Poor's directory of companies, the Martindale-Hubbell directory of lawyers, the *Social Register*, books on America's wealthy families, and the *Harvard College Class Reports*, a series of books compiled from notes sent in by alumni and published at five-year intervals. The job amounted to an in-depth look at America's upper class, how they got their money, and what they liked to do with it. For some large and complex families, I drew charts to show several generations, their marriages and children. In a book on the Commonwealth Fund, which was founded by the same Harkness family that helped pay for the Harvard Houses, I found pages on my grandfather Lester Evans, who worked for the Fund for years to improve health care and medical education.

In July, I bought a bicycle. Over the next year, I rode it all over Boston, to the Arnold Arboretum in Jamaica Plan, to Revere Beach, and out to Lexington and Concord. I saw the redevelopment of Commercial Wharf, Lewis Wharf and Long Wharf: "the whole area is looking brighter thanks to efforts to fix up downtown Boston for the Bicentennial." I kept up with Smitty, who lived in Eliot House that summer and worked for Buildings and Grounds. On August 9, 1974, we watched the Nixon resignation on television in a basement lounge. I still got calls to play clarinet for Gilbert & Sullivan and other shows. My year in Cambridge working for Harvard prolonged

undergraduate life. But where was I headed?

Strangely enough, inspiration came from the Development Office. From a letter of October 10, 1974:

I no longer remember why I decided that architecture is “it,” but I can explain how I feel by a comparison. My present job is dull, in spite of the nice office, and I mope. By contrast, the librarian Vickie, committed to her old maidenhood, bustles all day long. Although she occasionally lets fall a quavery “damn,” she obviously enjoys her work. In fact, she never stops, for lunch or weekends. Her work coincides with her life’s interest, and this coincidence is the source of great satisfaction. Now, it’s clear that my interest in life is to build—in the sand, with cards, and on paper. If a job is the key to happiness, more than income or living conditions, then it should be in construction.

I had no course credit or training in design, so this career choice would mean three years of graduate school. I knew nothing about academic programs or architectural practice, and I did not know any architects personally. The field never came up for discussion during my four years in college. So far as I know, only one of my classmates went into architecture or any sort of design. Law, medicine, business and finance claimed the majority of souls.

To apply to architecture schools, I scraped together a portfolio of doodles, calligraphy, and photos of sand castles. I carried my paper models to a photographer’s studio in Harvard Square and paid for a professional, black-and-white portrait. The following April, two schools offered a place. Yale’s offer was conditional—I had to take a drawing course. I made a quick visit to Yale by train and decided that it would do. I completed the series of Development Office reports and left at the end of May. I signed up for a summer term class in life drawing.

That summer, I continued to read books and ride my bicycle. The life drawing class went well, as an exercise in observing closely

and letting the hand move freely. The class was in Harvard's Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts. The only building by Le Corbusier in the United States, it was completed in 1962. Curved forms and raw concrete posed a stark contrast to the traditional brick boxes around it. A wag called it "two grand pianos copulating."

For the month of August, I house-sat for a neighbor family on Dana Street who went on vacation. Sleeping in an attic bedroom in an empty house was strange, but the yard was lovely. I browsed their books and listened to their records. I was waiting. It was an awkward, lazy time, but at last I had a destination: architecture at Yale.

Taking My Time

Eric M. Bosarge

Lots of people take time, only one steals it. He's stealing from you, too. Every moment you ever stepped inside a bathroom and looked at yourself in the mirror while the fluorescents were still flickering, each little burst of darkness between pale blue light, those moments those were his.

Snip.

And you never even notice he takes them while you shave. Your legs, your face. Admit it, there's a moment every single day that you just can't remember. You call it spacing out, or attribute it to being tired, but next time you nick yourself and throw the razor down, wincing yourself back into consciousness, ask yourself, do you feel anger as his iron tongue licks your blood?

All the moments, the ones you don't use. Those are his.

Every time you ever drink. Even the first time, as I giggled hysterically and fell back into the tall grass glistening with early morning dew, laughing so I couldn't breathe and stars danced upon stars till I forgot what was so funny in the first place. That first moment had already been his. And I interpreted it as bliss.

In college I got so crazy that I glimpsed him through a cloud of bobbing people, emerging as something less than a hazy gray shadow out of focus on the dance floor, walking toward me in the crystal blue smoke. There was no way to tell, not as the strobe light hit the ridge of one thigh, then the other, if he was wearing any pants, if he was trying to be sexy or if he really was that tough. The ears were a bit too tall and he had the perpetual red eye of a subject in a photograph.

His cold, massive gray hands reached for me, his gentle touch turning my flush cheeks cold, thumbs crawling up my face, on the outsides of my nose, eclipsing my eyes like the moon, and just as dark as the music faded.

I've known him, time and time again—come to call him a friend.

At wedding ceremonies, funerals, and church, or meetings at work, every time the speaker goes on and you feel your mind start to wander, he's there, sitting beside you, pulling out the strand of your life and splicing it back together like a movie frame, taking all the boring parts you don't use, the ones you don't want. Then you find yourself clapping, on your feet. When you stare at a computer screen at work, mindlessly clicking away or wherever you are reading this, when you look up, he'll be in the corner, where his gray skin matches the shadows, hiding. He lets you have the fun stuff.

The memorable stuff.

He'll take the family dinners, the endless Sundays, and with it he's slowly sewing whole cloth from table scraps. The worst ones, he leaves you with those.

He could take all the moments with my father. I didn't recognize him when he came home. Not even from his pictures. The only thing that looked the same from the photographs was his uniform, but there were hundreds of men and women wearing the exact same thing, lined up in front of the podium he stood before when he thanked us and my mother for waiting for him, for keeping the faith, and I said it was nice to meet him when it was my turn to hug him.

He walked around the house and gave us orders and once, he woke up me up in the middle of the night by pressing cold steel against my neck. He said to be quiet because they were coming and we had to be careful. We crawled on our bellies around the perimeter of our property, through fescue and brambles, and I told myself it was a game.

It wasn't.

The cold, dew-stained branches soaked my pajamas a little at a time and I remember the mist, hanging above the low brush that bordered the back of our property, and how it disappeared when the back porch light came on.

Mother's silk nightie flounced about her body as she bounded down the back porch. I thought she was going to jump into his arms.

She stopped short, and the mist was on her face, condensed, catching light I couldn't see. It was beautiful but her hands wiped it off, and she made a little noise, then ran back inside.

I can't trade those memories. I think, maybe, they make me who I am, but I'd rather be a nobody, cold and empty inside like my father.

I wonder if my father brought him back from the desert. I often think he did. That, one night he was over there under alien stars in a cold, dry hole, keeping one eye out for scorpions and another on the black horizon for the enemy when he thought, I just want this to be over. I just want it to be done with, and down he came from the stars or he swam up through the sand, sat down and pulled out the strand of my father's life and started cutting whole chunks, hours at a time.

I use a needle. At work, as I stare at the computer screen. I sterilize it with a lighter and stab myself a little at a time, just underneath the nail of my left thumb. I wear a bandage over it so no one can see how it swells up. It keeps me from spacing out, from wanting to wrap the phone cord around my throat. As soon as I feel any slack in the tension of my life, when it feels like one of those moments I'm not really present, I give myself a little jab. He can have the blood if he wants. So long as I keep my life. Every second.

Father lifted weights in the garage a lot, spending hours on the bench, staring at the ceiling between sets. He said that feeling sore was good for the soul, that working hard, punishing the body, made the mind strong. I learned how to bench and how to squat, and how to take drags off his smoldering cigarette when it was his turn. When my friends came by on their bikes, father just shook his head. There wasn't time for friends. You only got one life.

We were spending it together.

I pace when I'm at home, before supper, while the pots are waiting to boil. I'm constantly holding a book and singing when I'm not reading and the neighbors, they close their windows even in the summer.

I saw a priest yesterday. I went to church and lit a candle, and

he saw me when he exited the confessional booth. I expected the old man to stop in his tracks, staring at me as some sort of hungry, toothy demon clung to my back, but he barely even looked up.

I lit the candle for my father.

He told mother she was beautiful, the way the light played off her face, then he walked down the hallway and peed with the door open. We heard sobbing, like a dog that was ready to be euthanized, and my mother took him upstairs and put him to bed. She came back down covering a red mark on her face. I went in the bathroom, with the TV muted, and watched as the blazing light of the commercials burst and flickered on the walls and knew it was like the videos of missile strikes, getting closer and closer to a door before going to fuzz. It must have brought all that pain back for him.

He's doing something with the time. He's not just squirreling it away. He's taking it and creating something. It's big and it's ugly and has a name that I can't pronounce.

I asked my father about his memories one day. About the bad ones from the war. He sipped his beer from the can and eyed me like I'd just broken a glass.

"I don't have any memories," he said.

"How can that be?" I asked. I couldn't have been more than twelve. I knew that people had memories. I'd heard of PTSD and knew that I wasn't really supposed to ask about it. The counselor said to give him space, to listen if he wanted to talk but not ask about it.

Everyone has memories.

He said one night he was with DJ, his buddy, on *R & R* and they were drinking beer and whiskey and playing cards. They were all just sitting there and they didn't even hear the incoming shells. He took another drink, tilting back the beer can, and I caught his hand shaking.

"What happened then?"

"Then a lot of people died. Jesus, kid."

The springs in the couch sighed of relief when he stood.

I wake up when I stab the needle in my thumb. Both thumbs

now. I sometimes forget if I've sterilized it and I think he has those moments, too.

I keep all the lights on but still there is shadow under the kitchen table. When I dream, I think he must be taking six, seven hours a night, because I wake with soaked sheets, like I've been wrestling. In the bible, Abraham wrestled with an angel, all night long. I used to think that was nothing but hyperbole. Abraham was a man. How could he even touch an angel, let alone wrestle with one? Now I think I know; he was trying to hold on to those days. Trying to keep the moments that were his.

They say to give your life to God. All of it. So people go to church and they volunteer or they meditate or whatever. I think all those moments, those belong to God. The rest. Well, the rest we sleep or work or space out.

There is color in his face. I saw him in the morning, in that place between sleep and wakefulness, when you're not sure you're eyes are even open, red lips, and green, green eyes, glowing and disembodied like a Cheshire cat, smiling as he faded into the wall. It had been a good night for him.

I place my finger in holy water and hope it boils. Squeeze a drop of my blood from my thumb into the saucer but still, nothing. My soul is not in hell. I'm not unholy. I'm simply human.

I try talking to Tina every day, but I think she senses I'm a puddle of bad intentions. She's not overly beautiful, her brown hair is mousy and when she smiles a lot of her upper gums are exposed. She's kind of awkward when she moves. But she's competent and there are sexy legs underneath her pencil skirt.

She said yes to a date with me. I'm terrified that we will be sitting at a nice table, and as she's talking I'll see him with those red lips leaning in, pulling that string taught, section it and tie a knot with a smile on my face and I'll have missed something terribly important, like how her best dog was named Canker, and in the end he barked at shadows. Or worse, I'll be talking and see him reflected in the curvature of her water glass, taking time from her.

Snip.

I guess I don't miss it. I guess that's the point. Whatever he's doing with it, whatever he's building, those wasted moments are worth more to him than they are to us. He's actually doing something with them. He's taking them and sealing them inside something, some other kind of life, maybe some kind of weapon.

I wonder if he's rebuilding his son. Or, maybe, if once he has enough time, he'll just step inside me and I'll be on the outside, holding the scissors, waiting for table scraps.

I endlessly drive the needle into my thumb. It goes almost halfway under the nail and it looks like a tunneling blood blister. I've been wearing the bandage for so long people must think I'm deformed. That's what Tina said, as she sat across from me.

"I mean, people can deal with a wart, or a missing nail," she said, fishing. Trying to get deeper.

"I'm diabetic," I lied. I wished I was. Sometimes I really wished I was diabetic, so that when it was all said and done I could blame everything on my blood sugar. I'm not sweet enough, dear, or, I'm so sweet I can't deal with it.

Tina had too many drinks. Too many was two and a half martinis. Her cheeks were flush, her eyes sparkled and as the demon picked up the string he winked at me.

"I'd like to fuck you," I said.

"Well, uh," she stammered, eyelids fluttering. The demon set down the string and folded his arms.

"I'd like to take you home, light some candles, put on some music, pour us each a glass of wine we won't drink, and see how many times we can go. Maybe watch the sun rise in the morning."

"You know you don't have to be so crass. There are any," she hiccupped, played it off as if clearing her throat. "Any number of euphemisms you could have used. Let's go back to my place. I have a really nice bottle of merlot in my place." She pointed a finger at me, "but don't use that line. There's no such thing, excuse me, as a nice bottle of merlot. Cab, pinot noir, maybe. Merlot, no. That's the

mnemonic. No, merlot.” She stared at me. “So?”

“So, what?”

“Are you going to get the check?”

I figured that would make the night unforgettable. I didn’t think it would get me laid.

She came back to the apartment and we danced by candlelight. We bumped the night stand and the oil fell on the floor. I left it until morning. The third time, as she inhaled deeply and turned her head to the side, smelling the pillow case I wish I’d changed, I saw the flash of his movement, reaching in, taking seconds from her. I opened my mouth to say something and woke up the next morning, her frizzy hair tickling my nose.

That’s when I knew it was inevitable.

The floors of my apartment are uneven. Sometimes, when moving from room to room, walking down the hallway, I feel dizzy. When I sit on the couch, it feels like everything is sliding towards me.

My father killed my mother. I remember it. I wish I didn’t.

Tina asked for a key. I had to think about it, not because I didn’t want her around but because I couldn’t remember how long we’d been dating. I tried to remember—as I said yes, of course.

“I’ll make you a copy after work,” I said, and she cuddled next to me.

I can’t use the needle anymore. She saw me take off the bandage and insisted she get a good look at it. Before she changed to business she worked in a medical office. She yanked my thumb forward and gasped. “You need to go to the hospital.”

“It’ll get better. I promise.”

“It’s infected.”

“Trust me, it’s already getting better. I’m on something,” I said, and went into the kitchen.

I stared at the little calendar on the fridge. It was August. The first time I asked Tina out was six weeks ago.

The appliances, the dishwasher, the microwave, and even the

fridge, disappeared. Father said they made noise. I tried to remember if they ever made noise, and I got caught in the home ec kitchen at school, bent over, head pressed to the side of a microwave, listening for what my father heard.

Mother was at work, so they had to call him at home. I could hear the sound of the principal's stubble rubbing against the receiver of the phone in his deathly-quiet office, but not my father's voice.

The principal hung up the phone and sighed and tried to smile as he looked at me. "Did you find what you were looking for in the kitchen?"

I shook my head.

"You're too young to skip class. You're not even in high school."

"I understand," I said.

"Wait in the office. Your father is on his way."

At the door, he stopped me. "Wait. Is everything okay at home?"

"Yeah," I said, and waited on the bench in the office until school ended.

I found my father outside after school, standing next to the flagpole, looking straight up at it as the wind beat the carabineer against the metal pole.

"How long have you been out here?" I asked.

He blinked a few times and looked at me. His face was pale as if all the blood had drained. "We don't need to tell your mother."

He's showing me this, and worse, over and over, trading my time for the memories. I'm not sure why.

Tina thinks I take drugs. She saw the needle marks in the webbing between my fingers. I'm a human pincushion. She knows I'm not diabetic and she knows that there might be something wrong with me.

"You don't have a full-size freezer, do you?" she asked the other day. We were walking along the river, holding hands. "Not in like, one of the storage areas in your building I don't know about."

"I don't think so."

“Good.”

“Why?”

“I was afraid you might cut me up into bits.”

“That’s not funny.”

“Isn’t it? You’re a strange little man,” she said, playing with my ears. She likes to play with my ears.

We sat by the water and watched leaves drift by.

He’s taking larger pieces of my life. The days I work, I’m left with water cooler chat, the moments when I stick my tongue out between two fingers at Tina. She knows I’m joking, and I think she likes it, but she told me to stop anyway. It freaked out her girlfriend, Lesley. I had my eyes closed when Lesley came around the corner, making the face as grotesque, as realistic, as it could be. Lesley was repulsed. I know. I’ve seen that look before, on my mother’s face.

On the way home father stopped at the bank and took out a stack of twenties, bought steaks and wine and a fifty pound bag of potatoes and the biggest box of beer cans they sold and a pool with an inflatable ring.

That night the neighbors came over. He cooked for all of them, and one by one as their bladders filled up they went in to use the bathroom and came back out with the same question: what happened to all the appliances?

The hose bled into the night, creating an endless whirlpool beneath the rim of the pool, which struggled to stay afloat, but no one went in. The water was too cold.

Mother got mad, about the pool, about the water bill, and the money. Everyone chased phantom food around their plates with forks while I watched their heads arguing in the window above the sink. We couldn’t hear them over the music playing. We didn’t have to.

“It’s a damn shame,” Arnold, our neighbor, said, and downed the rest of his beer before walking to his car.

Father came outside and stood in front of the pool for a few minutes, looking down at his reflection the way he’d stared up at the

flag pole. People began to whisper.

I tugged on his hand but he pulled away. That's when he took off his shirt and we saw the scars for the first time. There were three on his back that looked like stars, all jagged and purple, like his skin needed blood, and white lines all over his chest. I tried to imagine how he got them, and didn't like it.

He jumped into the pool without testing the water. Almost everyone had gone before he broke the surface. He stood in the pool, not even shivering, and looked over the empty backyard. Rain turned to steam on his body and lightning flashed behind the trees. Father sank in the pool and floated on his back.

Mother came out and yelled at him, saying it wasn't safe with the lightning, and he just waved. When the rain reached us, we went inside. From the upstairs window, I watched the rain dimple the surface of the water around him. There was something prenatal about it, how even with the dark sky raging above him, it couldn't touch him.

It was like the world was drowning him, and all he had to do was stand up.

In the checkout line at Wal-Mart, behind a mother with two screaming children, walled in by fifty kinds of beef jerky, and receiving death glares from a woman in her sixties who still had acne, I knelt and stretched the tape of my life out before him, begging him to take it.

My mother said it wasn't his fault. The army made him like this. He didn't have a choice. She didn't know anything about what they did or what they didn't do. She barely knew him. They had been dating for a month when they found out they were pregnant with me. They got married, he enlisted and by the time he finished basic there were wars raging on three continents.

Timing is everything.

I don't remember the joke at the water cooler. I just remember laughing. Everyone staring at each other all Chinese-eyed, wondering if I'd said something stupid.

I woke in the morning to find Tina on her side, left hand on her

pillow. There's a diamond on her ring finger. She looked happy.

Blood dripped onto the sink from the razor. It feels like I'm sleepwalking when I wake up. My life passing in segments longer and longer. Even if I still had the needle, I wouldn't use it.

Father left shortly after the infamous cookout. We moved out of the house, back into a noisy apartment complex and I played video games at the neighbors' most evenings after doing my homework. The building didn't have a pool and it smelled like pot all the time. After a while, my mother got a new boyfriend. His name was Dominic and he had red hair and freckles and a big, burly smile. When I shook his hand, I felt infantile. He was massive.

Dominic's levity was directly proportional to the number of empty beer cans beside the kitchen sink. Unfortunately, it was a negative equation. After I'd gone to bed and before the television turned off I'd hear him, starting to complain about the things she did or didn't do well enough. My mother was strong. She survived living alone, married to a man she hadn't spent but four consecutive weeks, with whom at one point she thought was dead, and raised me, all by herself.

That's why Dominic hit her.

"Supper was fine," she'd say. "The house is clean enough. You want it cleaner you clean it."

That's when he'd go off about who paid the bills and how he needed to have it his way. It was his right. It was his house.

"It's an apartment," she'd say, and the hollow pre-hung doors weren't thick enough to keep out the sound of breaking dishes and fresh bruises.

I asked mom where father went. She didn't have an answer. Last I heard, he was on some fishing trawler running out of Hudson Bay in the North Atlantic.

His skin is no longer gray but a healthy shade of pink. His lips are emerald green and the red eyes are charming. He is fully clothed in a vintage, if not dapper, suit. That's when I realize whatever game he's playing, I don't even know the rules.

I remember saying I wanted to have the rehearsal dinner somewhere near the ocean.

My boss has been fired and they put me in his place. Apparently, in the time I've lost, I do a great job.

The rehearsal dinner was nice. It was at a swanky joint with a large deck overlooking the bay and a marina where yachts and sailboats rocked back and forth gently to Jamie Cullum as Tina and I danced.

I stood by the altar as a man of the cloth read endless vows. Before I knew it, I was kissing Tina and everyone was rushing us out to a limo.

Boarding the plane for the honeymoon, there was a woman I recognized in front of me. She asked if I remembered her.

I said no. She scowled and walked away.

"Mistaken identity," I said to Tina.

We sat in our seats and when Tina kept asking about her, I just held out the tape to him. He was in the seat next to me, smiling, waiting.

We arrived at the airport safely.

Tina threw up the first morning. It had the same effect as when I cut myself shaving, hearing her in pain. I went into the bathroom and held her hair.

"Did you drink too much?" I asked.

"I think I'm pregnant," she said.

"Oh, is that all?"

When Dominic lost his job, I started to see beer cans piled up beside the sink when I got home. A lot of beer cans. Sometimes, from where I was playing video games downstairs, I could hear him shout at her when she got home from her second job, accusing her of things she couldn't have done. One night after a particularly intense bout of video games, slowly increasing the volume until it was impossible to hear the arguing in the apartment above, I went home to find the house dark and curiously quiet. The television played on mute. I called hello and no one answered.

In the hallway, my sneakers crunched broken glass.

Mom was on the bed, posed like a princess, her dress fanned out carefully around her legs, which were crossed, head to the side, a hand gently across her midsection, skin cold. I stared at her a long time, thinking she was beautiful, even with the purple eye, even with the bloody pillowcase beneath her, even without breath.

He was there in the corner, still as a statue, skin just as gray. Waiting.

I spent that evening downstairs and my friend, Tim, said he knew how to handle it. We swiped a bottle of Black Velvet, crossed through the Cineplex parking lot and sat on a couple of rocks in the field, passing the fiery liquid back and forth and trying to act like we enjoyed it.

“She’s in heaven,” he said. “You know that, right? Your mom was a good person.”

It sounded like he was trying to convince himself.

When they found Dominic he was all tears and apologies behind the glass at the police station. It reminded me of an aquarium, like he was some awful joke of a pet. One of the officers said he must have loved her, to position her like that on the bed. They found his tears dried on her face. If that was true, my father must have loved us, too. If he’d never left, Dominic wouldn’t have come into our lives.

I knew whose fault it was.

“Maybe today we can go horseback riding,” Tina said.

“I’d like that,” I said, even though I felt like cattle, like he was driving me toward a cliff.

“I know we shouldn’t be talking about this, but I was thinking, when we get back. If it’s a baby...”

She must have seen my look.

“Is the idea of a baby something that you could, maybe warm up to? I mean we did just get married isn’t marriage about starting a life together? A family?”

“It’s warm here. I thought this place would be air conditioned.”

“It’s a grass hut in paradise with a sea breeze that keeps it

eighty degrees.”

She was right. I must have spent a fortune on this honeymoon.

In the corner, he wasn't even hiding. He had his legs crossed long, gnarly fingernails drumming on the arms of the chair. He was definitely more solid, gentrified even, in his double-breasted suit, horns that almost passed for slicked-back hair. He arched an eyebrow, curled a beckoning finger.

“The pool is cooled to seventy-five!” Tina yelled as I dove beneath the surface.

I knelt on the bottom. His suit was wavy underwater, and the rippling sunlight made him shiny, beautiful, oneiric.

I didn't stretch the tape before him; I wrapped it around my neck and gave him the spool.

Two Poems

Catullus and Horace

trans. Christopher Childers

Gaius Valerius Catullus (ca. 84–54 BCE) was born in Verona to equestrian parents but spent his brief adulthood in Rome, where he fell in love with “Lesbia,” the married sister of Caesar’s henchman Publius Clodius Pulcher. From 57–56 he served on the staff of Memmius, governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor, and died in Rome at the age of 30, having produced the slender booklet of poems on which his fame now rests. While in Asia, Catullus visited his brother’s grave in the Troad and wrote this famous elegy.

Quintus Horatius Flaccus (65–8 BCE), the son of a freed slave from Apulia, got off on the wrong foot in the civil wars when, as a student in Athens, he joined Brutus’s army. After Brutus was defeated by Antony and Octavian at Philippi in 42, Horace returned to Rome under amnesty and wrote the books of poetry—the Satires, Epodes, Odes, and Epistles—which establishes him beside Vergil as one of the two greatest Augustan poets.

These pieces were undertaken as part of a translation project I am working on for Penguin Classics (Greek and Latin Lyric from Archilochus to Martial), but there was also a more personal motivation. A couple years ago, the headmaster of the school where I was teaching Horace and Catullus lost his father. The day after the funeral, he was back at school, throwing himself into his work, and speaking unguardedly in chapel about the consolations of community and how we help each other through hard times. I was moved by his openness, and, wanting to write a poem for him, translated these two, which I had long known, as a preliminary study in consolation. Each addresses the limits of language in the face of loss. Catullus’s justly famous elegy opposes the tightness of its couplets with sinuosities of syntax as it exposes the failure of ritual form, its leaky inadequacy as a container for grief. Horace elicits less sympathy as he lectures Vergil, the last person you’d think would need to hear it; but the coldness of his poem is really the coldness of its subject,

its consolation no consolation—which, I think, is the point. What both poems offer is precisely that sense of community in sorrow my headmaster was speaking of. The original poem I had meant to write for him never materialized; in its place, I dedicate these two translations, two years late, to Tad Roach, with sympathy, gratitude, and admiration.

Catullus 101

Multas per gentes et multa per aequora vectus
advenio has miseras, frater, ad inferias,
ut te postremo donarem munere mortis
et mutam nequiquam alloquerer cinerem,
quandoquidem fortuna mihi tete abstulit ipsum,
heu miser indigne frater adempte mihi.
nunc tamen interea haec, prisco quae more parentum
tradita sunt tristi munere ad inferias,
accipe fraterno multum manantia fletu,
atque in perpetuum, frater, ave atque vale.

Conveyed through many nations, many seas,
brother, I've come to your sad obsequies,
to bear you proper rites of burial
and call on ashes mute beyond recall,
since Fortune sundered us from one another—
how far, alas, from your deserts, dear brother!
These sorry gifts, of old inherited,
gifts which our fathers' fathers gave their dead:
take them, soaked where your brother's teardrops fell,
and, brother, for all time, hail and farewell.

Horace Ode 1.24

Quis desiderio sit pudor aut modus
tam cari capitis? Praecepit lugubris
cantus, Melpomene, cui liquidam pater
vocem cum cithara dedit.

Ergo Quintilium perpetuus sopor 5
urget? Cui Pudor et Iustitiae soror,
incorrupta Fides, nudaque Veritas
quando ullum inveniet parem?

Multis ille bonis flebilis occidit,
nulli flebilior quam tibi, Vergili. 10
Tu frustra pius, heu, non ita creditum
poscis Quintilium deos.

Quid si Threicio blandius Orpheo
auditam moderere arboribus fidem,
num vanae redeat sanguis imagini, 15
quam virga semel horrida,

non lenis precibus fata recludere,
nigro compulerit Mercurius gregi?
durum: sed levius fit patientia
quicquid corrigere est nefas. 20

What shame is there in crying? What limit to desire
for one we loved so dearly? Strike up the mourning strain,
Melpomene; your father gave you a voice like rain;
left, in your empty hands, the lyre.

So: Quintilius, then, has gone to his long slumber?
How could the goddess Honor, and holy Justice' twin,
immaculate Devotion, and naked Truth begin
to seek his like among our number?

Many good men have greeted his passing with their weeping,
none more than you, dear Virgil. Alas, your piety
is waste; the gods won't give up one all too fleetingly
trusted to our—but not their—keeping.

What if you played more sweetly than Orpheus could play
the lyre the trees heard and followed everywhere—
could fresh blood ever color that eidolon of air,
once Mercury has led the way

with his grim wand to pastures where flocks of shadows graze—
harsh god, and deaf to open those gates the Fates have sealed?
It hurts; but we must suffer: whatever can't be healed
grows lighter with the dream of days.

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