

New Haven Review

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Straight Outta Pittsburgh

Origins of a gifted son

Lamont B. Steptoe

I always felt that I'd need two lifetimes to be who I wanted to be. The first life I would spend reading books and traveling the world meeting and talking to all kinds of people. In my second lifetime I'd be writing about the lessons of the first. But since this is not possible, I decided that I better begin before this present life runs out. Not that I don't believe in reincarnation. I'm a firm believer in it. I've been here many, many times and have met people in this life that I knew before. Some of them are friends, another is my daughter. However, I haven't learned how to retain the knowledge of all those lives and bring it up like data on a computer screen. So, like everyone else, death somewhat unnerves me. I'm not sure what karmic debts I owe, what divine vengeance has yet to be exacted.

The poet Dylan Thomas said that poems are "statements made on the way to the grave." This is my long blues riff, my solo song en route to the void. It begins in the city that births the Ohio. It begins with a boy who came too early and wasn't supposed to live. A boy who would grow up among omens and signs and spirits. I am that boy.

"She pregnant again?"

"Well, it's been ten years!"

"Ump, ump, ump . . . another mouth to feed and no husband!"

"Who's the father this time?"

"Must be that jet-black niggah I seen her with a couple of months back."

"What his name?"

"Don't know."

"He got a job?"

"Don't know."

"You heard about all them robberies at the street car line?"

"You mean the 88 Frankstown line?"

“Yeah, got so folks scared to get off there!”

“I hope they catch ‘em soon!”

“Most of them take place after dark.”

“Whoever it is, the Penn Township police gonna get ‘em.”

“You know Pistol Pete don’t fool around with no bad niggers. He just soon as shoot ‘em as look at ‘em.”

“Girl, you know that’s right!”

“Pregnant again, huh! Ump, ump, ump...”

Pittsburgh is a city that sits on hills. A whole lotta hills. A city divided by two rivers that come together to make a third. Folks useta be walkin’ up and down all them hills. Kids usta be going to school up and down them hills. They make a game of it, especially when the last bell rings. They come pouring out of them schools like bats exiting a cave at dusk, whooping and hollering, running like herds of wild horses back to their parents, if they got parents, back to whoever is their legal guardian.

Growing up in a certain place shapes you forever. So that wherever you go, you are always of that time and place. I carry those three rivers with me and all those hills like some kinda money that never gets spent and is always in my pocket. Time is another kinda money that is always with you. In my case, it’s the 1950s and the 1960s. Each year, a hundred dollar bill. Twenty years of hundred dollar bills in the pocket of my soul.

Them hills was lessons. Taught you that life was a steep climb before you reached the top. Taught you patience and endurance. The climb was always worth it ‘cuz when you got to the top, you got to look down on the whole world like you was some kinda god.

Growing up in Pittsburgh, you didn’t know nothin’ ‘bout no oceans, except in books. The waters that defined you and yours was rivers. Folks fished in those rivers, drowned in those rivers, stood mesmerized on bridges and stared at those rivers, worked in steel mills along those rivers and traveled to amusement parks in street cars high above those rivers. Three rivers, color of catfish skin, movin’ barges

of coal and iron and steel all over the world. The entire time, your Momma ruled your life in the tribes of the family.

Childhood is a season and within that season are hundreds of other seasons and each carries its mark that baptizes and blesses or curses and damns. The weather from 1949 through 1968 was normal. Winter was winter, Spring was spring, Summer was summer and Autumn was autumn. The world had not yet been broken, although we all trembled in the shadow of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Coming of age in the middle of the twentieth century, we were blessed with the wisdom of elders knowledgeable of values that made the nation great, perhaps the last generation to be so before darkness began to overtake the light.

“Momma, where’s my Daddy?”

“Your Daddy’s dead!”

“How’d he die, Momma?”

“What I say, boy?”

“But how’d he die, Momma?”

“Boy, don’t ask me no more questions, I said, he’s dead!”

“But what am I suppose to write on the forms at school?”

“Write deceased! D-e-c-e-a-s-e-d!”

“But Momma...!” (slap)

“I told you don’t ask me no more questions!”

Momma tucked her children into bed every night. It was a ritual she loved. It was a ritual that her younger children waited for, lived for, needed to make the vanishing back into the void while their bodies simmered and yawned, while they whispered stories to themselves and dreamed of things to come and saw ancestors in timeless time. O to be tucked in by Momma! The sheets tucked beneath the mattress, under the blankets and the chenille spread, a warm pouch in the envelope of time. Then the turning out of the light, the room plunged into darkness, the rich blackness that breathed. Sometimes, Lonnie and Rusty would laugh and giggle or cower under the covers

because one of them would claim to have seen a ghost, heard a noise, detected footsteps, then lie there in fright too scared to look into the jungle-dark room. Then Rusty would fall asleep, his breathing become regular, and Lonnie would be left to contend with the dark.

He would peep out, his face sweating to feel the cool air, longing for sleep that would erase this fright of being alone in the darkened room. And sometimes, just before the “sandman” arrived to blind him to the expired history of his fleeting childhood, he would feel something, someone sit on the bed and, ever so gently, the bed would shake as if in a breeze, as if it were a hammock swaying. Back under the covers his head would go, wishing Rusty were still awake, wishing Momma would return to the room, wishing sleep would take him now. Eventually, it did but not before something quieter than a whisper taught him he was not alone, would never be alone, even when his Mother left him. There was something else, something that could pass through walls, move through time, something that watched him, followed him, guarded him. Something more real than real.

On the corner of Harvard and Euclid avenues stood St. James A.M.E. Church, a red brick structure with blood-red doors. This house of worship was a temple of pure black spirit. Led by the Rev. Augustus C. Sumpter formerly of South Carolina, a fire and brimstone preacher who wore thick spectacles that made him look bug-eyed. Bald and of a light-brown-skinned complexion, this man on Sunday mornings could make you think you was in a Baptist church rather than a Methodist one. Clad in white vestments, this black pope of a preacher could drive out the devils and demons who had taken up residence in souls over the past week. A sufferer of diabetes with two prostheses for legs, he roared out the holy word of God, pounding and stomping to emphasize his points. Elders and deacons dressed up for God would “amen” and moan-sing out Jesus’s good name to back up this thunderer, walking and pacing on the altar against a backdrop of a larger-than-life white Jesus, the

outspreed arms blurred and eroded by rain water that had found its way through the roof to seep over his image.

Folks who delivered mail, worked in the post office, took care of white folks' homes, worked in the steel mills, picked up garbage, worked in bars or buried the dead, moved and moaned, cried out, got up and danced, collapsed in the aisles on blood-red carpets, praising God, overcome by the power of the word, overcome by poverty, overcome by oppression, overcome by disease, overcome by depression, overcome by the rushing moments of time that drowned them day by day. Folks whooped and hollered, cried out to Jesus, began speaking in tongues, imbued with a power that gave them an awesome strength, overcome by a fire that burned them up, made them mad with holiness, electrified them into a dance of righteousness.

Old Rev. Sumpter hurled the words of God at his congregation like Moses hurled the Ten Commandments from the summit down on his sinful tribes. Sweating and pacing, pounding his fist on the pulpit, stomping to the rhythms of his possession, he flung fire into the black, sanctified faces of his flock, made them weep, made them cry out, sing out, pass out, faint and wake up to faint again. This was what they had come for, this weekly ritual of righteousness and redemption. He whipped them with his down-home religion, begged them, pleaded with them, cajoled them, threatened them to leave off from the ways of the world and get right with God. Called them sinners! Called them adulterers! Called them lost!

If it were summer, the brilliant light illuminated the stained-glass windows that illustrated biblical history in European flesh, long brown-haired Jesus and white cherubs with snow white sheep. It's a wonder that the powder keg of black emotion heating up those scenes didn't fragment the glass of those pictorials and send it shattering in the sin-slick streets outside. It's a wonder that all that grief, all that sorrow, all that pain, all that anguish didn't blast open those blood-red doors and amaze the neighbors who refused to come to church. It's a wonder that all those hymns lifted up to the heavens

week after week, month after month, year after year didn't lift that brick edifice up from its foundations and carry it off into the clouds with those fortunate enough to be in the church that day!

When Rev. Sumpter had burned them with the fire of holiness, lashed them with the whip of righteousness, poured salt and vinegar into the open wounds of their lives until they couldn't take it anymore, when he had threatened them enough, scared them enough, damned them enough, then and only then would he release them, cuddling them like those snow-white stained-glass lambs, gathering his scattered flock up, up into the balm of a collective hymn while folks dried their eyes, straightened their ties, replaced their eye glasses, gathered themselves once again in furry stoles returning to earth, thinking of Sunday dinners, the Sunday paper, Monday morning's agony and sweat. Then those collective voices would mount the air in a sweetness that only those who know life's bitter dregs can summon, a sweetness that only those who never had much, who don't have much now, who won't have much tomorrow can sing out, only those who have the diamonds and rubies of faith can know. Then, while Rev. Sumpter called for the lost to come forward, called for the sinners who wanted to sin no more, called for the sick who wanted to be well, called for the gamblers who wanted to quit gambling, for the wife beaters who wanted to change their ways, for the liars who wanted truth, the angry who wanted peace, the choir lifted soprano, alto, and bass voices up, up, up into the ether, and the velvet-lined brass plates passed among the poor and they gave what they could from Caesar for the salvation of their church and the fragile beauty of their lives.

Mr. Johnson's barbershop was on Margaretta street in East Liberty. Going to the barbershop was almost like going to the colored church. It was pure colored. Nothing from the world of white folks lived in this place. Johnson was of medium height and a brown-skinned man with straight, black hair. In those days, it was known as "good hair," that short, curly, kinky stuff that could only be managed

by being either totally clipped down to the skull or heavily pomaded with grease and fitted with a stocking cap overnight to insure “temporary” waves the next morning.

Johnson’s shop was the place to be on Saturday mornings. Momma would drop off the kids, old timers would wander in, young hipsters would drift in and the regulars—those that came to talk politics or collect the numbers—would be there as well. Most times, Mr. Johnson would do most of the cutting himself but if things got too busy, there’d be an older man—old enough to be Johnson’s dad—and a younger man working the other two barber chairs in the place.

Mr. Johnson always looked dapper. His white barber coat would be spotless, his fingernails clean and manicured, his dark trousers newly pressed and his shoes shined. Would anyone expect less of a lord in his manor? Seasons could come and go with snow, rain and scorching heat but the atmosphere of the shop never changed. In fact, Johnson always seemed ageless. Customers passed away or went to nursing homes, moved back down South or left for larger cities but the shop remained a fixture, adding and weaving the accounts of the missing to the folklore of the place.

Seems like the barber was part psychologist for those who knew nothing of psychology. It was a gathering place for taletellers, signifiers, liars, old soldiers, hip cats, handymen and errand boys. While rumors swirled around of the white folks comin’ to “urban renew” the neighborhood, Mr. Johnson’s place became a rock of a community goin’ under. Seems like the more folks heard of the neighborhood being broken up, the more firm their conviction to carve deep into their psyche the places that mattered, tell the tales and lies that kept them sane, memorize the faces, the places that gave them a sense of who they were and what they’d come from. Most adopted a state of denial, for to consider goin’ anywhere else was too frightening to contemplate.

Weren’t no radios or TVs in Mr. Johnson’s place. The barber-shop was a nexus of oral history. A place to talk, a place to laugh, a place to lie, a place to dream, a place of smoke signals, a tele-

graph office, a ritual of rites of passage between the young and the old. Somebody shoulda been writing it all down, copying it word for word, day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute, second by second. Somebody shoulda been drawing it, painting it, turning it into music and opera, putting it up on the big screen. Because those moments in that shop were golden and holy and full of something beyond words and music. And it didn't last long enough. It got swept away like the piles of hair on the floor at the end of the day, like piles of hair at the end of the day.

In the upstairs bedroom was an old black radio for listening to favorite shows. The volume was controlled by someone holding a coil of copper wire attached to the radio. If the coil was not held, the radio was impossible to hear. Many hours were spent listening to *Gunsmoke*, *The Shadow*, and *Amos-n-Andy*. It was on this radio that the child first heard of the acquisition of the states of Alaska and Hawaii.

In this same bedroom, Anna would spend long hours gazing out the windows across the parking lot that served as a ballfield on the weekends. In the distance could be seen the gothic edifice of Mellon Church which regularly played familiar hymns from its bell tower. Anna would often paint the cityscape from her third-floor perch in watercolors. Gifted with talent in drawing and painting, these would serve as her youthful meditations along with long walks throughout East Liberty, also known as Frogtown.

In summer the third floors of East Liberty would become too hot to retire to bed and this fueled a culture of front-porch sitting. The adults would gather on swings and metal lawn chairs, on front-steps gossiping about the day's events, the next day's chores, the latest deaths, while keeping an eye on the paddy wagons that frequently rolled by sometimes loaded with familiar faces headed for the NUMBER SIX police station which sat on the corner a half block away. One could gaze into windows on the backs of the wagons and see the cuffed forms of mostly colored men being taken in for intoxication or

fighting up on Frankstown Avenue.

Many residents would be on call to provide the prisoners with meals throughout the week. Neighborhood children would be ordered to carry these meals to the front desk of the station, there to be dwarfed by the big wooden front desk with white faces floating above it, as if approaching a realm of gods dressed in sky blue shirts. It was always cool in the Graystone building that also housed the firehouse next door, with a sinister silence permeating everything.

As the paddy wagons appeared, the black folks would get up from their chairs, lean over porch railings, or sometimes venture as far as their sidewalks to get a better look at the prisoners, praying that no one they knew was being taken in that night. In their wake, the wagons would leave the old folks buzzing from porch to porch with the importance of having God in your life or the evils of being outside the church or being enslaved to drink.

Dusk would begin to settle over the block and mothers would walk to corners to call their children home. Names would be heard filling the evening air: Lonnie! Lonnie! Lonnie! Rusty! Rusty! Rusty! Norma! Norma! Norma! Jeannie! Jeannie! Jeannie! Jack! Jack! Jack! Peachy! Peachy! Peachy! And after a time, the dusky shapes of children could be seen returning to home turfs whining for more time to play and being refused, or compromised to being allowed to play in front of the house. Those children that violated the rules were ordered or dragged into the house and made to go to bed early as punishment in rooms that were sweat boxes.

Lightning bugs would begin to flicker on and off, grabbing the kids attention as they invented new games pursuing these mysterious creatures, capturing them in Mason jars or tearing their lights from their dark shapes to make macabre rings, their hands and fingers odiferous with the scent of these nocturnal creatures. The street would slide into night as their tiny voices made plans for tomorrow's play while the old folks lapsed into stories of their lives in the South or their parents' experiences in that other world down below the Mason-Dixon line.

“I knew that boy’s Momma since she was a little girl. Seed her grow up to become a woman and a mother. She was a pretty li’l thing! You know, one of those what we call ‘red bones.’ You didn’t mess with her ‘cuz if you did you had her seven older brothers to deal with and believe me you didn’t want none of the Lawson boys to be lookin’ for you. That chile loved her Momma and Poppa. She was the baby girl of a family of ten. She got anything she wanted just by smilin’. You could tell even then that she was gonna grow up to be a fine woman. She had so much energy! And smart as a whip. If you needed to know something all you had to do was find Maybelle. If she didn’t know the answer right then you gave her a day or two and she’d come back with the answer. Usta wear her hair in two long pig-tails and always seemed to know if someone was good or evil. She’d just give you this long look and you could see her mind workin’ like a high priced engine. Once she had made up her mind about ‘cha there was no changin’ it. She knew what she knew when she knew it! The Lawson family had what ‘cha call Indian blood in ‘em on the Momma’s side. Old man Lawson, he could pass for white if he wanted to but his wife, Ella, now she looked Indian, a kinda reddish brown with a real prominent nose. Always wore her hair long or bundled up on her head. She’d wear these ankle-length dresses. She made all of her own clothes and the clothes for the three girls. Folks would sometimes get her to make dresses for their girl children too. That woman had a gift with the needle and thread! Yea, those Lawsons was a tight knit family.

“They was Virginia folk. Held they heads high! But they’d give you the shirts off they backs if you needed it. All of ‘em had a gift with makin’ stuff with they hands. Plumbing, carpentry, brickwork, electrical work, workin’ on cars — all of ‘em could pretty much fix anything that need fixin’. Yea, I knew ‘em for years up there in what they call Penn Township. That was considered ‘out in the country,’ then. ‘Nother thing about ‘em, they was some real superstitious people. You go to they house, better not put your hat on the bed! No, sir. Better not, they’d ask you to get steppin’. Walk in they front door

and look up and damn if you wouldn't see a horse shoe up there over the door. Yes, sir. Old lady Ella would always be sittin' in a rockin' chair readin' the Bible. House be just as neat. I mean you coulda ate off the floors in dey house, it was that clean. They never had much but what they did have they was willin' to share! Many times folks in the neighborhood down on they luck would hear a knock at they door and when they opened it, sure 'nuff it'd be old Lady Ella with a pot of greens and some homemade cornbread! Yes, sir. They was some charitable folks. Did I say they was from Virginia? Okay, youse forgets when you get up to be my age. Sometimes, can't remember from one sentence to the next! Good Lord gonna call me soon!"

"I'm thirsty, Anna!"

"Well, you just gonna have to wait until we get up to Negley Avenue where the fountains are to get a drink of water!"

"But I'm thirsty now!"

"Lonnie, you heard what I said, now be patient! Rusty ain't complain' and he's three years younger than you!"

"He thirsty too! He just don't know he thirsty!"

"Well, you keep talkin' like that and he will!"

"It's nice here in the park, Anna! All these trees and the Highland Park lake back there with all those fisherman. Ain't that where Fritz go fishin'?"

"Yeah, sometime he go there with his fishin' buddies Early and Coleman."

"Where else they go?"

"They go down the river sometimes or way upstate to Lake Pamatoming."

"Why they never take me along?"

"Cuz you too little! You might fall in the lake and drown!"

"Fritz won't let me drown!"

"How he gonna watch his fishin' rods and watch you too? Besides, they be drinkin' on those trips and Momma don't want you around no alcohol."

“Why Momma don’t drink?”

“Cuz Momma knows how evil liquor can be. It makes people mean and crazy and stupid!”

“You drink alcohol?”

“No, Lonnie! I’m not old enough and even if I was I don’t want to be mean, crazy or stupid.

“Boy, these sure are some nice houses we walkin’ by. Who lives in these houses?”

“White people!”

“Why don’t Momma buy us a nice house like these? How come we always have to live in somebody else’s house in two or three rooms?”

“Lonnie, don’t you realize that we’re poor!?”

“POOR! We’re POOR!?”

The elder sister and two younger brothers were taking a long scenic walk through Highland Park in a middle to upper middle-class neighborhood. It was summer. Lonnie was seven years old. Rusty was four. Anna was seventeen. The weather was sunny with a pale blue sky littered with an odd assortment of cumulus clouds. But when Anna revealed to Lonnie that they were a poor family, the weather instantly changed. It was as if the sunlight, the blue sky, the warm breeze were an outward expression of the child’s soul. Anna’s words were a sudden downpour, a deafening clap of thunder, preceded by a blinding flash of lightning. POOR.

POOR. Yes, Lonnie knew what poor meant but in his child’s universe it had not really taken root. He noticed things, the small quarters they called home in somebody else’s house. The scanty meals. The shoebox lunches Momma packed when other kids’ families had real picnic baskets. The absence of a father when other kids had two parents. The lack of an automobile when other families had a father who drove a car and a full house all their own. Yet, somehow at seven, he hadn’t really connected the dots. He hadn’t really thought about these difficulties as being what it meant to be poor.

But now—on this sunny and shady street among nature’s grass and trees and rolling, wooded hills—the dots had connected themselves in an electric jolt of realization. Here at this hour on this day in the company of little brother and older sister, his childhood suffered a mortal wound. Nothing would ever be the same again.

POOR. MOMMA WAS POOR. She couldn’t afford a house, wouldn’t be able to afford a house. They would always eat lunch packed in shoeboxes. They would always live in someone else’s house. They would never have a car. They would never have enough to eat. They were poor and colored and there would never, never, be a person to call Daddy. The five of them: Fritz, Anna, Momma, Rusty, and himself were alone in the big wide world and time was not their friend because time would take Momma from them, increasing their loneliness. What had started out to be an adventure had suddenly turned into a horrible dream, only this dream wouldn’t go away. It was real and his little soul began to bleed like the wounds of Jesus and nothing, nothing could give him back his happiness.

“Momma, we got a lot of relatives?”

“Yes, son. You have a lot of cousins on your mother’s side”

“When am I going to meet ‘em, Momma?”

“You know all you gonna know. You got relatives that are color struck!”

“What do you mean by that, Momma?”

“I mean that you being so dark they wouldn’t like you! They’d just hurt your feelings!”

“O Momma, it hurts my feelings just to know that ‘bout ‘em. I ain’t never gonna forget what you just told me. I ain’t even done nothin’ to those people and they already hate me! I’m gonna go read now . . . and do my homework, Momma.”

Lonnie had no grandparents. None living on his mother’s side and, since his daddy played no role in his life, no grandparents on

that side either. Just empty spaces where people should have been. His Momma told him stories of her parents. These stories were precious to him. But stories don't make up for living flesh and blood. So he grew up among absences. His Momma named names but they were names on headstones and tombstones in graveyards that the living never even went to.

Even the stories his Momma told were incomplete. Most times, the bad times were filtered out. The people he learned about were shorn of their rage, their madness and their lust. Sorta like cardboard cutouts with nothing in the back. Their images passed before his eyes in old black and white photographs: uncles, aunts, and cousins flesh of his flesh but gone, vanished, absent. And, young as he was, his Momma would talk to him of her coming absence.

There was even his living kin who were always absent because they lived lives that were unacceptable to his Momma's code. Having witnessed the quicksand that had swallowed many of her brothers and sisters, she avoided the kinfolk that walked that same path, headed for the same sorrowful endings. She protected her sons and daughter by keeping them away from those that danced with madness and gambled with danger. She hoarded the innocence of her children, protected them for years from the dark currents that threatened to swallow them at the first opportunity. So Lonnie grew up with survivors who had passed through the gauntlet of the Black experience. Folks who found something to grab on to like religion or abstinence to protect them from the temptations that would destroy them. Unknowingly, as a youth, he would fashion his salvation from the stuff of books, wrap himself in the mantle of knowledge and become a seeker. It would be this path that he would traverse, armed with his mother's prayers, that would allow him to parry the dangers that consumed uncles and aunts and cousins.

As a child, he became familiar with death by the empty holes it left behind, by the vanishing of precious things. Amidst weeping and sorrow, he would meet his kinfolk, gaze upon the dead he barely knew. The same hungers lived in his blood. The same passions quick-

ened his soul. The same intelligence illumined his thoughts. His only advantage was his youth, Time was on his side. As the disappearances continued, each imparted a lesson. If he was to overcome the karma of this tribe, he would have to listen, remember, watch, wait, study and write. Surrounded by the tribe of the disappeared, he opened his soul to their sorrows and their songs. He opened his soul to the wind that carried their voices, the nights pregnant with their visitations, the land of dreams that brought them together in ballrooms of oblivion. He invited these ancestors into the mansions of his dreams, begged them to utter what was never said, to reveal the history he was never told.

“Lonnie!”

“Yes, Momma?”

“Your great grandmother was full-blooded Cherokee!”

“You mean . . .?”

“Yes, we have Indian blood in the family. Look at your sister’s long, straight, black hair. Your grandmother could tell the future by her dreams!”

“I see things in dreams too, Momma! Sometimes, I just know things without the dreams!”

“I know, son! Your sister was born with a veil over her face!”

“What dat mean, Momma?”

“It mean she can ‘see’ the dead!”

“That’s scary, Momma!”

“It ain’t the dead you gotta worry ‘bout, son, it’s the livin’!”

Every community has one. That person or home that is strange.

In East Liberty the house that frightened all the neighborhood children was located on Broad Street, occupied by a woman that was always heavily rouged and wore caftans around her head. She had a hump in her back and lived behind a high cyclone fence with a red-painted walkway leading up to the front steps. Even on Halloween her house was avoided. She was rarely seen, and when she was,

it was vague glimpses of her as she ventured out on her front porch to water her plants or sit in the shadows of her porch hidden behind growths of vines that snaked up to her roof.

She was always garbed in black, and was married to a dark-skinned man who left for work every day. Some said he worked in the coal mines. His dress was always that of overalls, gold-rimmed glasses, and a cap like those worn by locomotive engineers. Neither he nor she ever spoke to anyone, just came and went, leaving neighbors and children to speculate about their lives. Softballs or baseballs that ended up in their yard were just considered forever lost. No one dared to climb the six-foot cyclone fence in an attempt to retrieve them.

Caramel-colored and always scowling, as well as frequently seen mumbling to herself, only confirmed in everyone's mind that Mrs. Johnson was truly a witch and for some reason or another actually hated children. Children passing by her home always did so on the run glancing with terror at her porch as they passed, hoping not to catch her eye. Sometimes, especially if it was near dusk, children would make their way home by going the long way around the block just so as to not have to pass in front of her home.

One day, a yellow boy from around the corner on Rural Street had words with her, flinging rude remarks in her direction. Not long after, while playing baseball in the parking lot across the street from her home, he ran full tilt into an iron telephone pole while attempting to catch a fly ball. The collision knocked him out cold and it was rumored that the neighborhood witch had cursed him with a spell. Whatever myths were circulating about her were intensified, and the fear and trembling concerning her doubly enforced.

As the years went by, she would sometimes be seen outside her home, leaving her locked front gate to shop, or returning with a shopping cart full of groceries. Withered and barely larger than a gnome, she looked ageless, like she had been on earth forever and would never die. Her legacy in the community was one of meanness and privacy and witchery. Even grownups had nothing to say to her.

She was avoided at all cost.

No one saw her attend church. No one ever saw her smile. Even now, no one has any memory of her ever moving away when the urban renewal project came through to demolish the block. No one knows if she even died, it's as if her spooky house is there lost in time on Broad Street forever, frozen in a time warp of the 1950s waiting, waiting, waiting to frighten careless children out of their wits.

“I ain’t gonna be with you always, son!”

“O Momma, I’m gonna die before you!”

“Umm huh. Just know that when you lose me, you’ll have lost your best friend! You’ll never have another friend like me!”

If Momma knew something about jazz, she wasn’t talkin’. If

Momma knew something about the blues, she wasn’t talkin’. Most she ever said about that kinda livin’ was that her brother William usta do the Charleston—that wide hip dance that had feet, legs and arms akimbo. Naw, Momma never talked about that fast, swin-gin’ gin-soaked lifestyle of flashy niggers and gals, diamonds, big rolls of ill-gotten cash and the splash of blood on late night, early mornin’ neon streets. Momma didn’t want her youngin’s fol-lowing her brothers in and out of the slammer or carryin’ pistols or skippin town ‘cuz big burly black niggers was on dey ass. So Momma never spoke of such things nor tuned the radio to stations that played that kind of music. Momma wanted her boys to remain boys for as long as possible. Wanted them to be innocent as straw-berries in a farmers field, pure as sunlight kissing a dew drop.

Momma ruled her kingdom like an Amazon queen ready to smite anything that threatened her moral code. Sunday morn-ing was Sunday morning and at the very least Sunday school was required and never an option! Attempts to resist were overcome by force. You either went to church or got smacked and in many cases smacked all the way to church! Hollerin’ and screamin’ and

threats of not eating or not goin' to school or rollin' eyes or stompin' feet meant nothing. Just more blows upside your head 'cuz Momma knew what was out there in the world, how bad kids led to bad roads and bad roads led straight to hell! Momma was saving you from yourself even if you didn't know it. Naw, wasn't no jazz in Momma's house. Wasn't no blues 'cept those you was livin'!

“Wake up son! Wake up! It's time to eat breakfast before you deliver your papers!”

“Is it cold outside, Momma?”

“Yes, it snowed overnight so you've gotta wear your galoshes! What do you want for breakfast Grapenuts or oatmeal?

(singing)

*“What a friend we have in Jesus. All our sins and sorrows bare.
We shall never be discouraged. Take it to the Lord in prayer.
All our friends despise and forsake thee, take it to the Lord in prayer.”*

“I like to hear you sing that song, Momma. Why do you and the old folks sing those hymns?”

“Well, son. You eatin' your white bread now. But there'll come a time when you have to make it in the world all by yourself and you'll need Jesus to lean on! We can't afford no psychologist or psychiatrist. Jesus is our doctor! Now, go on and finish your breakfast, so's you can get to your papers. Be careful out there. There's two feet of snow on the ground. Slippery as all get out!”

Highland Park is a large urban retreat in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

It houses the Pittsburgh Zoological Gardens, two large reservoirs, two swimming pools and a small lake that is annually stocked with catfish, carp, bass, sunfish, crappies and turtles. Grassroot children, predominately Black, utilize all the amenities, especially the swimming pools and the fishing hole. Granted permission by their parents to venture so far from home—about three miles—from East Liberty,

they take full advantage of the tree-lined roads, the dense woods, and the magnet of the lake to discover nature. Far away from the crowded rooms of their homes, they explore the woods and change into pirates, Indians, cowboys, scouts and escaping bandits, thrashing through underbrush, whooping and hollering, possessed by the madness of childhood.

They arrive at the lake with fishing-line, bamboo poles, and plastic floats determined to haul up from the depths a shimmering, battling mystery that will be shown off in the neighborhood and embellished with bravado and laughter. Garbed in cheap sneakers, five-and-dime shirts and pants, these children are the happiest they will ever be. Entangled in a universe of dreams, they run from excitement to excitement; energized with youth. What does it matter that they are raggedy? What does it matter they come from roach and mice-infested homes? What does it matter they will never be rocket scientists or CEOs? What does it matter they are under-educated and lied to and prepared like pigs to the slaughter?

No, like freight trains carrying iron ore and bituminous coal, they are railroaded to horrible futures, but in the sunlight of their youth they know nothing of this, are only boys being boys and girls being girls living imaginative lives whooping like Indians, fast-drawing like gunslingers of a western romance. Mothers and fathers are waiting at home together or apart ready to tuck them in, scold them or whip them, take them to church. They will return home, their eyes filled with lions and tigers, bears, spiders and snakes. They will race through the parks' verdant roads, become intoxicated on the green perfume of growth, unaware of sex or love or loneliness. They will sweat and the sunlight will fill the globules of water, making them sparkle like jewels spilling into the streets. They are alive and full of joy and hope and dreams. They are dreams in flesh and bone and death is far away and happens only to other people for they will live forever and riches and wealth await them and they are brave and in love with games and make believe. They are undefeated and

ESSAY

healthy, untainted by drugs or alcohol, believers in God and heaven and hell.

Home is a warm place where they will fall into bed exhausted by their athletic jaunts and tomorrow is only adventure and the day after tomorrow is more adventure. Like new colts they shy away from meanness and anger, drawn to sunlight and open fields. They are boys and friends and curious and sometimes wisdom falls from their lips like gold coins. They look out on a world that challenges, and look in on the clear rivers of their spirits full of wonder and amazement. They are short and tall, chubby and round, lean and skinny. They are blooming roses in gardens owned by others, their mouths wide like young birds full of thirst. Rain storms are nothing to them and they run through downpours full of glee, tasting the raindrops, tattooing time with their lives. They are honest and full of light, glittering diamonds shaped by history, draped in robes of parental love. They are electric eels swimming through the 1950s and days are eternal and they are boys forever and friends forever and mad with youth and nothing can rob them and each moment is sacred and holy.

“Aunt Minnie, can I lick out the bowl?”

“Hush, boy! I told you when I get these cookies in the oven and finish with the pound cake batter you can lick out both bowls.”

“It’s hot in the kitchen!”

“Well, go out in the back yard and play ‘til I get done in here. I got to finish this baking before my stories come on! I’m tired ‘cuz I been washin’ and ironin’ all mornin’. I started at six o’clock and I just wanna go sit down and have a highball and watch my stories. I don’t need you up under me worryin’ me ‘bout some batter in the bowl. And if you don’t stay up from under me you won’t get nothin’. Now, get on outta here. Shoo!”

“Where’s Rusty?”

“He’s upstairs takin’ a nap. Leave him be! Get on out in ‘dat yard, boy!”

STEPTOE

Children do secret things, have secret places, places of magic and imagination. Special places in the woods, favorite alleyways to and from school. They know neighborhoods in ways that adults do not or have forgotten in the tribulations of grown-up life. Between home and school are battlefields, moats, places where monsters live, where brave knights gather to plan strategies, where enemies lay in ambush.

There are backyards where fruit can be pillaged or short cuts taken. There are alleyways that are only experienced at a gallop and you ride hard on your invisible horse because bad guys are in pursuit or a pretty girl has been kidnapped and must be quickly rescued. There are club houses constructed from found objects, old doors, discarded window frames, tattered rugs, unused wooden boxes. Passwords and codes only for the initiates. There are hunting parties armed with slingshots, stalking helpless birds and squirrels. There are supply sergeants who pilfer foodstuffs from home to slake hunger and sweet-tooths. There are generals who plot warfare against other tribes. They are jokesters who keep everyone laughing. There are liars forever outsiders to the truth. There are the weak who depend on the strong. There are the strong who rule the weak.

Such is the real life of the child. School and home being merely the framework, the boundaries that hem the child in. Occasionally, there is a tomboy who is tough or rougher than the boys who shun her fellow females content to walk in their mothers' shadow. She is one of but apart from the tribes of boys who tolerate her presence while always ready to look for weakness and compassion and pounce like ravenous wolves. So while parents pay bills, shop, stagger beneath the weight of societal demands, their children sail the turbulent and changing weathers of the mind.

“That boy’s always readin’. Everytime I see ‘im, he got some kinda book in his hand.”

“Yea, chile. I had to talk to his Momma ‘bout him burnin’ my lights at all hours of the night!”

“Whatcha’ mean?”

“Ump, she just payin’ me rent! She ain’t payin’ no electric! I got to go deeper in my pocket if that boy burn them lights all the time. I tole her I want them lights out no later than ten o’clock. Those children suppose to be in bed by then anyway ‘cuz they gots to get up for school in the mornin’ and the younger one be fussin’ and fightin’ ‘bout goin’ to school anyway.

“What she say?”

“What could she say? She either goin’ have the lights out, or give me more money or move out!”

“It’s hard for a woman with kids to find a place. Don’t nobody want no kids rippin’ and runnin’ through the house ‘specially when they ain’t got no kids of they own!”

“Yea, you right. But that extra money comin’ in sho’ do help!”

“When you can get it!”

“You know that’s right! Some of these renters always got an excuse about why they late with the rent! I done heard it all!”

“I ain’t got nothin’ against that boy readin’ all the time. Lord knows it keeps him off the street! He ain’t like some of these half-raised whelps runnin’ up and down the streets using all kinds of foul words headed for hell, but they gonna be in jail fo’ they get to hell!”

“Dat boy sho’ do love books. Seems like when he gets a book in his hand he gets this faraway look on his face. Sometimes you gotta call his name three, four times before he even hear you!”

“Yea, that boy gonna grow up and do somethin’ to make his Momma proud. He ain’t good lookin’ like his younger brother but he real smart!”

Yea, and he’s so dark! That’s one black child!”

“Umm, huh! You wouldn’t think his Momma is his Momma dark as he is and yellow as she is.”

“You know dat’s right!”

“The Lord sho’ do move in mysterious ways!”

“AMEN!”

By the time he was six years old, Lonnie began to sense that he was somehow odd and different from everyone else around him. He couldn't have put it into words, of course. It was just a feeling. He sensed that all that took place around him was somehow making impressions upon him that he would always remember. It was as if he were a living, breathing, walking, talking camera that recorded everything that happened to him. For this reason, he felt different. Others seemed not to notice what he noticed, remember what he remembered, were not moved by what moved him. As early as six, this feeling was very strong and powerful within him. He also sensed that this "sense" was with him for life.

He began to sense that he was a stranger among family and friends, teachers and neighbors. He felt that his power lay in this "difference." He was always seen as the "serious" one. Even as he went forth to play his childhood games, immerse himself in the activities of being a son, or brother or nephew, he was unlike the others. It was as if he were in touch with forces beyond his knowing, as if he were being watched by invisibles. He was a child but not a child. He was still water full of depth. He knew things he shouldn't have known. Even at six years of age, he felt like an old man. He felt an ageless wisdom. He played but was not playing. He watched the life around him with eyes too mature for a child. He waited on something, not quite knowing what he was waiting for. He felt ancient though he knew not the word. Often, he spoke with God knowing that he was heard. He was a believer not yet knowing what a believer was.

The old folks watched him. They, too, knew he was "different." They began to expect something from this strange, odd, dark, serious little boy. Though they knew not what. Because he was not light-skinned like his Momma or his older or younger brothers, even his sister was lighter than him, he felt "odd." He would see people staring at him. Was it the darkness of his skin that made them stare? Was it the big head and unhandsome face that made them stare? Was it his "serious" demeanor that made them stare? Sometimes he

would just blurt out while riding with his Momma on a city streetcar or bus, “Momma, he’s looking at me!” “Momma she’s looking at me!” So others found him odd as well!

Something inside him began to lead him to the knowledge of books. He began to consume them like food, it became a hunger he could never satiate. It became a drug, an addiction, an obsession. If people did not like him for his looks and his dark color, perhaps they would like him if he knew things they did not know. He began to read. Alone, he began to imagine strange worlds and events that gave him comfort, he began to dream of things he would do, places he would go when he became a man. He began to make plans to escape the confines of this world that limited him. Somehow, he knew books were the key to achieving his dreams. Books became his true friends. He came away from them with new knowledge, new power, new hope, new words. He began to watch his playmates more closely and understand how their characters would lead them to certain destinies. He began to know that some “force” protected him, consoled him, informed him, prepared him for what he knew not, only that he in turn had to do what he could to prepare himself for that great unknown that waited to call his name.

Neighboring Parts of This Planet

Elizabeth Edelglass

They are in my basement, the boy and the girl. The boy is not circumcised. The girl is, although that's not what they call it. I know, because my husband said they had to delouse when they arrived—he insisted, even though they didn't have lice. They are Americans, born here, although that's not what we call them anymore. My husband said they had to be naked for the delousing, and I had to watch. I think he thought I wouldn't do it, and then he wouldn't have to keep them.

I filled the laundry sink in the basement with my own ration of hot water (no shower down there, but luckily this laundry sink plus a toilet, the maid's toilet, I used to thoughtlessly call it). In the linen closet, behind my daughters' old Hello Kitty quilts, I found delousing shampoo left from their preschool days. I'd finally had to forbid my girls from sharing the dress-up tiaras. They cried. Now dress-up is forbidden in schools, except for desert camouflage. They're both in the army now, my girls, in real desert camouflage. My mother says there are lice in army barracks. I couldn't buy delousing shampoo, even if I had the money; the army takes whatever they need, which is why store shelves are bare. My husband has taken to hanging out behind the Stop & Shop, scavenging for wilted vegetables, expired canned goods. If he finds canned beans, we pretend we're camping.

My leftover shampoo is long past expiration. But they don't have lice, this boy and this girl. I know. I looked. In their scalps, and also down below. It was humiliating. But I'm no good at lying, at least not to my husband. I lie to the neighbors and to the block commander about the boy and the girl in my basement. I hate lying to the neighbors, but if they knew, they'd be in danger. Even not knowing, I've probably put them in danger. The block commander, well, he deserves the lies.

I couldn't see where the girl had been cut, down there, but

she could tell I was looking, so she told me. It has always been their way, she said, her mother and her grandmothers and their mothers before, ancient tradition from another, faraway country. Here in America, now, even we Jews have stopped cutting our boys down there, not because we've suddenly decided it's barbaric, but because it's been outlawed. Not that we always obey the law.

Thank God we had girls, my husband and me, so we didn't have to decide whether or not to cut boys. Today, Jewish parents of sons must choose—God's covenant of six thousand years, or American law of the moment? At least American law banning ritual circumcision now keeps Jewish sons masked down below, so maybe safe. My husband's brother kept his son masked, and my mother-in-law didn't speak to his wife for months.

My mother knows about the boy and the girl in our basement. She brings soup, when she can. Just like the girl has stories from her foreign foremothers, so too my mother from hers, stories about the Great Depression, when her immigrant grandmother learned how to make one-chicken-leg soup to feed a family of six. Somehow my mother knows the recipe, a recipe she wasn't ever supposed to need.

My mother says her grandmother could also make a dozen *kneidlach* with only one egg. They don't know what *kneidlach* are, the boy and the girl, but they can say the word, just right, with its guttural "accchh" at the end. Their ancestors and mine once inhabited neighboring parts of this planet. I could surely learn to pronounce their names, if they would tell me. They arrived at my house with no papers.

"It's better you don't know," the boy said when I asked. "It doesn't matter." But it does.

So I've named the boy Lou, after my mother's uncle, who also once hid, although in a dirt hole under the plank floor of a barn, not in a paneled basement with a foldout couch. In Europe, not here in America. Above his head, the never-ending clamor of hooves—dairy cows, hence milk, yet forever after, Uncle Lou was deathly afraid of thunder.

Lou wasn't the uncle's real name either, but the name he took when he finally made it to America, after the hiding was done and we thought nobody would ever have to hide again. There was another uncle, Fyvush, who hid with Lou in the dirt hole under the hooves. He might've become Philip, had he made it to America. I debated whether to call the boy in my basement Lou or Philip. Jews consider it bad luck to name a child after someone who died a tragic death, yet good luck to name a child after someone who was martyred while sanctifying God (in the camps, but also the forests and barns and basements of Europe). In the end, I chose Lou, because my mother knew and loved the original Lou. I needed my mother to like him.

My mother has one photo of *her* Lou and Philip, dark beards and jackets nearly bursting from burly shoulders not intended to be squeezed into narrow basement holes. *My* Lou is slight—eighteen, he says, although hunger can stunt growth—with a beard so scraggly that it deserves another name. Which is good. Just as Jewish boys are marked by what's inside their trousers, so boys like Lou wear their identities on their faces. Smooth cheeks surely helped my Lou survive long enough to find his way to my basement.

The girl, I named Ruth, for biblical Ruth, a Moabite who followed her mother-in-law to live amongst the Jews. My Ruth followed her brother to live in my Jewish basement. In the Bible, Ruth, the foreigner, eventually marries a Jew and is accepted by the community. An important story, for these times.

My husband just calls them the boy and the girl, if he mentions them at all. He changed his name, too, my husband, after he lost his job at the bank. Not that we thought of ourselves as foreigners, my husband and I. We grew up here. His bar mitzvah, my bat mitzvah, our wedding, in the same synagogue. That synagogue has been converted to municipal offices now, the tax collector and animal control—is there some significance to those choices for this building? The Jewish star remains in the masonry, like Jewish stars I've seen on European vacations adorning offices, restaurants, pharmacies. European airports are closed now, travel suspended. We carry our

passports just to leave the house.

Some churches have been closed, too. And, of course, all the mosques. You have to belong to the *right* church, or none at all. Which doesn't mean people have stopped praying.

II

My mother no longer brings soup. Too dangerous to carry a pot through the streets. If she is stopped, what will she say? *My children are hungry?* We have our own ration books, they know, the people who stop pedestrians to check papers and packages and pots.

Today, she brought the newspaper, stuffed in her brassiere. That's what we still call it, the newspaper, although there's no news, just dictums and directives, often a single sheet, easy to fold and stash next to my mother's bosom. Even this non-newspaper is not readily available, as if words are dangerous. My mother gets the paper the same way she gets an extra chicken leg—don't ask. Today's dictum is about deportations.

"Everyone from the camps," my mother says. She knows that includes Lou and Ruth's parents. "Deported," she says, running fingers through grizzled hair. Unlike many of her friends, my mother never colored her hair. If only she had a bottle of hair dye lying around, perhaps we could turn Lou and Ruth (and ourselves) into acceptable blonds. "Except nobody wants them," she says.

Deported. Some of the camps are FEMA trailers left from floods and hurricanes, *natural* disasters. But some so-called "foreigners" are encamped in hotels, Holiday Inns and Marriotts otherwise vacant since tourists, the real foreigners, now stay home. I've preferred to imagine Lou and Ruth's parents with mini-bars and bountiful breakfast buffets.

RETURN TO HOMELAND, the non-newspaper headline reads. But Lou and Ruth's parents were born here, just like Lou and Ruth, although *their* parents came from someplace else. That someplace else, their so-called homeland, doesn't want them, says they're too

American, while America says they're too foreign. Deportation, when no other country will accept you—a euphemism for something worse?

“Will you tell them?” my mother whispers. Lou and Ruth surely hear us moving about, although not our voices through the extra carpeting my husband laid down, not to protect them from our thunderous footsteps, but to protect us from unexpected basement sounds that might get us arrested. He pulled that extra carpet from one of the abandoned houses in one of the abandoned neighborhoods where Lou and Ruth and their people used to live. He was lucky to get it before others moved in and made themselves at home.

Lacking soup, my mother and I descend the stairs with bread—the two slices allotted for my cheese-sandwich lunch. Today I will eat only cheese. Tomorrow I will have the bread, and Lou and Ruth will have the cheese.

First thing, Lou asks for the newspaper. My mother says she couldn't get one today.

“Maybe there's no news,” she laughs. Then, “Look what I *do* have,” and she extracts a colored pencil from her purse, deep red, the color of cherry pie, or blood. “Cerise,” she announces. Stupidly, I gave Ruth a diary when she arrived, but she doesn't write optimistic notes to someone named Kitty. She draws. Airplanes and guns and flames and blood. Our leader would say these are her plans, hers and her people's, their plans for us. I know these are just pictures of the things Ruth fears, the same things I fear.

My mother brings colored pencils one at a time, hoping not to attract attention from the pocketbook checkers in the street. She cannot bring paints. Paints can be used for protest signs and anti-government graffiti, so paints have been outlawed.

Ruth swallows her bread in one mouthful, gulping tea she's been steeping from the one teabag we all shared at breakfast, then pulls out her stash of pencils. She will save her new cerise for the future, this girl who still believes in the future. For now, she tackles green and brown—trees, like the lush forest I used to imagine when

hearing childhood stories of Uncle Lou's eventual escape from his basement. She sharpens a nub of yellow—flames for the forest—with a steak knife I gave her, from a set of a dozen, once a wedding gift. We don't have dinner parties anymore, have no need of a dozen steak knives; my husband will never notice.

Lou nibbles his bread, will save most for later, maybe for Ruth. Despite his limited diet, he's grown thicker in my basement, in the neck and shoulders. I've seen him doing pushups on one of the Hello Kitty quilts on the floor. The first time, I thought he was praying. He sleeps down there, too, probably a sin to share a bed with his sister, even if that bed is a foldout couch in a basement with a floor of cold concrete.

Ruth is younger, thirteen? Bat mitzvah age, if she were one of us. When she arrived, I couldn't guess her age, what with her punk hairdo, one side long and angular, the other nearly shaved. I wondered what her mother must've thought about that haircut, until she told me her mother was a hairdresser, had styled it herself. Later, I learned her mother had owned the salon, had owned a chain of salons, even one at the mall where I used to get my hair cut. Someone else owns them now.

It should've been her mother, not me, when Ruth approached last month with downcast eyes and bloody panties. I had only tampons, not at all the right thing for a child, a first-timer. I hesitated to describe what she must do with the tampon—she'd been cut down there, but stitched? I would ask my daughters to bring home pads from the PX, if I knew when they might come home, if I even knew where they were. Probably somewhere in the desert, in that part of the world where their ancestors and Lou's and Ruth's and mine once walked the earth as brothers.

Now it's my mother who sometimes trims the angular sweep of Ruth's hair. She can't bring herself to shave the other side. Shaved heads and basement captivity have frightening connotations for her, for us, although possibly not for young Ruth.

"It's time," my mother says to Lou. "Queen's Gambit?" She's

been teaching him chess, which they will play with the intensity of generals moving battalions across a map table while I go to my weekly bridge game, which still meets in the card room at the library. I will bid one-no-trump and make small talk, as if I don't have a boy and a girl in my basement. After the game, I will work my new job shelving books, hourly minimum wage. The other women in my bridge club have also found jobs. One is a school lunch lady, one of those hairnet women we used to make fun of. But school lunches mean leftovers. We would all rather slop spoonfuls of mashed potatoes than shelve books. We used to have a book club at the library, too, until one day a sign appeared: Book Club Cancelled. Books are still okay, for now (except those already designated for "recycling"), but apparently talking about books could be dangerous.

I would like to bring home books for Ruth, maybe those harmless Baby-Sitters Clubs that my girls used to read. Except the librarian knows my girls are grown and gone. We used to have a TV in the basement, until my husband carried it out. To sell it, he said, but I like to think he was protecting Lou and Ruth from what there was to see of the world—bombings and burnings and bloody beheadings. They have no phones, having dumped them before they arrived at our house. The government doesn't pin labels onto clothes nowadays, no yellow stars, no crescents cut from cloth. But they do track phones. My mother says they've started implanting identifiers into clothing, even into bodies, under the skin, a quick pinch while in line for ration books or waiting to cross the street. Thank God Lou and Ruth came to us before that, at least we assume, we pray, so far no knock on our door.

III

My husband hangs out so often behind the Stop & Shop, waiting for the trash, hiding in shadows, or so he thinks, that eventually someone offers him a job on the loading dock.

"Could be a trap," my husband says, but he is hungry. He used

to lift weights at the athletic club. Now he lifts crates of canned goods and corn flakes.

One night, after a week on the job, he goes down to the basement, which he rarely does, preferring to avoid the reality of the boy and the girl who should not be down there. I hear closet doors opening, heavy things moving, zippers zipping. He comes up with insulated ski gloves, from when we used to ski. Corn flakes are easier to lift, he explains, packages half-full of air, but the refrigerator trucks give him access to the guys in the meat department. One meat cutter speaks a language that isn't Spanish, isn't Arabic, but also isn't English. He works alone, my husband says, eats lunch alone, takes his smoke breaks alone.

The next day, my husband comes home with a pack of cigarettes. He has never smoked. "Money well spent," he says, on a day when I have eaten only cheese and Lou and Ruth only bread.

My husband takes the cigarettes into the yard after a plain-pasta dinner to teach himself to smoke. But his coughing will alert the neighbors. So he comes back inside, smokes and coughs in the living room. He vomits. I bring a cool cloth for his head. I clean up the mess.

After that, he smokes in the bathroom, first one cigarette each night, then two.

"Is he sick?" Ruth asks. She must've heard.

"No," I say. "Don't worry."

"Is there medicine?" she asks. "Still?" It's getting cold in the basement. She wears my old bathrobe over her summer shorts; I don't want *her* to get sick.

"I'm sure, if we need it."

"I wonder if Mom and Dad have medicine," she says, "where they are."

"Yes," Lou says without looking up from the chessboard, where he plays against himself. "They have medicine."

My husband learns to smoke without coughing, forces himself to control the reflexes of his own throat. He must learn quickly.

There are only twenty cigarettes in the pack. By the end of the week, he comes home with meat scraps in his pockets, blood leaking from butcher-paper wrappings.

“Janusz,” he says. “His name is Janusz.”

That night we eat meat with our pasta. I struggle to trim the gristle off the meat on my plate using a butter knife. Last month the block commander appeared with a sack, demanding we hand over anything sharp: carving knives, scissors (Ruth’s hair now tucked behind her ears), gardening clippers, and steak knives, eleven steak knives. I barely dared breathe should the block commander count out the steak knives. His wife would’ve noticed, eleven steak knives, one missing.

Janusz’s meat is mostly gristle. I try not to trim too much, or there’ll be nothing left to eat. My husband reaches with his fork, spears and eats what I have trimmed. After that, I trim more generously.

After dinner, I scrub the blood from his pants in the kitchen sink. With no money to run the electricity-eating washer and dryer, I’ve been washing clothes in the basement laundry sink, hanging them to dry on a rope I’ve strung down there, using wall hooks my husband once installed for exercising with weights and straps. The exercise wall, now the clothesline wall, directly faces the foldout couch where Ruth sleeps every night under her Hello Kitty quilt. I will keep these bloodstained pants upstairs.

The water is cold, no longer enough oil to run the water heater. My hands chafe as I wash the dishes, then scrub the bloody pants. Our leader says when we win the wars, we’ll have all the oil we want, oil flowing through the streets. Just like Uncles Lou and Fyvush, in their dugout under those cows, supposedly dreamt of American streets paved with gold.

I huddle into a coat over my clothes before carrying down pasta to Lou and Ruth, pasta with no meat. Ruth in my bathrobe and I in my coat, both of us descended from ancient traditions of female modesty.

On the exercise/laundry wall where tonight no laundry hangs, Lou is experimenting with my husband's hooks. The straps and weights are long gone, since the time when my husband had worked his way up at the bank and could afford the athletic club, but Lou has figured out a way to swing from the clothesline rope, grabbing at the highest hooks, hoisting his body by the growing strength of his arms. He is preparing, for I-don't-know-what. This basement does have one sliver of window, high up near the ceiling, possibly big enough to slither through. But outside that window no forest haven, no dark and sheltering canopy of trees. Just neighbors on all sides, with only driveways and a few scrawny azaleas in between. And backyards with swing sets and children, parents watching. And dogs. Dogs that bark.

IV

October passes without Halloween; November comes without elections. Our leader says times are too precarious to change course. Once, he was elected; now he cancels elections.

“For the good of the people,” he says.

“To avoid riots,” my mother says.

On what should have been Election Day, he stages rallies across the country, thousands cheering and chanting his name. For one day, electricity is free, so even the poorest can watch on TV. The cheering crowds—are they actors? Day laborers hired off street corners? The way immigrants used to gather on street corners for construction work, when there used to be construction work, when immigrants used to gather in public. That night there is looting, neighborhoods burned, swastikas painted by people who still have paints.

One day soon after, my husband says Janusz is going to Canada.

“How?” I ask. Special papers are needed to cross the border. Papers that nobody can get, at least nobody like Janusz and us.

“He knows someone.” We are at the dinner table, and my husband is savoring the gristle in his mouth, chewing and sucking and probing with his tongue, as if this might be his last almost-meat, if

Janusz leaves. “He says we should come,” my husband says. “He can get us out, too.”

“And them?” I nod towards the basement.

“They can’t pass,” he says.

“And we can?” I look at him, with his dark curly hair, like mine, and his beard growing in thicker than Lou’s. All men have beards now, an irony possibly missed by those who decided to confiscate razorblades.

“Better than them,” my husband says. He has blue eyes; I have freckles.

“Who’ll take care of them?” I ask.

My husband’s Adam’s apple bobs up and down as he forces a particularly tough piece of gristle down his throat.

I don’t plan to mention this to my mother, but she can tell.

“I’ll stay with them,” she says. “You should go. It should be you.”

Why me? A blink of fate? Once upon a time, I had a once-a-week housekeeper, an immigrant who knew my basement, my laundry sink, my maid’s toilet. Who knew other immigrants, from other communities, who shared their native foods and fears. Then this boy and this girl, strangers, found their way to my basement. Then my husband met another stranger in the shadows near the trash behind the Stop & Shop.

My mother brings my father’s gold watch for the bribe, tucked in her brassiere, warm from her bosom. My father’s gold watch, the only item of value that his grandfather brought from Europe, arriving in America just in time to be sent back to fight the War To End All Wars, which didn’t. Then worn by my father’s father through France, Italy, Germany, in the war that taught us to Never Forget, or so we thought. Then passed to my father, who did *not* flee to Canada to escape Vietnam. Who fought for his country, like our girls do now.

My husband takes the watch.

A few days later, my mother brings paints for Ruth—actual paints in stunning shades, cerise, cerulean, ocher. And marble chess

pieces for Lou, king and queen from a set that also belonged to my father. She would've brought the whole set, if she could've fit it in her purse, from which she now produces six paint bottles, one paintbrush, and two chess pieces each as big as her fist, as if she didn't care who might have stopped her to check.

She also brings news.

"A protest," she says. "On Sunday," which our leader has officially designated the Lord's Day, although I see no evidence that he is one for prayer. "On the green," she says, the town green where once Revolutionary soldiers mustered for General Washington. "A call for elections," she says, "freedom of speech, freedom of worship, a return to the Constitution."

There will be protest signs. That's how my mother got these paints, from some Underground Railroad for poster board and art supplies. My mother has been making signs.

"A sit-in," she says, "like the sixties. Peaceful, unless they try to rough us up..." She is smiling.

Now, who will stay with Lou and Ruth, I don't say. My mother plays chess with Lou, tells stories about Woodstock and Kent State and Selma, as if she'd been there. She hugs me tight before she leaves, her breasts soft and familiar against mine. If I feel anything else, anything hard and unexpected and maybe dangerous inside her brassiere, I don't mention it.

On Sunday, there is no television, no news. The block commander paces our street all afternoon and long into the night. Every hour, he pounds on our door, insists that my husband and I present ourselves for his inspection, studying the list on his clipboard to ensure that everyone who lives in this house is accounted for, as if there weren't only (officially) the two of us, easy to count. We don't bother going to bed, just sit in our clothes on the couch in the dark, waiting for the jolt of his fist against our door.

My husband slides a broom under the couch, all he can think of to defend us with. He once had a baseball bat, but the block commander confiscated that. No scissors, no steak knives, no baseball

bats, yet every pureblooded “American” still entitled to a gun. Surely some of our neighbors are sleeping with their guns tonight. My husband’s leg jerks to the rhythm of his nerves, his foot tap-tap-tapping on the floor. I rest my hand on his knee, with a nod towards the ears in our basement.

V

On Monday, my mother doesn’t come. I phone her house, listen to her voice on the machine. I find some old movie-star magazines and bring them downstairs for Ruth. I offer to play Monopoly with Lou, but he prefers to play chess against himself. His belly is flat, nearly concave from hunger, but his fingers are callused from the hooks and the rope, and his shoulders bulge like Uncles Lou and Fyvush in my mother’s precious photo.

Three more days, my mother doesn’t come, doesn’t answer her phone. I barely sleep, barely eat, give my portion of meat gristle to Lou and Ruth in the basement. Janusz hasn’t left yet. There is still time for us.

On the fifth day, when I phone my mother’s house, I hear a different recording, not my mother’s voice. I grab my passport and literally run to her house, no gasoline for my car in months.

A woman who is not my mother answers my knock. A woman whose hair is blond, not dyed, opens the door with a smile that disappears when she sees me.

“Wrong house,” she says, then shuts the door in my face. A face she clearly recognizes. I wonder what she has done with my wedding photo on my mother’s piano, the photos of me holding each of my newborn girls that hung in my mother’s kitchen, the photos of birthdays, bat mitzvahs, graduations that smiled upon her upstairs hall, the record of my aging face up to the sweating, red-cheeked, tear-streaked face that lingers uselessly outside no-longer-my-mother’s-front-door.

“It was Janusz,” I cry, beating my husband’s chest with my fists

when he tries to comfort me that night.

“It wasn’t Janusz,” my husband says.

Better Janusz than me. Was this my fault, that my mother is gone? Because of Lou and Ruth? Because of the uncircumcised boy and the circumcised girl I took into my basement? Must I send them away? Where? Or is it too late for that?

“It’s not too late,” my husband says, hugging me tight. “For us.” He doesn’t say it was my fault. He doesn’t say it wasn’t my fault. He doesn’t say my mother made her own choice, did not choose me.

VI

My husband says to pack light, but warm. He doesn’t know how we will travel to the border, how far we will have to walk. He lays out hiking boots, ski jackets with zip-in-zip-out linings, woolen socks, long underwear, even two rolls of toilet paper. He loads his backpack, then mine. Then he adds my extra sweater and sneakers to his pack. He is going with Janusz. He will carry my sweater and my shoes, so he expects me to join them. I still haven’t said I will go.

But I prepare. I boil pasta and pack it in Tupperware. I use extra ration coupons to buy a block of cheese, instead of pre-sliced, so my husband won’t notice the barest slivers I shave off for myself, saving most for when it might be needed downstairs. One day, I ask my husband to ask Janusz for a chicken leg, and I experiment with my mother’s soup, thin and watery but somewhat soup-like, which I portion into more Tupperwares. There’s an old fridge in the basement, which I could plug in, when the time comes, if the time comes. I think we’re allowed two months of unpaid bills, maybe more, before the electric company will shut us off, shut *them* off, Lou and Ruth in our basement.

Ruth asks what is happening. Surely she noticed when my husband dragged our ski duffels up from the basement. Maybe she smelled the soup.

“Nothing,” I say.

Lou leans over the chessboard, leg jiggling like my husband's. His beard has thickened. I wonder about Ruth's hair down below. It's been months since I could get Tampax. She washes her bloody rags and hangs them on the clothesline rope. I hang my own bloody rags in the bathroom upstairs.

The night before Janusz will depart, before my husband will depart, we fight. I plug in the basement refrigerator, without explanation to Lou and Ruth, and then I fight with my husband. I cry. He cries. There is no right or wrong here, just fear and possibility. We go to bed, but we do not sleep. We make love. My husband is heavy and strong, not from weights and pulleys in a gym in our basement, but from hefting cartons loaded with steaks intended for tables that are not ours, tables in the homes of people who belong to the right churches. He is urgent, yet also urgently careful, plunging and withdrawing. There must not be a baby, not now. Condoms, another thing the army has cleared from store shelves, for whatever our soldiers, our male soldiers in desert camouflage, might be allowed to do with young girls like Ruth.

In the morning, I carry tea to the basement. Will I carry down the Tupperwares? Will I go? The words have not yet been spoken.

Halfway down the stairs, I drop the teacups. They tumble and shatter. Hot tea splatters my leg, but I do not feel that pain.

What have they done, my Lou and Ruth? What have they done, with one steak knife and a clothesline rope? The Hello Kitty quilt on the couch now splashed with cerise that is not paint, the rope hanging taut from the highest hook on the wall that was meant for a diversion, a gym.

Warm liquid trickles down my leg, clad in jeans over two layers of underwear, silk and wool. Jagged shards of china, my grandmother's teacups with their golden edges and painted bluebonnets that so delighted Ruth, scatter sharp yet harmless round the lug soles of my hiking boots.

My mother once told me that, in that other faraway basement hiding place, Lou always wondered, never knew for sure, if Fyvush

stopped eating, gave up his food, so that one of them, Lou, might live. But was Fyvush still moving, maybe showing one last spark of salvageable life, when Uncle Lou grabbed what might or might not have been his only chance to flee that basement for the forest, with only his bare feet and the tattered clothes on his back? Was there a twitch, or an infinitesimal rustle—a pinkie finger, or possibly just a mouse—under the blanket of leaves that Uncle Lou had banked, all those months, in a desperate attempt to keep Fyvush warm? Like the flutter I might or might not see, now, from the shambles of Ruth’s sullied sheets.

I stand on the stairs, halfway, neither here nor there, while, from above, my husband calls my name. It is time.

Two Poems

Sarah P. Strong

Pastoral at the March

Our whole world stomps between us,
her small hands tugging ours along

until she breaks for a billowing fabric sun
rounding the corner of 6th Avenue.

Watch me run she calls,
just as she called to us that day

at the farm, her thin limbs
flashing as she flew

past the barn, past the flowers
alive with honeybees

and down the best hill,
ours for rolling, until we fell

together into clover, everything
three and green, sweet as breath and hair.

But here the air is full of signs,
each waving one more danger,

one more anger, one more shining *should*;
voices rise and chant, the long river

of bodies floods the avenue
and someone's painted, along the sides

of each gray building,
the rising water level, marked in blue.

Love, what have we done—
I want to seize her, spirit her away,

as if I would unmake her
in the face of what we've made.

As if we'd ever give up
that hour in the field that day,

her fingers stained
with grass and earth

slipping from ours to run ahead
so we would chase her,

her laugh streaming behind her
in a banner, and we caught her,

and disappeared
into a tunnel of trees.

Footnote

In the wilderness
of desert he eats
locusts and honey

eats one by one
a plague of beaded eyes
hard shells

from whose louvered folds
wings lift

In the branches
a wild hive

alive with bodies
deep in the curves
of the combs

dark bee sap drips
into his tattered hands

his mouth
a flood of sweetness

the gold river swallowing
hard bits of carapace
whose soft innards
keep him

his urine so sweet
flies follow him

and when he squats
in the bushes

undigested wings
gleam in his soil
like flecks of mica

A Wondering Jew

*One woman's search for
identity*

Jennifer Lang

1. A self-conscious Jew

Growing up in a small, residential city in the San Francisco Bay Area, I was the only Jewish kid in my class throughout elementary school. None of my friends from Girl Scouts and ballet had to skip school and miss geography tests on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur to sit in services all day. In kindergarten, my mother visited my classroom on Hanukkah to read the *Festival of Lights*, light the candles on our menorah, recite the prayer and make sizzling, greasy latkes in our portable griddle. Nobody's mother came in or read about the birth of Baby Jesus or explained the meaning of the nativity scene.

During Passover, in first grade, I unwrapped my matzo sandwiches, causing curiosity about my funny-looking bread. In second, third and fourth grades, our music teacher introduced Christmas songs as soon as Thanksgiving ended; eventually, I summoned the courage to request "I Had a Little Dreidel." By fourth grade, I begged my parents for a Christmas tree so that I, too, could hang tinsel, lights and ornaments from its branches. My mother acquiesced, since she'd grown up with a Hanukkah bush. My father refused. He said Zeida and Boba, my Eastern European grandparents, would be disappointed. We couldn't cross that cultural line. My frustration and little girl rage—at their mixed messages and at being different—simmered.

Initially, we belonged to a Conservative synagogue, where my older brother and I attended Hebrew school, and, at age thirteen, he read from the Torah for his Bar Mitzvah. We switched allegiances later, moving further left on the Jewish spectrum of observance to Reform, which rejects the customary authority of Jewish law and tradition. In our new Temple, the rabbi emphasized social action, supporting Israel and *Tikun Olam*, or repairing the world, rather than belief in God.

At home, God's name never surfaced unless my mother dropped something and screamed "God damn it!" We ate pork chops, cheeseburgers and shrimp, and only turned up at Temple on major holidays or special occasions. My brother and I attended Hebrew school every Sunday morning and Tuesday afternoon. At my Friday night Bat Mitzvah, the cantor strummed his guitar while singing "Jennifer, this is your evening," a song he wrote, I presumed, for me. We socialized with our *Havurah*, a group of like-minded families with kids of similar ages. My school life and my Jewish life never overlapped, and because I felt so different in the former, I clung to the latter.

For five summers, I attended Camp Swig, a Reform-affiliated enclave in Santa Clara County, first as a camper then as a counselor-in-training and finally as a counselor. In high school, I served as a chaplain on the local board of the National Federation of Temple Youth movement: writing and officiating services for our youth group conclaves where we—hundreds of Jewish teenagers from Sacramento to Fresno—sang songs and chanted prayers, our arms around each other, swaying together. My closest friends and boyfriends anchored my identity as a Reform Jew in a predominantly Catholic place. In my final year of high school, I began dating my youth group advisor; he intended to become a rabbi.

2. An open-minded Jew

After I settled into my dormitory at Northwestern University, I gravitated toward others like me from Ohio, Michigan and Wisconsin. Some nights, we sat around our dorm rooms singing songs like "*Shir Mi-libeinu*" and "*Gesher Tzar M'od*" with guitar accompaniment, reminiscing about our summers at Reform camps around the country. God's name never crossed our lips. Our Judaism revolved around behavior, not belief in any deity.

I didn't restrict myself to Reform Jews. One of my classmates, Staci, grew up Modern Orthodox in nearby Skokie. She'd always at-

tended Jewish schools, learning modern and biblical Hebrew, laws and customs. Because she kept kosher, Staci ate meals at the campus Hillel. Sometimes, she invited me to spend the weekend with her family, teaching me the rules of *Shabbat*—no turning on and off electricity, writing, drawing, driving or cooking. One rainy Saturday morning, I grabbed my umbrella until she stopped me, saying, “Silly, you can’t carry that. It’s *Shabbos*.” Who knew carrying is considered work? She never judged me, my exposure to drinking, my experimenting with smoking or my experience with boys. She had no desire or intention to live outside the boundaries of Jewish law, and I had no desire to live within them. Whenever I accompanied her to *shul*, where men and women sat separately and women couldn’t participate in the Torah service—holding or reading the ancient text—I felt inferior, invisible. Staci widened my eyes to see Reform Judaism through a new lens, and to see a different way of living Jewishly. She made me question my ancestral roots and the rituals they had—and hadn’t—transmitted. She made me think what kind of a Jew I did—and didn’t—want to be.

3. An anonymous Jew

During my junior year abroad in France, I pined for my camp and youth group friends studying in Israel, filling aerogrammes about visiting the Western Wall on *Shabbat* and celebrating holidays with Jews from South Africa and South America. Of the 120 students on my program, only one woman identified as Jewish, willing to attend High Holiday services with me.

In Tours, the heart of the Loire Valley, where we spent our first month of acclimation, we entered the staid building and climbed the stairs to the women’s section. A dozen females congregated, whispering. We opened the tattered prayer books and struggled through the foreign words to usher in the new year. Nobody welcomed us; nobody wished us a *Shana Tova*; nobody invited us to eat; nobody

asked us our names. I wasn't there because of some deep-seated need to connect with God, but rather out of a desire to hold onto tradition, passed down from my grandparents to my parents to me.

The separate seating, old-style prayer service and Old-World tunes reminded me of Staci's synagogue in Skokie. In both, I felt out of place and isolated—a Reform Jew among observant Jews. I had to choose: either try to replicate my Jewish friends' spiritual experiences in France, or cast my Judaism aside in order to make the most of my year abroad.

By the time I settled into my host family's apartment in Paris, I'd opted for the latter. My religion had never defined, restricted or controlled me.

Every day I absorbed new words and understood more of my French family's banter. At dinner, I learned that the Gardettes never missed Sunday Mass, and Monsieur and Madame aligned themselves with the extreme-right-wing party, Le Front National. I also learned that Monsieur regarded blacks, homosexuals and Arabs as other, different and lesser than the French. Most likely, he regarded Jews the same way. They never questioned my religious background, but I didn't divulge much either.

I didn't step foot into one Parisian synagogue. At Hanukkah, I didn't light candles. For winter break, I flew to Israel to meet my parents and brother, who had emigrated there after college, without telling the Gardettes my whereabouts. My living arrangement was a business transaction, and they didn't need to know. For Passover/spring break, I traveled south to Spain, avoiding matzo altogether.

All year, my long-distance boyfriend wrote airmail letters about his student pulpit in rural northern California. I sensed his world had shrunk and become intensely Jewish, while mine had expanded, anonymity replacing religion. In summer, while we traveled by train through Western Europe, I froze whenever conversations about our future arose. He envisioned me moving in with him after my graduation, him becoming ordained, finding a congregation, and us getting married. Did I want to live in Anywhere, America, and be a rabbi's wife?

Something new and foreign had nestled inside me: a desire to broaden my sheltered Jewish-American existence, to learn more languages, to live differently. My European adventures had shown me that once we shed our labels and identities as Jews or Catholics, French or American, Reform or Orthodox, left- or right-wing, we share the same core humanity. We each long to experience love, feel safe, find contentment and be accepted as ourselves.

Marrying him and living that Jewish life would be like sliding back to the beginning of the Chutes and Ladders board: the wrong direction.

4. A detached Jew

I returned to Northwestern feeling untethered. My major—Human Development and Social Policy—meant nothing. My semester-long internship at Quaker Oats in Chicago seemed pointless. My English sometimes escaped me. My peers yearned for a post-graduation job in corporate America, while I yearned for something unnamable.

I broke up with my boyfriend, saying, “I need to explore more, to figure out who I am, where I want to be.”

When a former classmate called from Paris, I saw it as a sign. We’d crossed paths the previous summer while she was on vacation from her job at the World Jewish Congress. After two years abroad, she was returning home. Did her Bilingual Assistant position interest me? Would I be willing to return to France in September—a risk since her boss wouldn’t hire me until we’d met? A believer in synchronicity, I’d never felt so sure that someone, somewhere was giving me the green light.

5. A professional Jew

After an informal interview at the Jewish non-governmental non-profit, I started working. There, I befriended my French-born Jewish colleagues of North African origins: Nathalie of Tunisia, Shosha-

na of Morocco, and Corinne of Algeria. They invited me to synagogue for Rosh Hashanah, to Hanukkah parties with their friends, and to Passover Seders with their families. They made me forget how often my boss criticized me, challenging my fluency if I said or wrote something in incorrect French.

I listened to unfathomable tales about the French Resistance and concentration camps from Henri Bulawko, a Holocaust survivor and office volunteer. I studied the negatives of our in-house photographer Frédéric Brenner whose passion documenting Jewish communities had led him from India to Yemen, from Russia to Ethiopia.

I said yes to every opportunity: visiting the American cemetery and beaches, learning about my country's history that I'd long forgotten; eating oysters and snails, mussels and frogs; and bathing at the Grand Mosque of a Paris-run *hammam*. I dated a Catholic named Christophe whose obsession with Manhattan matched my fixation on France. When I told my brother I'd invited Christophe to meet the family in the Big Apple, he balked. My brother, who was studying Jewish text in Jerusalem, thanking God after every meal and rebuffing physical contact with women, shouted, "I will not acknowledge him and refuse to be with you as long as *he* is in the same room!" I retaliated, telling him I didn't care if I dated or even married a Jew.

I didn't care whether my sibling or my superior approved of my escapades or not. For eighteen months, I played the part of a Jewish professional, but my free time—my life—belonged to me.

6. A Jew in limbo

My visa stipulated that I could only stay in Paris if I worked for the Congress, but, since my boss made me miserable, I quit. I'd decided to return to the U.S. for graduate school but had a six-month gap to fill.

When two camp friends invited me to visit them in Israel, I accepted. My objectives—to learn Hebrew and to heal the relationship with my brother—justified flying east.

“Whatever you do, don’t fall in love and stay!” my mother warned. She didn’t want to lose both her children to that country.

“I have no intention of staying,” I said. “Don’t worry.”

Five weeks after I arrived in the Promised Land, I met Philippe. Jewish and French, he’d recently emigrated to look for a chemical engineer position. Jewish and French, he was worldly, well-traveled and multilingual. Jewish and French, he combined both a religion and a culture I loved. Jewish and French, he lured me with his grammatically flawed English and silky soft J when he slid my given name, Jennifer, off his tongue.

A month after commuting between his place in Haifa and mine in Jerusalem, Philippe invited me to move in with him. I stalled. A month later, I agreed, packing up my measly belongings to go north. I enrolled in a municipal Hebrew class. He job hunted. I deferred graduate school. The Israel Electric Corporation hired him. I reasoned that a master’s in political science at the University of Haifa couldn’t be so different from one in public policy at NYU. I wasn’t ready to leave the country or this Frenchman but knew that staying meant prolonging the expat life for an indefinite period. Could I envision living in Israel rather than visiting? When my mother called to tell me she needed braces, she asked for a wedding date—she didn’t want them on for pictures. On that frigid December day, Philippe teasingly picked a date nine months away: 9-9-90.

Being with Philippe felt right, but being Jewish in Israel irked me. I’d visited the country many times but never knew that Israeli society divides into two: observant or secular, all or nothing. I’d grown up choosing how much religion to incorporate into my life rather than living my life according to my religion.

Before we met, Philippe, a traditional French Jew, had upped his level of religiosity, deciding to no longer cook, drive, write, ride a bike, watch television or listen to music from Friday to Saturday sundown. He said he accepted me for who I was, but could I accept him? Could I spend the rest of my life with someone who, like my

brother, put religion before relationship?

Since my faith wasn't based on beliefs, I challenged Philippe: did we have to spend an entire *Shabbat* with my cousins if I was willing to drive home after Friday night dinner? Couldn't we eat in a non-kosher restaurant in Haifa, a mixed Arab-Jewish city with a large secular population, since so few were kosher? Would God strike us down if we drove to the beach Saturday afternoon?

"I'm not your brother," Philippe reminded me. Unlike my brother, Philippe swam and showered on *Shabbat* (drying off with a towel is prohibited) and believed in premarital sex any day of the week (touching members of the opposite sex is forbidden for Ultra-Orthodox Jews).

If I hadn't been in a transitional state between Europe and America, job and school, I might never have come to Israel and met and married Philippe. But if I hadn't been in a state of uncertainty with regard to my faith, perhaps I would have felt less anxiety as a Jewish-American woman in the Holy Land.

7. A distant Jew

When Philippe wanted to pursue a MBA in France, I jumped at the chance to leave Israel. Five years there were four too many. We arrived in Paris with our one-year-old son days before the High Holidays in September. After discovering a nearby synagogue, Philippe set off, alone. Even though Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur were the two holiest days of the year, I numbed at the thought of sitting in the balcony like a second-class citizen and listening to unrecognizable prayers and foreign tunes.

Most married French-Jewish women don a hat before entering *shul*, keeping in line with the rules of modesty to cover their hair in public. Many men, like Philippe, wrap *tefillin*, two small black boxes with black straps, around their arm and forehead each weekday morning before prayer and on *Shabbat* and holidays. Most French Jews observe the laws of *kashrut*, dividing milk from meat, each with

its own set of dishes; many attend services on Friday night and dine at home *en famille*. None of it appealed to me.

During our ten months in Paris, I distanced myself from Judaism. Running a home, raising a baby and working left me little energy to nurture myself. I let my relationship to religion fade and neither felt nor filled the void.

8. A reluctant Jew

After Paris, we flew west to spend a second year in the San Francisco Bay Area before returning to Israel, as planned. I hadn't anticipated an easy transition after twelve years away, especially with a foreign husband and a toddler in tow, but the close proximity to my parents helped. I quickly secured a job as Marketing Coordinator for the San Francisco Jewish Federation, but it took Philippe a year to break into website development.

Supporting ourselves was as important as connecting to a Jewish community. Philippe floundered and began clinging even more tightly to the religion's rules and boundaries. His traditional upbringing translated into Modern Orthodoxy, and, without discussion, we joined Beth Jacob Congregation, a one-mile walk from our rental house.

I often accompanied him, sitting on the opposite side of the *mehitza*, the barrier running through the main sanctuary. Because attending synagogue was a way to forge new friendships. Because it meant a lot to Philippe, who'd never dreamed of living in my native land. Because my father, for myriad reasons, also attended Beth Jacob and beamed at his grandson.

Yet each time I stepped foot inside the building, I felt displaced. Like my once vibrant Reform Jewish identity had been kicked aside. I stumbled over prayers in English with references to God, unable to utter the word. At a loss, I buried my former self.

Our new community, an eclectic group of young families comprised of Modern Orthodox transplants from the east coast, perhaps

drawn to the climate and the less stringent, watered-down version of Orthodoxy, welcomed us. They represented different shades of observance: the rabbi's wife always covered her hair, while most married women only did so on *Shabbat* in the sanctuary; many families kept kosher homes but ate at non-kosher vegetarian restaurants in the Bay Area. No one ever judged me or cared if I went to services, prayed, or believed in God.

Our year in Oakland extended to six, during which we brought two daughters into the world. Philippe had no desire to stay state-side, but I refused to return to Israel, where the Palestinian bus bombs of the 1990s led to the Second Intifada of the new millennium. When Philippe said he felt betrayed, I absorbed his wrath, too immersed in child rearing and the day-to-day business of getting by.

Consciously or subconsciously, I reasoned that if I chose country then he could rule over religion.

9. An uncomfortable Jew

In 2001, when the kids were two, four, and seven, we changed coasts. Philippe's employer, an American-Israeli high-tech company, advised him to relocate—either to New York or Israel—in order to keep his job. I rejected Israel for reasons of safety and distance, pointing out that the eastern seaboard seemed logical, midway between our families.

Unlike some people who choose a home based on public schools or property taxes, we considered walking distance to a Modern Orthodox synagogue, affordable tuition at Jewish private schools, and an open-minded community for our mixed marriage. As soon as we heard about the Hebrew Institute of White Plains, which describes itself as “a diverse community ... those with extensive Jewish backgrounds and those with less,” we joined.

Despite the diversity in our chosen community, I found Orthodoxy in the tristate area—New York, New Jersey, Connecticut—cookie-cutter and rigid compared to California. Most of our peers

knew each other from Jewish day schools, *shuls*, or summer camp; they kept kosher in and outside their homes. It was like an Old-Boys Club, an inbred Jewish clique that shared the same alma maters and camp cheers. My Reform upbringing had no place. I never played Jewish geography, asking who knew who, like I had in California.

Surprisingly, I began to appreciate the slowing down on *Shabbat*. Friday nights, we ate dinner in pajamas, played endless rounds of Uno and read books. Saturday mornings, Philippe left the house with the kids, who met friends and made playdates at *shul*. I attended on rare occasions, mostly holidays or Bar/Bat Mitzvahs. Sometimes we entertained people or were invited out for meals.

But if anyone dared tell me what I could or couldn't do, I cringed. "Mommy, why are you wearing leather shoes?" my middle child questioned me one Yom Kippur. (Apparently, we're supposed to afflict ourselves, according to the Torah, and leather shoes are typically comfortable, therefore something to avoid.) "Are you gonna fast?" the oldest asked. Growing up, I'd never succeeded, almost fainting one September in synagogue, but since when did I have to answer to my children? I huffed loudly, shooing them out of my room while getting dressed or even snapping at them, "It's none of your business," knowing how cruel and immature I sounded. What I really wanted to say I couldn't: I grew up Reform and you're being raised Orthodox, and *Abba* beseeched me to align with him on religious matters, at least on the outside. But they were too young to understand. As long as we lived in the States, I continued to cede on Judaism and tried my best to keep the peace.

10. An angry Jew

As time passed, Philippe and I each grew restless. Our solution: a semi-sabbatical year in a peaceful city in the center of Israel near his company's headquarters. When we told our kids, they raged. I'd never moved during my childhood but could imagine how daunting it felt. My desire to shake up our routine, to stave off a prevailing

Keep-up-with-the-Joneses mentality and the accompanying midlife complacency surrounding us, and to expose our kids to a different way of living beside their insular New York Jewish one, outweighed my fear. Thanks to the Israeli West Bank barrier and a general clampdown on security, Israel seemed peaceful.

After settling into our fully-furnished rental home in Raanana, the kids started third, fifth and ninth grades. I steeled myself for a bumpy ride as they transitioned to reading from right to left, six shorter school days a week, and hearing Hebrew nonstop.

They fared better than I. I hadn't lived in Israel for thirteen years and had never been to Raanana. I'd never raised children in the country and didn't fully grasp the school-*Shabbat* situation. Our only full day off was Saturday, but we couldn't drive anywhere. I felt suffocated—by kids home for lunch and long, hot afternoons; by the Jewish calendar whereby every holiday, whether major or minor, was observed; by a city that shut down completely every Friday afternoon until Sunday morning.

Two months into our adventure, I yelled at my spouse, "*Shabbat* feels like a noose around my neck!" I missed our lazy New York Sundays, which began with homemade waffles and often included family hikes, bike rides or errands, thereby balancing out Saturday's restrictions.

In White Plains, I'd occasionally attended services, but in Raanana, the synagogue Philippe gravitated toward was the upstairs room of a run-down, city-owned building, with plastic chairs and dirty tiled flooring. The women's section was divided by a low partition from the men's, but the rabbi's sermon—in Hebrew—and Torah readings occurred on the men's side. Women could either stare out the tiny window straight ahead or strain their necks. But I went because I liked some of the English-speaking women, immigrants from America, Canada, South Africa, Australia, England and elsewhere.

If anyone asked how I felt about being back in Israel, I ranted about everything I missed: longer school hours, my sense of purpose

outside the home, our two-day weekend and the Gregorian calendar. My attitude and behavior felt beyond my control, as if I were possessed.

From January until we left for New York in July, Philippe begged me to extend our time. I dug in my heels, insisting we return to Westchester, as planned. Would I consider returning to Israel after? In his fantasy world, we'd go back to White Plains to sell our house, leave our jobs and move the kids yet again—to Israel, for good.

Reality slapped me: Israel was home for Philippe, not for me.

11. A torn Jew

Back in New York, Philippe and I started therapy. Anger and resentment had been building for years, me toward Philippe and me at myself, for not standing up for or holding onto my version of Judaism. And then, one night, it all dissolved.

"I'm sorry I ever asked Jennifer to keep *Shabbat* and do things that made her so uncomfortable," said my husband of two decades. He slouched in a worn leather recliner, I sat upright on the ultra-suede sofa, and our therapist in her swivel desk chair. We faced each other in a triangle. I dabbed at my eyes. A long held breath escaped.

I summoned the courage to express my needs and desires for the first time since our wedding. Every Saturday morning, Philippe and the kids continued to leave home and turn right toward Hebrew Institute, where they prayed and socialized, while I sometimes turned left toward the Reconstructionist synagogue Bet Am Shalom. There, I had close friends, women whom I'd met in other parts of my life. Women who sat next to their spouses, as a family. Women who introduced me to their fellow congregants. Women who, like men, read from the Torah and recited blessings on the podium.

As much as I wished my husband or kids would accompany me, I knew they'd feel out of place. Rather than dwell, I focused instead on what I loved—the beech wood seats and sunlight streaming in through the windows like the Temple of my childhood, the familiar

prayer service I used to lead during my years as chaplain, the tunes I knew by heart. There in that place of worship, I sensed a bigger, all-encompassing force. It wasn't tapping me on the shoulder or whispering in my ear, but it moved me. I sang. I shivered. I teared up. I still didn't utter God's name aloud, but was I wrong about not believing? Or was it just the memories of who I once was as a Jew flooding my mind and body?

After services, Philippe and I either congregated at home or with friends in the neighborhood. We came by foot from opposite sides of town, and although it always felt like four against one, I arrived feeling bolstered.

Two years later, Philippe announced he couldn't envision spending one more cycle of holidays in the United States. If I wouldn't accompany him to Israel, he'd go with our firstborn, who'd decided to enlist in the Israeli Defense Forces after high school. Our emotionally charged conversations, mostly with the therapist, continued until we agreed to return to Israel together, as a family, at the end of the following school year.

"But if we move to Israel, then I no longer intend to play along with or abide by your version of Judaism or hide mine," I said. "I'll respect your desire to observe *Shabbat*, but I don't have to do it that way."

Philippe nodded.

Our conversations continued.

"The kids have a right to know that *Abba* believes X and Mommy Y." I'd always maintained that honest parenting trumped deceitful; Philippe had begged me to present a more united religious front. "They've been educated in Orthodox schools and will have each had a Bar or Bat Mitzvah. And we'd always said they'd have the right to choose how they want to observe."

Our therapist listened. So did my spouse. Initially reluctant, he agreed.

We swapped: he'd get country, and I, religion.

12. A spiritual, secular Jew

Since our return to Raanana, Philippe and I live more authentically. He's content and relaxed, happy to be in *his* Holy Land, while I feel more true to myself, relieved to no longer feign a way of life that felt false every week. Our downstairs living space is Sabbath-observant, but in our rooms, we do as we please. If I want to read before bed on Friday night, I turn on my lamp; if I want to use my electric toothbrush or my phone, I do.

Every *Shabbat* morning, Philippe goes to synagogue alone. While my teenagers sleep, I attend a yoga class, drive to the beach, or visit friends for coffee. I take the car and couldn't care less who sees me. Where we live, our Israeli neighbors don't care anyhow.

Whenever we meet new people, they eye Philippe's yarmulke and automatically assume we keep the laws of *Shabbat* and *kashrut*. If the conversation arises, which it often does, I say: "We're in a mixed marriage," or, "he's religious, but I'm not." The all-or-nothing, religious-or-secular paradigm doesn't fit my sense of self or my belief system.

Even if those people might label me secular, because I don't have faith in and abide by Judaism's monolithic definition of God, I'm spiritual. I swear by signs, synchronicity and some superstitions. I consider certain places and things and relationships sacred, to be regarded with reverence: synagogues, cathedrals and churches, temples and mosques, libraries, Mother Earth, artists of every kind, and, most of all, marriage.

When I married a Jewish Frenchman, my mother had said, "It's *bashert*," which is Yiddish for destiny. Have I spent the past twenty-five years fighting some grand, predetermined plan—to live here, with Philippe, in this land? I think not. I made the decision to stay in Israel, to marry this man.

But does our religious experience differ depending on where we live and the people who surround us? I think—no, I believe—so. I believe.

**The Towns
Where
Everyone
Is a
Heroin
Addict**

Nicole Hebdon

We grew up between factories and farms. The factories made different things, obscure car parts we never had to purchase or plastic tool handles, but they all smelled like burnt coffee. The farms were dairy farms. We all remember the milk trucks, with purple cartoon heifers down their sides. We all remember the yellowness of raw milk, how we thought it came out rotten until farmer Jude fed us a drop off his finger. It was warm; we remember this, but we don't remember if Jude's touch had warmed it or if it had been that way.

We all remember leaving a rolling suitcase of Barbies in Jude's field. We cried all night because some of the dolls were naked, and we were sure they would freeze to death. We don't remember what girl accused Jude of molesting her, but we remember she said it happened in that shed, the one Jude decorated with our drawings.

We don't remember entering beauty contests at three or four years old, but our mothers have the pictures to prove it. We were all princesses. We all won.

We all remember Balloon Bob, that old man who collected pop cans and inflatable animals. He tied pink dolphins to his porch, alligators to his car, Halloween cats to his roof. Our favorite was the whale, the one that floated in his pond like a real whale. When we picked blueberries near his house, he'd say, "Hey, see that whale there," as if we didn't know it was fake. This went on until either someone said, "Sir, we are eighteen years old," or he died. We don't remember which. Someone said he had cancer of the brain, that he had it for years.

We remember eating homemade doughnuts at the Amish auction, the one on Main Street. Someone's father said the Amish liked root beer. We forgot this for years, until we got a job at the buffet, where each Friday, after the auction, the Amish families ate. They did like root beer. And Sprite. And iced tea. But they hated chicken

wings. They tried to scrape the hot sauce off and would leave with reddened nails. We had to clean their fingerprints off the quarters they paid with.

At our second jobs, we were gardeners at the cemetery. We remember standing outside “the shovel shack” and talking about the heroin deaths. We remember tallying the overdoses on a poster in the cemetery bathroom. It was a poster for one of the beauty contests we don’t remember entering.

We remember our older friends, they were neighbors mostly, and how they let us paint our nails Cherry Pie Red even though we got it on the walls and carpet and our own faces. We remember their mothers scrubbing the polish away and saying, “Beauty is pain.” And then, “You look like Bloody Mary with hands like that.” We don’t remember their mothers drinking Bloody Marys or mixing their tea with singed spoons.

We remember Jenna, that fat girl who dyed her hair pink for breast cancer awareness. We remember how she was afraid to change in gym class, how she’d try to hide inside lockers she couldn’t fit in. We remember she died in December, that she wasn’t the driver, that she was going to church, that her seat belt decapitated her, that the principal did not say this on the announcements, but that the secretary told everyone who asked. And we all asked.

We remember Lou Ann. “The town whore,” our parents said. Or “The Dolly Parton.” We remember thinking she was beautiful. We remember that she gave us a nub of eyeliner. We remember putting it in our underwear drawer and taking it out for sleepovers. We remember one of these sleepovers, the last one. We had the TV on, and Jude was on the TV. We don’t remember which girls got anxious, so anxious they threw up the peppermint ice cream. But it happened. The carpet was stained.

We remember our first boyfriends. Jake. Josh. John. Jess. Jude. Rob. Ross. Rick. They were a syllable of our lives, but we can’t forget them.

We got accepted into college with no scholarships. At dorm

mixers, we'd swish our root beer and say, "Yeah, everyone was a heroin addict at home." And whoever we were talking to would respond, "All small towns are full of heroin addicts." We didn't want to believe this, but gradually, we realized we weren't unique. At some mixers we'd ask, "Anyone else win homecoming queen?" We were all homecoming queens. We said, "Ever know a girl who got decapitated?" Everyone had.

No one would listen to our stories, so we learned to lie, but even our lies were predictable, so we learned to be quiet, to let the boys tell their stories about their hometowns, their footballs, their fathers, who only cried once (when the dog died). And when they got to the heroin part, we held our tongues. We didn't say, "all small towns are like that," because we remembered how much it had hurt to know that. We were quiet as we wondered how many other girls had heard our boys' stories. And when our boys touched our lips, we tried not to think of Jude's warmth or the familiarity of the taste building in our throats. Sour like unpasteurized milk. Sour like a puke stain on a white carpet. Sour like an eyeliner pencil melted into white, lace panties.

An Eco- Terrorist Love Story

Tom Toro

I've learned to appreciate the bad puns at Balboa Research

Station. Whenever a steady light rain breathes over the jungle, ignoring our canopies as it prowls for the touchiest pieces of instrumentation, people say, "It's mist-ifying." Some anonymous soggy scientist must have coined the phrase years ago to ease the tension between teams of climatologists. After all, what better icebreaker than a comment on the weather? From "it's mistifying" grew a lingua franca of silly mottos: "How are you dewing this morning?" and several others that I'm too embarrassed to mention. But it's fascinating to watch newcomers adopt our misnomers and toss them back and forth to build camaraderie. The recent arrivals try to sound optimistic, even as the thankless slog of cataloguing tropical tree frogs changes them precipitously into us, a troop of glorified accountants under no illusion of preventing species extinction. The graduate students descend upon Balboa at four-month intervals with smuggled idealism. The mist invariably comes to greet them.

Another thing I've learned is how to tell the difference between a veteran field researcher and an amateur. It's simple: The vet will throw a tarp over the coffee maker first, and then the mass spectrometer. Minds take precedence over tools, and minds like Celia's need caffeine. I squeeze in next to her to stay dry. From underneath a plastic sheet, Celia produces two frothy mugs defter than a doctor delivering twins, and with the same trace of miracle. I accept mine gratefully. I remember when I first arrived at Balboa last year, Celia took a little while to warm up to me. It was due, I came to discover, to my resemblance to an old flame of hers, Felix de Silva, a native cauchero whose ancestral turf spanned the research station as well as the virgin acres beyond it prized by logging companies. Hot on the trail of a rare glass frog one day, Celia heard a woodwind's trill. She discovered Felix de Silva leaning against a rubber tree trunk, coaxing notes from a panpipe to accompany the rhythmic drip of

latex as it oozed from the lancet-like tap. He made love, Celia will freely admit, with similar sweet languor. This rustic troubadour was not without his defects, however, since Felix resembled another ex-boyfriend of Celia's, one of the *medicin sans frontiers* who was battling polio in tribal Pakistan. He dedicated himself to the eradication of microorganisms just as madly as Celia dedicated herself to the preservation of macro—. The shrinking pockets on the globe where polio was fighting its Alamo are what haunted the *medicin* day and night. He craved to know the feeling of wiping something completely off the face of the Earth. Celia did try to comprehend it, but she made a fatal misstep one night after an overdose on Humboldt's *Kosmos*, when all at once she couldn't discern why one form of life outweighed another—microbial “bad” but mammalian “good”—and, playing devil's advocate, Celia argued that polio was an essential contributor to biodiversity. She lost the *medicin*'s love forever. His style of tantrum throwing happened to be freakishly akin to the Baptist anarchist from whom Celia had fled barefooted and heartbroken in New Orleans.

It was evident right away that I was dealing with a woman tossed between extremes. Celia's paramours were flesh manifestos. Her soul was a cauldron of passions. It must have seemed, for a time, as though Felix de Silva was the stable pillar to moor herself upon, rooted as those rubber trees that he gently bled and ser-enaded. So when his naked corpse was found lynched at the jungle's edge, the news of it blew Celia's soul to pieces. She lost all interest in tree frogs and climate science but stayed on at Balboa as a kind of resident cynic. When I showed up here last Easter she was already a fixture.

My habit of softly whistling, my green thumb, the impression that as a lover I'd hate to rush it, which as virtues of Celia's previous suitor may have endeared me to her in a former life, did the opposite. I was trampling on a grave I couldn't see underfoot. My very presence was repeating the unwelcome cycle of Celia rushing pell-mell from impossible romance to impossible romance. But the matter was easy

to clear up, as it turned out. Following several weeks of giving me the cold shoulder, Celia simply noticed that I'm not an extremist. Swaddled in this Patagonia slicker is no warrior's heart, just the dutiful ticker of an eco-conscious technocrat. We became friends.

As a side note I'd just like to say, without bitterness, that I've enjoyed the close confidence of many extraordinary women for no other reason than sexual irrelevance. Being the nonthreatening sidekick to Amazons is a sort of minor profession of mine, and I'm truly convinced that intimacy of its kind outdoes the blind fission of bedmates. When we talk of unconditional love, what else can we mean?

"That's the last of the soy milk, so enjoy it," I hear Celia say as she takes a judicious sip of her coffee, but then flings the rest like slop into the mud. "Rancid grounds. Fucking Reinier's been raiding my stash again and leaving the container open. Cabrón."

I slurp mine but taste nothing awry.

The things she'll do to Reinier's genitals once the drizzle abates are varied and inventive. It somehow brings us around to our favorite topic of conversation. The gist: meaningful action. Celia goes on a well-rehearsed rant, and I agree with her up to a point. I understand how it's totally futile to spend our time tabulating the effects of global warming when common sense tells us that any future down our current path leads straight to hell. Twiddling hell's thermostat is absurd. The best that science can offer us now, having already peer reviewed the nature of our doom, is a nonbinding timeline. But that's incalculably worse (Celia argues) than wild, feverish visions of apocalypse.

"Give me macabre superstition instead of a palliative spreadsheet any day of the week. 'A three-degree rise in ocean temperatures by 2100.' Ha!" she scoffs in a generic Gen Xer's accent. "Eff that. We're playing right into enemy hands. Those denuders of the Earth who want nothing more than for us to prevaricate while they plunder and profit. Consider the human animal. Death is a guarantee and yet we always arrive unprepared. How can a surplus of statistics motivate

us to rescue our brethren—mammalian, amphibian, floral—when the mere notion of our own mortality causes us panic and paralysis? What we really need is a good old jolt of holy terror.”

So far, so good. But here is where we diverge. I ask Celia if instead of scientific inquiry she’s advocating a kind of pseudo-religious fervor, Adventist cults perhaps, and whether this wouldn’t lead us to the same impasse but from the reverse direction. Doesn’t imminent catastrophe render us helpless and fatalistic (to answer my own loaded question), just as its protraction makes us ambivalent and lazy?

She never gives me a straight answer. She just wants people to be scared shitless and to behave accordingly.

“Action. It’s a double whammy,” Celia says. “The problem with global warming is, firstly, its consequences are diffuse and, secondly, the actions we can take against it are unromantic. Where is the allure in using cloth diapers? Guerrilla warriors don’t march to the banner of solar panels. No bard composes revolutionary odes to the virtues of compostable utensils. But the ire of the people is there, we can feel it, Discontent and Impotency sit perched on the crown of Man,” it’s not unusual for Celia to talk like this, and by now I’ve grown accustomed to her florid effusions, “but where is our courageous Calvin with his nail, hammer, thesis? We can’t put abstraction into action. People need a target to aim at, and they need to hear the satisfying thwack of impact, otherwise there’s no visceral reward and this isn’t a war we’re waging, it’s some bogus exercise in attrition. Hello!”

A huddle of graduate students slobes past us, giving comradely nods. They enter the jungle perimeter, loath to lose a day’s data gathering to the stubborn damp, mistakenly thinking their dedication will impress us. Celia and I leave the shelter of the mess tent and walk with sucking steps up to the bunk cabins where she lays out fresh towels and energy bars, a de facto den mother. I hover nearby wanting to make myself useful but only have this to say:

“We don’t need chaos, though. Practically speaking, as frustrating and slow as it may be, a systemic problem requires a systemic fix. Luddites didn’t stop the Industrial Revolution. I want to take

action, sure, but more than anything I want results.” Stripping off her poncho, Celia flops down on an unmade cot and rests her eyes for a minute. My comment hangs in the air like something decorative but insubstantial. She knows me too well. I dissent under false pretenses. I don’t disagree with Celia, but I shrink from the desires her words awaken in me. The reason I, or any of us came to Balboa, really, the only reason, is to die with a clear conscience. We want to fulfill our nominal commitment and then return home with bragging rights, decorated veterans of The Good Fight. At least we can say that we did our damndest. Then we can point to historical inevitability for the global calamity—not our own cowardice—and luxuriate in the self-righteousness reserved for champions of a failed cause. How many saints await baptism in the rising seas?

Anything is preferable to making real sacrifice. I could have gone off the grid and built a log cabin, raised vegetable marrows, cured venison, shrunk my carbon footprint to chicken scratch, but why inconvenience myself if with a few laptop keystrokes I can summon the magic of Western civilization to jet hemispheres away and play Darwin? I see it clearly. I’m not innocent. Irony doesn’t keep well in this climate. Possibly without Celia’s companionship I would have quit long ago and ended the farce. Her sisterly cynicism has kept me in limbo. But how long did I think this could last until Celia’s smoldering grief over Felix de Silva’s murder sparked fire, and my yearning for a deeper purpose led me to follow her into the inferno?

“It has happened before. It can happen again. Someone needs to bend the arc of history...” her eyes crack open just a slit, peering directly into mine. “Someone like us.”

I won’t pretend to misunderstand what Celia means. The response of my blood, an instantaneous tumescence, causes me to crouch like a boxer, jack-knifed, combative. She has me now. Moving nothing except a fingertip, my every nerve lassoed to it, Celia draws me closer and whispers commands that I could have spoken myself. These very moments contain all that will come afterward.

The future that I've grown accustomed to seeing hazy and fractal snaps into focus like a cleansing eye blink. Parallel lines converge. And because there is no other way forward, it's much less shocking than it might seem when I find myself running toward the loggers' barracks with a silenced pistol in my fist and a pair of watchmen already executed back at the gate. Celia is inside by the time I reach the head honcho's hut. We're alone with Capitán So-And-So for barely a minute and he's confessed to Felix de Silva's assassination, given the names of accomplices higher up the food chain, spelling death for those men surely as his own breaths are numbered. The way Mozart looked at a piano and saw *Così fan tutte*, Celia looks at a pissant and sees a fantasia of agony. His howls, el capitán's, pierce the night for miles around, and I imagine them chasing the terrified woodsmen like demented spirits of felled trees, hexing all those who will come here with chainsaws and bulldozers forever. But I'm only able to hear—his hot blood streaking my face—the frogs' choral song filling the silence.

We put his head on a pike and we plant a leafy branch in his trunk. Contrapasso.

There's no question of sleep anymore. Cold sweats. Jagged images. The horror at what we've become runs thicker through my veins than Celia's, since I've been a sponge for liberal pacifism my whole life. Sometimes I mentally refute myself like a *New York Times* op-ed piece, citing how the impoverished citizens of developing countries have no other choice than to exploit their natural resources. The real culprits are greedy multinational corporations and insatiable Western consumers. To save the environment we must reform our own buying habits. The epitaph on my headstone: "He shopped conscientiously."

I grope around in the darkness. I seek out Celia, my hands moist and empty, only to find her standing at the far edge of the glade etched boldly in moonlight as she observes the dust clouds billowing from a distant caravan of poachers moving across the savannah.

Barely above a whisper: "Shall we?"

The orphaned elephant calf paces anxiously around the butchered carcass of its mother. The bound and gagged men kneel in puddles of their urine and jabber weepily. We force them to kiss a sawed-off tusk and then to pick heads or tails. Next, we insert the pointy end into their corresponding orifice until their screaming or kicking, respectively, stops. Our habit is to allow one survivor, the storyteller, whom if his mind doesn't crack from pain will spread the dreadful tale of his torture and embellish it to the status of myth. But to do so, Celia determines, he won't need his own ivories. She digs them out and pops in a hot coal to cauterize the gums. Meanwhile I hop on the GPS and relay our coordinates to the park warden of Ynratu Wildlife Reserve.

The Kenyan authorities officially deny any knowledge of our existence. Unofficially, they're our pit crew. Somehow Celia already knew a handful of the rangers from a previous escapade, and there was hardly any fuss about accommodating us—not that if she'd dropped from the moon it would have caused the slightest hiccup. Things had to happen this way. It isn't optimal or probable or preferable, but it's predestined. I'm constantly aware that my persona has folded into Celia's; we leave one set of footprints. I'm her natural partner, harmonious symmetry. To the supporting cast of men who've accumulated around us, all of whom must envision themselves heaving bull-like between Celia's tawny thighs, I'm like a squire or a caddie. They can't understand why she picked me to play demigods with. Little do they know that Celia's divine spark needs my dry husk to create combustion. Jealousy doesn't enter into it. The times which she and I have spent massacring bad guys under fabulous starry skies, no husband and wife, no legendary tragic lovers can approximate. Even if Celia does take a park ranger to bed every now and then, to satisfy an incorrigible animal itch, it only serves to elevate our perfect union.

We aren't informed of his visit in advance. It's strictly off the books. Sand pelts my face and I dream of suffocating in an hourglass before I awaken, gasping, to find Celia at the open flap of our

lean-to, her kimono whipped to a frenzy by the Apache helicopter's propeller cyclone. Word has spread to reach the ears of the wildlife reserve's principal benefactor, Samuel O. Pierce. He's paying us a visit. "We have unlimited funding," Celia mentions to me, and then she goes to meet the billionaire philanthropist who's decked out like a spindly Teddy Roosevelt.

I probably don't need to elaborate the steps that bring me to being drunk and slouched beneath the window of a biodiesel Humvee, eavesdropping on Celia and the tech tycoon's postcoital chat inside. Our lives run on a governed course. Surely as Samuel O. Pierce promises blanket immunity and a blank check, surely as his weaponized drones and untraceable private satellites make us the generals of a robot Mossad, surely as Celia's blithe ingratitude only swells the awe in which she's held by Samuel and myself and the annoying ranks of minions (because we all know that without cash and technology, Celia would continue to slay evildoers by hand, regardless), it comes to pass that I fall from favor and hit the bottle.

Above me I hear their pillow talk.

"You never knew your father? That's an old story," Celia is saying.

"Knew him in the deeper sense, is what I mean. He was a beaten man. He failed at everything twice over, the poor bastard."

"Whereas you conquered. I see. Good lad. Does the 'O' in your name stand for Oedipus?"

"You tell me, big mama..."

I puke in my mouth. Orbiting the Humvee is a cybernetic hummingbird. It stops abruptly to face me, its roto-wings a soundless blur, its beady little camera-eyes streaming everything in real time back to the geeks at Com-Set. I flip the bird the bird. We have no secrets here. Everybody knows everybody's whereabouts always. I'm on the other side of the armor-plated door, Samuel's aware, and so's Celia. She actually pressed her hand to the tinted glass at climax, bidding me to stay put and to listen. I roll onto my knees and moon the hummingbird. Then I splay out on the reddish baked dirt.

The heavens overhead brim with invisible technology. Whose

war are we fighting, anyway?

“I happen to notice you aren’t circumcised,” she’s saying.

“Agnostic upbringing,” Samuel answers.

“This absentee papa—I’m guessing that a pasha’s wealth fills the void he left?”

“Ha ha! Hardly.”

“Then?”

“For my children. The world they inherit. I made my billions to give them the gift of beauty.”

“Trust funds they’d appreciate more, I think.”

“They’ll be plenty comfortable, trust me, but not pampered brats.”

“Beauty?”

“A chance to experience it. For pristine nature, for unsullied wilderness to reflect their souls so that they might know themselves better than I or my father were ever able to. Do you think me pathetically sentimental?”

“Men have killed for stupider reasons. Play something, Sam.”

“What would you like to hear?”

“Surprise me.”

Naked as the dickens, he exits the Humvee carrying a French horn. Celia perches on the fender, also nude, and smokes angel dust. Hidden under the chassis, I peer out between her sleek muscled calves to the rock formation, like a petrified lion, where Samuel assumes an Orphic stance and blows the martial theme to *Carmen*. I slither forward and kiss Celia’s ankles. Her arches arch. Her fingers tousle my oily mane as I peck my way north to bury my nose in her profuse bush. The hummingbird records us in wide, medium, close-up. Samuel goes on a jazzy riff. We three all wind up back in the vehicle, spent and steaming, staring zombie-eyed at drop-down video screens that show aerial night vision shots of scattering human forms and blooming silent smoke plumes. Samuel puts the joystick aside and takes my hand.

“May I confide in you?” he asks.

Celia pretends to doze on my shoulder. The atmosphere reeks of our fluids. I want air.

“I want out,” I say.

“I know. Take a walk with me, please.”

She is actually asleep. We lug Celia to her bed and then we stroll outside the compound, muttering tonight’s password at the sentry. Twin scarab beetles hover just overhead and shine blue LED light on the sandy, pathless earth. I know that if I attack Samuel they’ll rip holes in my chest before I can blink. “We’re both smitten with the same woman. She’s chosen me, the rich interloper, and you have every reason to feel agitated. Speak with your blood, my friend. I’ll give you a freebie.” Samuel clucks a command that causes the scarabs to pause and somehow appear disinterested. He faces me bravely. I clock him with the rock that I’d been carrying in my pocket, which I don’t think he was expecting. Then I help him to his feet.

“Better?” Samuel says through chipped teeth like castanets.

“Yes, thank you.”

“Don’t mention it...” somewhat nasal. His sinuses are probably caved in. “But that’s beside the point. You were a—what were you professionally before you became an eco-terrorist?”

“Nothing, really.”

“Nonentity. Cog. Is that it?”

“I don’t like to talk about those years.”

We stroll along the rim of a shallow ravine. Heard in the distance: hyenas.

“Fair enough. They plan to kill me, you know.”

Indeed, I’d heard rumblings. I’d been hoping they were serious.

“Kidnapping then beheading—the usual menu,” Samuel continues. “Why reinvent the wheel?”

“You’ll blow them all to kingdom come, of course.”

“Obviously. I have no interest in playing the martyr. Things will devolve, though, a bit, in the aftermath. Celia and I plan to go underground. Retool. Our vision of the next phase doesn’t include you, I’m sorry to say.” He rips a silk handkerchief into strips and stuffs them

up his nostrils. “It’s a hard pill to swallow. I do want your life to have meaning, my friend.”

Samuel stops and takes my hand. I suddenly remember how his cock tasted. It isn’t an unpleasant thought, to be honest, mingled as it is with freedom, escapism, finality. And Celia’s warm cheek pressed to mine.

He says, “Care for my children in the interim, will you please?”
“Your children? Me?”

All at once, distant explosions ring the horizon. In a few seconds their reverberation breezes over us with its gentle, particulate mist. And then all is quiet again except for some sporadic gunfire in the direction of base.

“That’s how you can best serve the cause. The movement which you and Celia started.”

“As a manny? Are you joking?”

“Don’t put a label on it. And besides—” Samuel adds, and as he speaks I notice the scarabs shimmering in midair, “—you have no choice.”

“But... but I wouldn’t know where to start.”

“Make it up as you go along. All parents do. The eldest, Jordan, is twelve. Marjorie just turned nine last Wednesday. She has a severe peanut allergy. My publicist will fill you in on the details and then unexpectedly meet with foul play, after which you’ll be the last person alive who knows the truth.” Samuel glances calmly at his wristwatch. A light goes out. One of the scarabs has flown off, but it returns bloodstained and once more becomes a lamp.

“Can I just see her one last time?” I say, as if asking him to stop the world from spinning.

Shadows coalesce. And there she is, Celia, standing apart from us, the residue of carnage painting her head-to-foot, a pistol smoking in her fist. For a moment I remember our first bloodbath at Balboa. It’s difficult to speak with my voice cracking, but I hear myself say, “I need you, Celia. Please tell him that we’re partners. We’re meant to be together—” but it’s no use.

With a subtle whirring noise that I only notice afterward, enormous mechanical dragonflies descend from the sky and clamp our shoulders daintily. Their reverse-thrusters make a ballet of dust devils upon the ground. Samuel hovers over to join Celia, and it seems fated, as if they're identical Icaris soaring overconfidently into the air, husbanded by their shared hubris. My machine is uncontrollable, on autopilot, flying away diagonally to I don't know where. Celia flashes me the sign for victory or peace and then I'm history.

Three Poems

Alison Moncrief Bromage

The following poems, transcribed here, were written spontaneously on the poet's grandmother's Royal Arrow typewriter at various farmer's markets in New Haven. Prompted from strangers' requests and written within the constraints of 10 minutes or so, the poems take on an immediate, sketch-like quality that releases the poet from her usual practice and challenges her to reshape the raw material of life's most private matters—dying mothers, long-distance lovers, people hungering for peace within their communities.

Brooding

There is the sky, laden
and the trees and all the things
we need, this morning and each.

There is yeast in the air above us
somewhere the seeds are bolting
and between two panes of glass,

honeybees are stewing up honey
in it, lavender and tansy
and organized industry.

Everything around us is making -
making from matter an action
a sensation, a tingling tongue.

The poet of the spirit said
make of the sword the plowshare-
the spirit of the human is still

learning. What have you made today?
and by what origin have you come
inspired? today Think of the courage

of the newly turned tool, of the
cloud to stave off its nature.

Think of the instinct, when born

to reach out for love.

For Henry

8.31.14

What the scraped knee teaches us . . .

A mother will tell her daughter
she doesn't remember the pain
of childbirth, and so the two
can laugh together at any scraped knee.

There is one idea that pain is a gift,
that it reminds us that the body
has boundaries, and that objects have
strength. . In another idea, it is a

curse. The poet believes a scar
is a story. A scar is a rite of passage
and emblem of experience. And so
in our family, we show our stories

by tending. By salving the wounds.
That the rock wall loomed below
the daughter as she swung, off balance,
over its crags will not be what anyone

remembers. But the care with which
she was giving a bandage is what will
define this memory. Ask the knee what
happened and its reflex is ,‘love’.

For Lily and Susan

8.23.14

A Keeper's Heart (For Jason)

When first she told me

Once the grid of green held bodies

It was mine who-m leaned in.

The lightness of her hair

a web, a circumscription in any light

or crypt.

What type of heart can hold secrets

or stories of other loves

and enter their darkness

enter their dampest preservations

and tend and wipe clean?

A keeping heart, a heart of dark chamber

and rime and of the whispering

angels and ancestors and forgotten

foundations.

When we shared wine together

in the crypt, first she passed

me a glass with her lips

lingering on it

the veils of ardour

the enchantment

and the peripheral walls

opened. And in that place

in those lives, we tasted

a dry sweetness of something

aged and time old, something

making our bodies feel light.

Fascinating Asshole

*How I learned to love Frank
Sinatra*

Jim Cory

I snap it on.

I wait.

The silence becomes a purr, the purr a buzz, the buzz transformed in an instant to . . . voices.

With a safecracker's nimble precision, I adjust the dial.

Discovering AM radio at age ten was, I later realized, somewhat like stumbling on love. It's yours, you possess it, and no matter how lousy the day turns out, it's there, waiting.

And, as is the case with love, this prompts new behaviors even as life takes on additional dimensions. Here, for instance, was life Before Radio:

"It's 9:30, why aren't you in bed?"

"Can't I just stay up?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"No!"

"Please?"

"I'm not going to argue with you. GET UP THERE NOW!"

This is life After Radio:

"It's 7:15."

"So?"

"Whuddayamean, 'so'? Why are you going to bed?"

Shrug.

"Aren't you feeling well?"

"I'm tired."

"Tired?" (Eyes roll.) "From what?"

Door shut, pillows fluffed and piled against headboard, thumb-shaped orangey bulbs aglow on the nightstand, I await the evening's reverie. Having developed a taste for girl groups such as The Shire-

lles and The Dixie Cups, and the British Invasion bands from The Beatles to The Dave Clark Five and Herman's Hermits, I had found my way to the source.

It's the summer of 1964 and the hits just keep on comin', lofted by hyperkinetic DJs including Murray the K, Cousin Brucie, and 'Big Dan' Ingram. Fifteen or twenty of them man the three big rock 'n' roll stations out of New York (WINS, WABC, WMCA). The jocks are gods and seem to know it. Equipped with psychic powers, as gods, however minor, must be, they know exactly what I want to hear when I want to hear it. How? No idea. Tele-something-or-other.

Click

Birds, sing out of tune,
and rain clouds hide the moon . . .

Oh my God! It's Peter and Gordon warbling "World Without Love," their first big hit. On the TV shows *Shindig* or *Hullabaloo* they look like a couple of guys in high school. Are they? Maybe. I imagine my older sisters bringing them home and my father, easy in his easy chair, lowering the afternoon paper to scowl at their flouncy sleeves and bangs (big back then), telegraphing his disapproval in monosyllables.

Click:

Don't let the sun catch you crying
alone, wo wo wo . . .

Now it's Gerry and the Pacemakers, with this winsome bit of melancholy—their breakthrough single, "Don't Let The Sun Catch You Crying"—to remind me that even though I've never been in love (and won't chance upon it for another dozen years), I surely will be at some point, and that this one-syllable emotion contains its own moist tenderness, its own blind pain, a thought further articulated by, for instance—*click!*—Gene Pitney in whose voice, it seems, a stray

sheep bleats, awaiting some shepherd's rescue:

It hurts to be in love,
day and night, night and day . . .

The hit list, endlessly refreshed, mixes multiple styles. This was diversity before anyone except biologists used the term. Besides the British Invasion there's Motown, Surf Rock, Folk Rock, Rhythm and Blues, plus assorted hybrids and outliers, along with occasional hits by good ol' boys such as Roger Miller or Roy Orbison (note: not to compare them). However various, it's all of a piece. How, I wondered, had I stumbled into this thicket of bliss? It was a miracle far surpassing anything the nuns at St. Cecilia's could conjure.

I mouthed, memorized and occasionally even performed these ditties (white t-shirt, flannel pajama bottoms, cracked 12-inch ruler for a mike, the vertical mirror on the closet door a stand-in for future adoring throngs). The brain becomes a sponge, absorbing entire catalogs of lyrics. How, I wonder from the vantage of a time in life when I'm lucky to remember what I did last weekend, was this possible?

It wasn't so much music as some perfectly calibrated emotion spooling out as sound. Sorrow and longing, send-ups and put-downs, triumph and recrimination ("My boyfriend's back and you're gonna be in trouble..."), most of it snatched from desire's bottomless bag of tricks. It promised a world of noble feeling, one no doubt waiting just beyond puberty's door.

"Rock 'n' roll," *Shindig* producer Jack Good told the *New York Times* in 1965, "if it is anything, is pure joy in sound."

Boy, did he get that right.

The only shadow thrown across an evening's utopia was Frank Sinatra's. Well before I ever heard Frank Sinatra sing I knew who he was. You couldn't watch TV or go to the movies and not know. Cavanagh fedora, sport coat, open shirt, the inevitably tentative smile of

someone who doesn't trust his own moods, Frank was in charge, the "Chairman of the Board" (Asshole Nickname #1). He reminded me of the guy who gives you grief when you go back for seconds at the parish pancake breakfast. ("What's the matter, your parents can't afford to feed you?")

Reports of boorish behavior keep him in the headlines. Frank, buddying up to Chicago Mafiosi San Giancana. Frank, furious when the Kennedys, weighing the political consequences of his Mob ties, drop him immediately prior to a presidential visit to his Las Vegas estate. (He gets off the phone and, in a frenzy, takes a sledgehammer to the helipad where the president would've landed.) Frank, insulting a reporter in Australia. (He calls her, among other things, "a two-bit whore.")

How is it possible to be this rich, this famous, and this pissed off?

And then there's his politics.

After the Kennedys stiff him, Sinatra swings to the right, endorsing the vile Nixon in the 1972 election. Before the decade is out he's donating \$4 million to Ronald Reagan's presidential campaign, the same Saint Ronnie who loathes hippies, commies and queers; who, on being elected, soon sets out to hobble American labor unions by busting the air traffic controllers strike.

Who in his right mind would call this person an artist?

Artists have sensitivity. Frank Sinatra is emotionally clueless.

Artists are doyens of taste. Frank Sinatra has no class, no couth, no culture.

His is the sort of persona you equate with junior-high levels of maturity.

He's the original carrier in a country where Narcissistic Personality Disorder is now a raging epidemic.

His empathy gauge registers zero.

He combines these traits with a relentless need to dominate whatever room he's in or whatever person he's with, physically if he can get away with it.

Sinatra biographer James Kaplan has Joe Smith, head of

Warner-Reprise, noting that Frank Sinatra hated “Strangers in the Night” because “he thought it was about two fags in a bar!”

It’s hard enough to loathe the art and like the person, but is it even possible to loathe the person and like the art?

Wagner fans have wrestled with that question for years. How to enjoy something as timeless and elevated as the prelude to Act 1 of *Parsifal*—a work that exists on the same level as anything Michelangelo or Da Vinci produced—knowing the composition issued from the same pen that wrote “Judaism in Music,” which Wikipedia describes as a “landmark in the history of German anti-Semitism?” I don’t even question it when Jewish friends tell me they can’t get past Wagner’s politics. (His music is “unofficially but effectively banned in Israel,” according to the magazine *Tablet*.) There comes a point where the behavior and/or publicly expressed views of certain artists compel disconnection from the work. It’s not a logical decision, a position built on a structure of facts set sturdily in place. It’s an emotional one. The body makes it. The thinking part of your brain can mull it over all you want, but some other, deeper, truer set of facts has already settled the matter.

The short answer is: perhaps, but it’s not easy.

Especially if you happen to know the person.

For about a decade I was friendly with someone I’ll call Poet X. I admired his work and promoted it to editors and publishers. But the work, as good as it was and is, earned him little. Poet X was scraping by. At my suggestion, we agreed I’d pay him to feed my cats when I went out of town. I gave Poet X a house key.

The arrangement went on for a year. One day, a few weeks after I’d come back from a trip, I went to retrieve a book by a certain San Francisco writer of fiction and poetry. It was a book I read again and again. Poet X and I had shared our admiration for the writer, and for this book particularly, in multiple conversations. My copy was a first edition I’d been lucky enough to find in a Chicago bookstore that was closing.

Now the book wasn't there.

Since I've always been prone to absent-mindedness, I assumed I'd misplaced it. Sooner or later it'd turn up. Meanwhile, on the phone, Poet X references the book and author repeatedly. He's planning an outdoor reading series where people will come and read from the work of a single writer. He mentions this particular San Francisco writer of fiction and poetry. Could I bring the book and read from it, he asks? He asks again. He asks three or four times.

Not only am I absent-minded, I'm often naïve. These no doubt belong to the same family of personality traits. The challenge lies not in overcoming naivete—which I define as the notion that all people are working off an identical moral standard—but in keeping it from becoming its opposite, which is cynicism.

I wondered why Poet X kept referring to the book. Meanwhile other volumes came up missing. For instance, from its publisher I'd received four hardbound copies of the selected poems of another California poet in a limited edition. Each signed by the author. These were stashed in a cabinet. I decided I didn't need all four and offered one to a friend, who was also a friend of Poet X. When I went to retrieve it, there were only two in the cabinet. What the hell, I would give it to him anyway.

"Oh," he said, flipping it open at a café table, "Poet X has this book."

After that, it became impossible for me to read Poet X. My mind might've wanted to, for the pleasure formerly afforded by his lines, but the spirit wouldn't allow it. On a logical level, you might see it this way: if his actions proved him so completely devoid of basic honesty, what kind of integrity could the poems have?

That point could be debated. But still, I lost all interest in anything he was writing. A few years later he sent me a chapbook. When I flipped it open, the lines may as well have been written in Tajik.

My Sinatra aversion was born at around 8:30 one night in 1965.

Age eleven. One pillow wedged between my knees, another under

my back, the third clutched to my chest, I'm swinging right to left, back and forth, in continuous motion, as WABC counts down the hits. Suddenly there's this:

When I was seventeen, it was very good year
It was a very good year
For small town girls
And soft summer nights . . .

I flung the pillows off and sat up. What? Who?
In six notes, I knew.

It struck me as the kind of voice suitable for the soundtrack of a movie in which, say, Rock Hudson, Cary Grant, Jimmy Stewart or similar is wooing that living tribute to frosted hair, Doris Day, through various absurd misunderstandings that end, of course, in the ultimate misunderstanding: a marriage proposal.

But will someone please explain what Frank Sinatra is doing on this radio station? Why is Cousin Brucie touting this, this, this . . . interloper?

Rock stations love hurling the occasional curve ball at listeners. ("Paul is dead.") They artfully mix continuity with surprise. It's part of their game. How else explain Dean Martin (cutting up while he's pretending to be tipsy, an act that always works) vaulting up the charts with irresistible Id-candy like "Everybody Loves Somebody?" Take it in stride. Maybe even learn to like it, because the things you have to learn to like you end up liking better. On TV, Dean projects a comedic charm Frank Sinatra must've envied. Dean's a lout one sheet to the wind, Sinatra's a guy who could blow any minute. Whatever you do, don't get in his way.

I dismiss his invasion of the airwaves as a freak occurrence.

But soon, Ol' Blue Eyes (Asshole Nickname #2) is back. Sinatra had a dozen solid hits in the '60s and 1966 was a banner year with "That's Life" and "Strangers in the Night" all over the air. You could crawl under a boulder in the woods and still not escape that voice.

In defense, I developed the Sinatra Lunge. Quicker than a pissed-off rattler, my arm shoots for the tuning dial. In three seconds, tops, Frank's outta there.

Occasionally I ruminate on the sordid fact of his presence.

Sinatra wasn't on the air out of some kind of affinity for rock 'n' roll. Far from it. To him, the "bulk of rock 'n' roll," (see October, 1957 interview with Paris magazine *Western World*) is "the most brutal, ugly, degenerate, vicious form of expression it has been my displeasure to hear." Ten years on, his views hadn't much changed. For instance, he despises The Doors, regards their music as "ugly and degenerate." Martin Chilton, in *The Telegraph* ("Frank Sinatra and his violent temper") describes the singer driving in California one night when "Light My Fire" comes on the radio. Frank, doing a lunge of his own, pops the button to change channels but—sonuvabitch!—the next station's playing "Light My Fire," at which point the Chairman "stopped the car and smashed the radio to bits with his shoes."

All this becomes beside the point around 1968, when radio undergoes a revolution, initiated by an FCC ruling that forbids AM stations from simulcasting on FM. FM radio stations transform into a world separate and apart, a place for the burgeoning counterculture. Singles are passé. Thanks to *Sergeant Pepper's* and *Blonde on Blonde*, LPs are what matter now. With long-playing songs, FM radio finds a late-night niche and a longhaired audience. Hash-addled DJs slap an album on the turntable and zone for a half-hour.

And where's Swoonatra (Asshole Nickname #3) in all this? Exactly nowhere. Imagine squeezing Frank Sinatra between "In a Gadda Davida" and "Hey Jude"? Besides, no one I knew in the demi-monde of pot smoking and peacenik politics (or later in gay Bohemia) cared about, or even knew what Frank Sinatra was singing or where he was performing.

And, because laziness licenses ignorance and vice versa, I assumed, for a long time, that that was a universal point of view.

What's more, experience of shared tastes tends to buttress rather than challenge assumptions.

For instance, while touring the Art Institute of Chicago sometime in the '90s I find myself squinting into the glass box containing an earthenware sculpture of a horse from the Tang Dynasty, circa 800 AD. An older gentleman with a stained blue raincoat slung across his forearm is suddenly standing at my side. What, he wants to know, do I think about the horse?

I tell him it's interesting, which is another way to say I have no idea.

Nodding, he explains that the object was made for a tomb, that the lead in the glazing was highly toxic. He begins to hold forth on balance and proportion.

I grunt.

He offers to conduct me on a personal tour of the building. Partial to brilliant maniacs, I agree.

For the next two hours, Ed shares various uncanny insights regarding roughly a dozen and a half pictures, pieces of furniture, and sculpture. Toward the end of our sojourn we come on Edward Hopper's "Nighthawks." It's probably the most famous painting in the Art Institute. Isn't it, I inquire, Hopper's last picture?

A frown. No, Ed explains. Hopper's last picture treated the subject of theater clowns.

I tell him I'm partial to Hopper and had seen many, but not that one.

"Of course not!" His eyes narrow, the chin lifts a centimeter or two. Gallery visitors now wantonly eavesdropping. "Do you know why?"

I shake my head.

"Frank Sinatra owns it!" Glances back and forth across the room.

"That asshole," he says.

Ed takes a deep breath.

"He bought it," he clears his throat, "for his clown collection."

I thought the view of Sinatra as an entitled, abrasive jerk was common coin until the day I encountered a passel of Sinatra fans and realized there's way more of them than I'd suspected.

Directly across the street from a semi-decrepit house I bought on South 7th Street in Philadelphia stood a building in even greater disrepair, constructed sometime between 1890 and the '20s. A sign in the window reads: Second Ward Republican Club.

Its owner, Charles Santore, former president of the municipal workers union, by then in his early 90s, is standing out front one morning when I return from the supermarket. I park and start unloading the trunk.

"Can I help?"

I beg off, but when I come back for the last two sacks Charlie invites me into the club. In ten years it'll be bulldozed and replaced by million dollar townhouses with gated parking. But at the moment a half-dozen older gentlemen are inside—most ex-boxers—playing cards. One asks if I want to see some card tricks. I pull up a chair and, as I follow the various sleights-of-hand, two black-and-white photos stare down from the wall. One is former mayor Frank Rizzo, the other is Frank Sinatra.

Frank Sinatra was a god in South Philly, which consisted, into the '90s, of rowhouse neighborhoods where people one or two generations removed from their Italian immigrant forebears lived. "A working class hero is something to be," John Lennon wrote. Frank Sinatra was one. Every Sunday for three hours, DJ Sid Mark airs a program called "The Sounds of Sinatra." It's all Sinatra all the time, and the program, authorized by Sinatra, is picked up by at least 100 radio stations coast-to-coast.

If I'd actually followed his career, I would've known that La Voz (Asshole Nickname #4) never stopped touring or performing. In Philadelphia, his preferred venue was Palumbo's, a nightclub a block from the Italian Market and about six or so blocks from my apartment then. But no one I knew at the time would've suggested going to Palumbo's to catch a Sinatra show. Why not cuddle with denning

bears or skydive into volcanos?

Sometimes it's possible for music lovers to leap from one genre to something altogether different. It doesn't happen all the time, but it happens. The antennae synced to a discerning intellect will sooner or later pick up signals constituting proof of inherent artistic quality in any musical genre, familiar or not. You need two things: an open mind and a knack for concentrated listening.

Also, you have to be interested. And to be interested, you have to be curious.

Propelled unconsciously toward slow-motion crossover in increments: from late '60s Rolling Stones to B.B. King/Muddy Waters/Big Bill Broonzy blues to bluesy jazz performers à la Ben Webster, Count Basie et al., and on to Charlie Parker bop and then post-bop.

Sometime in the '70s an article in the *Village Voice* on the keyboard eccentricities of Cecil Taylor activates a nascent interest in jazz piano. Once planted, the seed extends tendrils in the direction of other instruments—saxophone and trumpet, then bass and trombone. In the middle of all that, someone or something—Billie Holiday is the likely culprit—results in the chance stumble into/onto jazz singing.

And jazz singing rapidly morphs from thrill to obsession. To hear them all and to hear them live, a must: Sarah Vaughn, Ella Fitzgerald, Betty Carter, Blossom Dearie, Abbey Lincoln, Cassandra Wilson, Shirley Horn, Mose Allison, Jimmy Scott, Joe Williams. More, but I forget. In odd moments, I slap myself for having passed on the opportunity to hear Carmen McCrae and Peggy Lee in night-club venues.

Frank Sinatra? Not on this radar.

Then a book arrives for review called *Jazz Singing*. Author: Will Friedwald. In 25 years of reviewing books for newspapers, this is the only one that still sits on my shelves. Brimming with anecdote and

information—the sort that know-nothings dismiss as “trivia”—Friedwald’s book blends a fan’s passion with the technician’s analytical skills to explain how singers such as Bessie Smith, Sarah Vaughn, Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday became the artists they were and are. I move chapter to chapter in a happy trance. Everything confirmed or explained. Then I got to the one called “Sinatra!”

That chapter stopped me like a slap. There was no way Frank Sinatra would be mentioned, let alone discussed, in the review. I’d simply skip the chapter.

The first paragraph, of course, proves irresistible. Three minutes later, I’m on the second page, where I encounter this: “Children of the last few decades risk growing up thinking of him more as a political figure than a musical one.”

That seems plausible.

Twelve long paragraphs in: “In picking out songs for his recording schedule, Sinatra codified the basic repertoire of adult popular music.”

So that’s who did it.

But in the face of such storied musical accomplishment there’s Frank, the man, the asshole. How get around that?

Friedwald acknowledges and explains, even excuses, Sinatra’s rabid egotism by pointing out that the singer had transformed this defect into an aesthetic strength, to wit: “...so much of what he sings about is himself, and he doesn’t try to hide his arrogance but instead makes it part of his performance.” Further, he writes: “Sinatra arouses our anger and our passion by expressing his own.”

Maybe, but I still wasn’t at the point where I felt a serious challenge had been thrown down. Then I encountered this sentence in Friedwald’s discussion of the albums on which Sinatra collaborated with conductor/arranger Nelson Riddle: “It’s the same feeling you get from Shakespeare: There’s no death, as Howard Dietz once said, like you get in *Macbeth*, but *Only the Lonely* is at least as profoundly moving an experience of romance undercut by tragedy as *Romeo and Juliet*, while *Songs for Swingin’ Lovers* and *A Swingin’ Affair*

balances feel-good machismo with erotic tenderness as effectively as *Henry V*.”

C'mon, I thought, you can't be serious? Two days later I'm exiting the record store with a bag of CDs.

Who hasn't at some point seen a trusted friend become a treacherous enemy? Nothing deflates, or empowers, quite like betrayal. Now imagine the exact opposite. You're thrust into circumstances where someone you loathe is revealed as a different and more sympathetic figure. You ask yourself: How could I have been this wrong? How could I have so completely misunderstood his motives, misread his intentions, and judged his actions so harshly in the absence of evidence?

You end up befriending this person.

In a similar way, I came to acknowledge the artistic validity of Frank Sinatra. The first hunk chipped from that raft of calcified prejudice in the brain was the notion that this singer interprets everything the same way (either because he's lazy or his talent is limited). “That's Life!” sounds like “Strangers in the Night” which sounds like “Summer Wind” which sounds like “Something Stupid.” But . . . popping *Songs for Swingin' Lovers!* into the CD player made two things clear: 1) the sound is the same because that's his voice and, 2) a strategy underlies his every inflection.

The sound is often relaxed, but every fraction of every second is thought through, the product of many choices considered and discarded. I think: could I actually have convinced myself that this perfectionist—consider the famous twenty-two late-night takes to get “I've Got You Under My Skin” the way he wanted it—was coasting on his name and intellectually lazy?

And then there's the tone. Trying to describe it is like trying to describe rare wine. You could toss adjectives at it—suave, earnest, authoritative, vulnerable, butch—and still fall short of anything accurate. A friend says that Sinatra songs strike him as just so many post-coital cigarette breaks. You can see why someone would think

that since the songs we most closely associate with Sinatra are imported from the Great American Songbook and so much of what's there is about love. Those songs nail down just about every which way love arises, flourishes and fails. And Sinatra sings them in a way that signals he knows what they're about and that—he knows—you do too. It's a sly way of requesting your confidence, of seducing your engagement. It sounds deceptively casual until the instant it morphs into something more earnest. As verse piles on verse, for example, "I've Got You Under My Skin" measures out its mix of ardor and fatalism in ever larger doses.

But what anyone could agree with is that Sinatra's sound, his vocal tone, carries the authority of experience. That of course is a word with many definitions, but dictionary.com defines it as: "the totality of the cognitions given by perception; all that is perceived, understood, and remembered." It is there in the words but the tone itself is ineffable, beyond words. If you know it, you hear it. If you don't, you don't.

Once I really listened to Sinatra I was able to step inside the spirit of his singing. His best songs have this in common with much great art: they're both familiar and strange. They both comfort and disquiet. His approach seems so unaffected that sometimes I wondered if he was talking or singing, and resented it, but it occurred to me after a while that those two activities are not mutually exclusive and that this happens constantly in opera, a genre with which he was on intimate terms.

Here is a style largely free of embellishment or effects (imagine Frank Sinatra scat singing, ouch!) the point of which is to put the song first, the singer second, but which by seemingly doing that accomplishes the opposite. A lot like a card trick, when you think about it. And ingenious. How else do so many Sinatra interpretations top the list of American popular songs that have been covered and recorded by hundreds of people?

The strange thing that results—strange because I never would have expected it—is the pleasure listening to Frank Sinatra's music

gives me. Like all aesthetic pleasure, it's involuntary. In the beginning I neither desire nor anticipate it. It just happens. A discovery, much like rock 'n' roll at age ten, though, in this case, not the product of lucky circumstances (that place, that time). This time it's the result of being willing to do the work necessary to change my own mind.

One September weekend in 2015, the Pope arrived in Philadelphia.

The city closed its streets to vehicular traffic. Maps in hand, pilgrims wandered our public spaces. As many as a million people gathered on the Parkway, in front of the Art Museum, to hear His Eminence say Mass. And while the town shut down, I withdrew to my apartment and for two days played, with undiminished pleasure, the same eight Sinatra albums.

Late discoveries may be the best discoveries. They prove that that repository of curiosity and awe within remains somehow intact. And once I was hooked I couldn't shake him. I finally figured out why. Listening to The Supremes or the British Invasion bands remains a guilty pleasure, one freighted with the double risk of sentimentality and burnout. Is *Herman's Hermits Greatest Hits* playing right now because it's great music, or because I'm trying to crawl back into the pillow-piled bed of childhood? With the Beatles the answer is unambiguous, but I limit my Beatles listening to a few days a year, rather than risk growing indifferent to songs I've heard, now, thousands of times.

Sinatra has more staying power.

What are you working on, a visitor asks, and when I tell him he fixes me with the look a mirror might have thrown back had someone else asked me the same question at, say, age 30.

"Frank Sinatra?"

We pay a price for aesthetic stubbornness. Sometimes it's a big one. In this case the price consists of all the opportunities to hear this artist in that most perfect performance venue, the nightclub, which I forfeited.

One July evening some years back I'm driving to Cape Cod. By the time I get to the Mass Pike, it's 2:45 a.m. There's not another car on the road. Suddenly I'm hungry. Then, tired. Now I feel overwhelmed in the way that everything suddenly seems meaningless or unimportant with no discernable catalyst for said feeling. I've been in these situations before—red-eye driving—and you at some point run the risk of succumbing to hallucination.

I pop *Only The Lonely* into the CD player. The box features the album's original cover art. Sinatra, as Pagliacci, the tragic clown. The artist who drew it won a Grammy. It's the last of the Riddle collaborations and different, deeper, more somber, than the others.

Desire, the verb, is about not having something. Desire, the noun, is a spiritual state. On *Only the Lonely*, recorded in three days, desire's come and gone. The singer recorded this album, his favorite among the Riddle collaborations, in the aftermath of his divorce from Ava Gardner. Frank Sinatra was literally out of his mind about Ava Gardner.

I crack first the right back window, then the left. Air pours in. Tires roar across asphalt. The world is noise. Our lives are noise. There is noise and there is music. I twist the knob as loud as it will go. No lights ahead or behind.

In a minute there's a lump in my throat, a sensation I haven't visited since fifth grade. How do great singers do this? Thank God they do and thank God there's no one else in this car.

If you love an artist instantly, it's like any other kind of love at first sight: turn the hourglass upside down and wait. Whatever is great mixes positive and negative elements. These are necessarily held in balance and out of that balance there arises a tension always present, always felt. Immediate worship only means you've blinded yourself to the negative that's surely there; that you see only what shines, what's colorful, what soothes, and when that light goes out or the tune dies away, as it will, you're left questioning your taste, your judgment, your self. If your attention is directed only toward the

dark side, toward what's negative—in other words if you instantly dismiss—you'll fail to see, or more importantly, to feel, what might have changed who you are or where you are.

Great artists speak for everyone. It's one of several things that make them great. They don't have to be great people. Often they aren't. What they have to have is the ability to awaken what's great—sublime, generous—in each of us. The next time you sit in a concert hall or any musical venue, ask yourself why you're even there, why you've paid all that money to place your body and mind in that space at that time, amidst the manifold distractions attendant to any human gathering. Wouldn't you rather be watching television, reading or having sex? Wouldn't playing tennis or bird watching be a hell of a lot more fun? But you're there to find what you already know exists, something that's part of you, the best part, and art, especially the greatest art—music—is only a way to find it.

The Water Spider

M.W. Johnston

It was foggy that morning. Until the sun came out and burnt the fog to tatters over the harbor, brought the peal of children from the nearby schoolyard (either a coincidence, or it really was true that fog deadened sound), dried the dew on Laurie's lawn, and heated her cedar door until it gave scent—until all that, for an hour or two in the morning, Laurie entertained the possibility of a fully foggy day.

It would never happen. The fog always broke by noon. But even if it didn't—what was the use? A day like that would be all morning. She would fall apart in the freedom of it. When was one supposed to go to bed, draped in the day's failures? (The image had Laurie in real drapes, torn from the curtain rods, like the survivor of a house fire. The house was a century old and stuffed with her papers; it would go up in minutes.) What of the checklist on the fridge? Laurie no longer wrote, but in her writing days fog, or a morning rain-storm, had been a rare gift. She was a morning worker.

That morning she cleaned a little, and made coffee in the press that was a gift from her niece, and fried some eggs and bread. She sat at her kitchen table, in the light by the patio doors, and looked out at the fog. Down the hill, beyond the street, the fog was devouring the harbor. It had laid its long wide body on the harbor, had stilled the harbor to a perfect paralyzed surface, the better to devour it. She watched this silent predation until her eggs had cooled to jelly, and then, feeling full, she ate.

The display was so obviously like something Laurie had seen before that she opened her mouth, expecting the answer to come tumbling out. Nothing happened. The way a certain predator, she thought, but the thought went nowhere. The way it what? An insect, maybe, that paralyzed its victims before eating them. Was that right? With a beak like a straw. And then lay in repose, eating. Which of them did that?

Check the computer, she thought, and remembered what she had done to it.

Around which time, having tidied and made her coffee before going back to prepare breakfast, the fog began to lift.

It had been Laurie, not some insect, who had decapitated her mate after successful copulation, in a ceremony involving an expensive Chinese restaurant, ten years of each of their lives, and a back room in the town courthouse. Mr. Stern remained among the living, but barely. He liked to carry his head around with him, in a false show of gratitude for her having spat it out. When she ran into him, he would gesture with it. Look, he seemed to say—for he could no longer make noise out of his mouth—look at what my life is like now.

“You have the money to have that sewn back on,” Laurie told him once—it was the third or fourth time they’d run into each other. They were in the freezer section of the grocery store. The words astonished him; his mouth grew wide. But he had always been astonished by money. *Spider woman*, he mouthed, out of his severed head, in front of a wall of ice cream sandwiches.

Spider, Laurie thought, getting into her car: it was the spider who paralyzed its victims with a bite to the neck. Not a *beak*, then, but *bite* and *neck*. That was the confusion. And not the neck, anyway, but the other thing, whose name she could not recall.

It seemed daily, now, that there was some new thing Laurie could not recall.

But the fog was lifting, and she had to run errands. The paper, for one thing, had run out. And cleaning supplies. Garbage bags she thought she had, but something to disinfect the floors, sheets of plastic, disposable gloves. . . .

Laurie pulled her car onto the road and drove along the lakeshore, until she saw a small person on the shoulder, back-packed and waving excitedly.

She passed him, slowing, and pulled over. It was that Skinner boy, at the foot of what must have been his own driveway, which

wound back uphill into the trees. He ran up to the passenger door, tugged on the handle, and leaned down to look at her, breathing heavy on the window. “Hey, it’s locked!”

She unlocked the door, and he hopped in. “Hi,” he said. “I know you. You’re—Ms. Stern.”

He was out of breath, and said it in one exhalation, like *cistern*. “I am indeed,” she said. “And you are Mr. Skinner.”

“Yeah. Hey so would you mind taking me the rest of the way to school? I missed the bus.”

“Not a problem,” Laurie said.

They pulled back onto the road.

Laurie had the radio on, but the song irritated her, she didn’t know why, so she turned it off. Skinner patted his thighs, looking out the passenger window at the trees.

“Could I ask you a question?”

“You are driving me to school otherwise I’d be late,” Skinner said. “That gives you basically unlimited question privileges.”

Laurie glanced at him, all eleven or so years of him tucked into a chubby rosy-faced body, a lot of body tucked behind his rosy face. He had dried cereal on one corner of his mouth. His hair was gelled but only over the front third of his scalp. The rest he must have forgot about in his hurry, or else it was beyond what he could see in the mirror.

“You’re in what grade. Six?”

He confirmed he was.

“Okay. Sixth grade. So you’ve probably done some animal biology maybe, by this point.”

“Animal biology? I aced that. It’s my best subject. Ask me literally anything.”

She wanted to know if there was a specific kind of spider that paralyzed its prey.

“Well, first of all,” Skinner said, “that’s not just spiders. That’s basically a lot of insects.”

“Really!”

“Yeah that’s, that’s one of the most common mechanisms for hunting in the insect world.”

“I didn’t know that,” Laurie said.

“Insects,” Skinner continued, “evolved to have many different hunting techniques for killing their prey. Spiders especially.”

“They *do* seem like rather effective hunters,” she said.

“They are,” he said. “They definitely are. Nobody even sees all of what they can do. Scientists are still discovering them.”

They came to the end of their road and turned out onto the semi-highway that would merge with the Trans-Canada. “Well,” Laurie said, “thank you for sorting that out for me.”

“No problem.”

“What are you focusing on now in your classes?”

Skinner said, “Cellular reproduction. Mitosis and meiosis.”

She had no questions about these things, and let him be.

The boy had, Laurie thought, lots he might have wanted to say.

But the presence of an adult, even one as old as herself, had quieted him. He responded to questions but would pursue nothing on his own. That was fine. Laurie had all day to do errands but had taken the morning fog as a signal: today ought to be spent, if she could afford it, for the most part alone. It was making more and more sense to her that this conversation be a little one-sided, that it could drop off into a comfortable silence.

“So you said you have a test next week?”

“Yeah,” Skinner said. “In grammar.”

“When I was young, I hated grammar.”

“I’m young now, and *I* hate grammar,” Skinner said. “I’ll probably keep hating it until I’m as old as you are.”

When she glanced at him, he blushed.

“You’ll have to let me know,” she said.

“Oh—yeah.”

“I’ll probably be half cyborg by then,” she said, but Skinner was looking up the road.

A kilometer or so away she could make out the rearmost of a line of vehicles. Yellow men with signs milled about beside the road. “Oh, uh-oh,” Skinner said.

“That is not ideal,” Laurie said.

They slowed to a stop behind a silver pick-up truck. The truck had a bumper sticker which said, HOW DOES IT SMELL FROM BACK THERE?

“Wise guys,” Laurie said, and immediately decided she ought not to have said anything. She didn’t understand the sticker, and it could have been some well-known reference. More likely it was filth. But she looked over at Skinner to see what he made of it, thinking, If he thinks it’s funny, I’ll laugh, too. But Skinner’s face was red, his eyes wet.

“Hey,” she said. “It’s Monday morning. This shouldn’t take long.”

“Could you call?”

“The school you mean.”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t have a cell phone,” she told him.

“You don’t have a *cell phone*?”

“No,” she said. And then added, “Not anymore.”

“Not anymore? What happened to it?”

“To be honest,” she said, “I dropped it in the bath.”

“You dropped what? Oh. Oh, holy cow. That’s genius. That’s really smart.”

“One of my better moments,” she agreed.

“And you like paid for it and everything?”

“I paid for it and everything.”

“Oh my God,” Skinner said.

“Do you have a cell phone?”

“I’m not allowed,” he said.

“I’m sure they’ll let us through in a couple minutes,” Laurie said.

“No, based on this lineup I bet it will probably take at least an hour and a half.” The boy checked his watch and sighed. “Maybe ninety minutes.”

A quarter of an hour passed, without movement. Skinner had begun rocking gently back and forth in the seat.

“It’s just that if I’m late they’ll call home,” he said when she asked him if he wanted to stretch his legs on the shoulder. Then silence, and rocking.

Laurie was thinking of Toby, an old neighbor, much younger than herself, of whom this boy reminded her. He’d written Laurie letters. That was how she knew Toby. A precocious young man. She couldn’t tell if Skinner was very like him or very unlike him.

“Hey, Mr. Skinner,” she said.

He said nothing, only turned and brought his eyes no higher than her hands, tapping the wheel.

“Hmm?”

“I was just thinking,” she said. “About something that might distract you. Want me to tell you?”

“You can hardly expect to *tell* someone you want to distract them and then *actually* distract them.” He wiped his nose with the heel of his hand. “I’ve been primed. I’m basically un-distractible now, on account of you saying that.”

Then he said, “You can tell me if you want.”

“One time,” Laurie began, “I was in a bit of a car chase on this same stretch of highway.”

Skinner exhaled. “No.”

“It’s true. It wasn’t that exciting. Not like it sounds, anyway. Somebody wanted to speak to me, and they came to my house, but I was gone. Except I hadn’t left soon enough, so I guess they could see my car some ways down the road. They trailed me, and I started going faster. By the time we got here I was going somewhere around one-sixty.”

“Oh wow,” Skinner said.

“Thankfully no one was hurt,” Laurie said.

“Why did they want to talk to you?”

The men on the roadside stood idly in small groups. One was slowly spinning his sign, SLOW/STOP, STOP/SLOW, while he spoke to a parked vehicle. Phones, Laurie supposed, were forbidden. In the bed of a pickup truck another sat eating lunch from a pair of plastic containers balanced on his knees.

“I used to write letters,” Laurie said to the boy, “to a young man. Who, actually, reminds me a lot of you. Gosh, he must be in his thirties now. But his parents didn’t like that we wrote letters to each other. They came to confront me about it, and that was when I took off.”

“Why?”

“No specific reason, I guess. But letters are personal, you know, almost by definition personal. Anyone who read ours would immediately see that I did not say anything I shouldn’t have. I was the young man’s tutor for a while, and we started the letters as an exercise in writing. Later on, they were more just for themselves. Mostly I asked about his own life. I was curious about the life of a young person less than half my age. How he thought about things. Just—to know.”

“Just to know,” Skinner repeated.

“But the young man’s parents, they found out about the letters, I guess he had been holding on to them. They asked me to stop, and I did. But, after a little break, I got a letter from him—he’d dropped it on my back porch. He was so lonely. I couldn’t help but answer. His parents discovered it and went wild. I was told never to contact him again.”

“That’s really sad,” Skinner said.

It *had* been really sad: like a lesson in the feeling. “I thought,” she said, “it might make the young man feel ashamed of what he had been doing. That was the saddest part of it. But then right around that time, I got sick.”

“Oh. What kind of sick?”

She realized now that she'd prevented herself from seeing sooner the reasons why telling the boy any part of this would be inappropriate. “Sick,” she repeated. “Not physically, but...I suppose just more unstable. It's something you'll understand when you're older.” Stop now, she thought, and didn't: there was a momentum she recognized, already at work.

“I guess—I felt not quite like myself. And the medicine I was taking sometimes played little tricks on my memory. And one time, what the medicine told me was, Hey, Laurie, when's the last time you wrote to Toby? I wrote another letter, but it was while I was sick.”

“Oh,” Skinner said.

“But the thing was,” she said. Thinking *stop now stop it*. “The *thing* was, I did not remember any of what I wrote in that letter.”

He heard that with silence, as she'd thought he would.

“Not a single word,” she went on. “Now, I suppose I look forgetful, as many old people do. But I was a vigilant young person once, and even when I was no longer very young I wrote a lot, and writing actively is great for the memory. But that letter—I didn't even know I *sent* it until I got a reply, not by a letter, but a knock on my door from Toby's parents, and the police.”

“What did they say?”

What didn't they say, she thought. But then, they had a point. And here she had to filter the thing for Skinner's ears a little.

“They said if I tried to contact their son again, they would have me arrested. They would make sure I went away to jail for good, books or not. They were sorry to have read the things I put in that letter. Well, it scared me straight, you can be sure of that.”

End with a lie, then, she thought. And find a goddamn lesson to it quick.

Up ahead, the line of cars began inching forward.

“Well look,” she said. “Not even half an hour. We're in luck.”

“I’m sorry I was crying,” Skinner said as they pulled off the highway and headed into town.

“What? You don’t have to apologize for that.”

“No,” he said, “I think I should. I’m sorry. I’m worried about being late.”

“Everybody is late now and then.”

“I don’t want to make anyone upset,” was all he said.

A moment later, he said, “Misstern?”

“Uh huh?”

“You said something about books. You said they’d throw you in jail, books or not. What did you mean, books or not?”

They were driving down King Street, past the grocery store and their little mall, the Tim Horton’s and the gas station and the auto maintenance store and several buildings whose use was a mystery to Laurie now, obscure government offices maybe, the esoteric dwellings of insurance agents.

“Oh. That’s nothing. I used to write children’s books. That’s all.”

“Oh,” Skinner said.

“Mhm.”

“That’s crazy about the letters,” Skinner said.

“It is crazy,” she agreed.

And did not add: that they continued, angry mercurial mis-sives, things she never could have told anyone, things so hidden that before she wrote them they could hardly have been said to be true at all. Reading them, in a lucid interval, had been like reading a correspondence between her own major organs. She kept cycling between recognition and betrayal. She sought help, and the mercurial thing reacted. And began to throw its firm small weight around in the chemical pipework of her personality.

What was the straightforward way to say that a self had come loose inside her, and wanted free?

But she said only, “Yes, it’s amazing how sometimes we do things without having control over them. Not everything, I mean, is someone’s fault. A lot of what we do is really accidental, only we

don't know it. I could not have helped myself. *That* is why I always practice a level of kindness toward others. Like picking you up today. I might have left you on the side of the road, you know that?"

They had stopped at the only lighted intersection in town. Skinner wasn't saying anything. How long until the call from his parents? They can email me, she thought. I bet the computer will still receive it. The phone had still worked, at least the first time she'd dunked it. Its notification bubble had shimmered in the screen, beneath six inches of bathwater.

"But a strange experience, definitely," she told Skinner; and that was when the fog returned.

It came with no warning, no transition: immediately the two had sunk to the bottom of a vast and heaving whiteness. The displays on Laurie's dashboard flickered and went off. Her headlights died. The sounds of the town, to which she'd paid no attention before, had muted, leaving a ponderous silence like the hush before an opera.

"Misstern?" Skinner said. "It's green. Why aren't you moving?"

What green? she wondered. There was no green. Out the windows she could make out the abstract whisper of moving things. The car's engine shut off by itself. "I don't see green anywhere."

"Right in front of you!" Skinner said. And at the same time, not before or after, added, "Hold on why did you shut off the car?"

She turned to ask him what he meant.

But there were two Skinners now, both sitting in the passenger seat. One was the chubby bad-haired boy Laurie had picked up on the side of the road. He seemed not to alternate, not to merge, but simply to coexist in the same space with another Skinner. This one was not especially chubby. His hair was flat and sandy brown. In fact, he was not especially anything. He seemed a beacon of inertness, a clone manufactured in a world of grey stone expanses. And as Laurie sat remarking on the geometry of the thing she was suddenly convinced that this alternate could not be connected, could in no way be related, to the boy she had picked up. There was no trick to it,

no doubling of vision. He had come, she was sure, from outside the vehicle. Had winnowed his way in.

As the other-Skinner looked at her, his eyes changed. Tendrils in the hazel mix spread, leaving bright green markings. “Ms. Stern,” the other-Skinner said. “You’re frightening me.” But his voice was solemn, his tone unremarkable.

The other-Skinner’s hair caught fire, and burned fiercely, like the combustion of an element.

And if she could only reach him, just—to hold him, she knew she could put it out. To hold him firmly enough would be easy. But the primary Skinner, still present, was in the way. And to move him she would need to be careful, not to jostle the other, not frighten him, but to adjust, with firmness, for a single second—

“Miss Stern,” Skinner said slowly.

“Yes, my dear?”

“Please let go of me.”

But by that time a little crowd had gathered in their fall coats around the car, and the fog had all but lifted, and the other-Skinner had vanished in some crack in the upholstery, by whichever way he had come in.

Laurie would not expect it, but she was never fully surprised

at the thought that she might be a danger to somebody. And as they brought her to the hospital that morning, the woman caught sight of a spider, finally—a water spider, it must have been, for it skated across a puddle near the parked taxis—and remembered. The morning returned in a series of flashes. She resisted lightly the arms of the men holding her shoulders for another look back. The thing skated—but not *skated*, not exactly. Really it slid with its feet in some chemical exactitude across the surface of the puddle, leaving no mark, in pursuit of prey too small to see. She had the name in her mind: *Gerridae*. She said it.

“Who’s this?” one of the EMTs asked.

“The Eurasian water spider,” Laurie said.

“Those are *striders*,” the EMT said simply. He did not even look! “Not spiders. They come over from the drain gully into the puddles when it rains. And this isn’t Eurasia.”

She accepted this in silence.

“Did I do something terrible?” she asked the EMTs.

“Terrible is thankfully a broad umbrella,” one of them said. “You could cover a minivan with most people’s definitions of terrible.”

Meanwhile a siren was blaring. In an act of pure inertia an ambulance burst into the parking lot and screamed to a halt. People came running.

“I was driving a young man to school,” Laurie said. “We write letters to each other. I’m afraid something awful has happened to him. Did someone take him the rest of the way? Was he on time?”

“He’s fine,” one of the EMTs said.

“But the sirens—”

They had flitted, by some magic, from the front doors to an elevator. A poster with a large many-legged cartoon monster claimed BEWARE OF SUPERBUGS—WASH YOUR HANDS!

“Someone lost control on the 125,” said one of the EMTs. “Ran through a construction site. You probably missed it by a couple minutes.”

The elevator opened, and Laurie was compelled into a clean hallway. Grimly, she called back to the poster: “Goodbye, superbug!” And then to the EMTs: “I used to know quite a lot about insects, actually.” She already knew what they were going to tell her in one of their rooms, for she’d taken proficient notes the last time. The EMTs brought her into a room and a nurse took some quick tests and called for a doctor. The nurse said, “Did you know your blood pressure is remarkably level for a person your age?” And then left in the middle of Laurie’s response. But they were simply busy, as they had been the last time.

But here Laurie was, at last, surprised. For no sooner did the nurse return to Laurie’s bedside than a man in a reflective vest came in, carrying her bedside table. “You put that back!” Laurie cried; it

was an old table and a dowel was free somewhere inside it. Laurie was struck with a keen embarrassment, but there was hardly any time to react—for the man in the vest was pursued by a trio of men struggling with her sofa. In no time, each piece of Laurie’s furniture had been brought into the room where Laurie sat fretting on the electronic bed. Who knew how it all fit. Finally a nurse returned, and Laurie waved her over.

“Am I to understand that the contents of my entire house have been placed in this room?”

“It’s a temporary measure,” the nurse responded.

“And just what use do you have, cluttering a sick-room and emptying a house of an old woman’s things?” Laurie asked.

“Fumigation,” the nurse responded.

Mother Nation

Tom Gogola

The following is the prologue to Gogola's debut novel Mother Nation, out in 2018 from Stormy Day Books. Journalist and musician Gogola lived and worked in New Haven for a number of years and now does so in northern California.

I

Reporter's Notebook: Mother's Day, 2018

I just went through the indictment and before I call my lawyer and turn myself in, I've been advised by the Media Congress that I should try to capitalize on the experience, get a jump on the next crisis. My civic duty, they say. Now I smell smoke and a local crisis brewing. Check it out, commanded the Media Congress. I've been promised a new identity if I agree to position myself as the latest iteration of whatever they need. I'm indicted, I'm inducted, so let's get on with the fiery beheadings already.

The undersub head-hunters say I'm uniquely qualified for the job, and yet the *Mother Nation* editors wouldn't respond even to my most hostile, taunting emails. I delivered the pitch of pitches to set the record straight about the faked D-Day landings and it's funny how that part of the story never made it into the indictment, though who knows, maybe it did. The indictment is *heavily* redacted.

Next on my reading list is *Righteous Rules for Alt-Radicals*, the best-seller from the book division at *Mother Nation*, whose editors have now been elevated to positions of high power in the Media Congress. The un-redacted version is fertilized with nitrogen. Don't ask me how I smuggled it in here. I'll only cop to Brock handing it to me over blackmail coffee before I was arrested, which is where you sit in a diner and make caffeinated threats to a fellow broke-beak reporter to get in line, or else—"This is embargoed until I say it isn't"—and then dime-drop him for felony possession of classified

demonologies, as applied to technology. I'm talking of course about the Honor Tax app created by my late father, Randy Mehrmann.

This investigation is also redacted at various points, given my easily traced location in the political culture and the demands and exigencies of a Freedom From Information Request. On that note, and at the insistence of the Media Congress, there are three words that you will not read in the pages that follow. Their presence is indicated by a Trigger Censor Redaction notification. The redactions are applied to underscore the surrounding vulgarity that is not subject to review by the Media Congress. For clarity's sake, the Media Congress has given me a one-time exception to utter the unforgivable words. Now the press release says jailbird pancakes will be deployed as gas masks before this is all over, and that I'll have to answer for my grammatical elisions. Prison will do this to a man. Or, to a man. Prison will do this—to a man.

You buried the lead, the editors always said that when I filed my story.

I buried my source, I muttered so they couldn't hear.

I'm trying to stay grounded in facts and this one's true I swear, this story, it is true. I'm not going to tell it right away because of the lawyers, but bear with me, please. It was the mid-summer Mardi Gras and an African-American chef in New Orleans told it to me a few years ago, going on several. I conspired to make his story my own and after the *Mother Nation* betrayals, set out to write a pitch for *Armed & Liberal* that was bulletproof insofar as the facts. I would go blackface again *if* they accepted the pitch, to try and keep up with Brock as we groped our white way through the identity trenches. I gave them what they wanted to hear, I thought. But the timing.

The timing was all wrong, and the editors recoiled at the abrasive frankness of my pitch. I swear it was the pills talking, as mingled with the ghost of Al Jolson, why couldn't they see that? And accept it, too? We white guys, it's our job to go out there and tear flesh apart for no reason. We are born to disrupt.

The crisis moment passed again. I failed to keep up in my media career, and the politics blew past me. Black lives had ceased to matter, just as I had the online degree which upgraded my expertise in John Brown throat-clearing. Now the magazines and thought leaders wanted long-read stories about white lives, and how they matter too—and perhaps more. “Pitch us again, though,” the editors cooed icily through underpaid intermediaries with offshore paychecks. I accepted the routinized blow-off yet unlike Brock, struggled to embrace the gross totalism of our times and watched *Mother Nation* feign resistance, on the editorial pages of a glistening tablet—and with a close eye on the market. Brock was right there on the Johnny scene with the Brown to Birch switch-out. He pounced as *Mother Nation* embraced new priorities in the pivot to a government by, of and for the media. Nobody could editorialize like Brock when it came to the advent of legislation as spectacle. I admit he was master at the under-sub racket, his disruption via transition, as the lies circled the globe and returned to Washington long before the truth got out.

I figured the sturdy and patriotic folks at *Armed & Liberal* would accept my pitch, but they turned me in and accused me of being an incel insider, rabid dog variety. I couldn’t deny it. I had the rejection letters that rationalized murder, I had created a cloud of collateral self-destruction to mask the larger task at hand. There were pills everywhere to stimulate the vengeance. I regrouped and resisted, despite the financial risks as a middle-aged white man defying his historical moment.

I pitched the story again, this time to the mirror of the Fresnel-lens philosophies, the steam-punk throwback lens whose politics were up for grabs but racially motivated. I reframed the storyline into the inevitable parable about my victimization at the hands of the media, and in particular *Mother Nation*. I stood at the window and sketched a pop-up performance piece about the encounter with the man with the karma tale into the camera, rendered it bloody and feral and solo-webcam style, complete with the Jungian dance moves. I need to jump

the shadow if I'm going to get a jump on the next crisis, or an advance on the story of my final dissolution into a politics of rolling betrayals. Fragments of memory. A falsified trip to the foreign land.

But the story *he* told, not *me* told, began in a strip club and so I did my part to honor the women, the girlfriends in the story, the dancers. TMI-TV was interested, but only on spec, as I rifled through the buried stash of undersub gear in the bureau, selected some choice garments, changed into them and stood in the kitchen in a gold-flecked micro thong, riffing pseudo vagina, the tucked-in style, and swinging a bottle of indecent red. I painted my toenails orange and told the story from the strippers' perspective. I attached the metal clamps to various appendages and adjusted the clamps for maximal discomforting pleasure as I attached the leads to the car battery, and adjusted my tie. The sudden one-frame appearance of a BB-gun AR-15 was the necessary plot twist. I rolled film and offered a pay-per-view option of suicide by cop.

Why are you telling us this, the *Mother Nation* editors demanded, with memos to the authorities as cc'd attachments. I ignored their questions and renewed my subscription to the magic bolus theory of resistance self-immolation, a miracle of colliding disasters and impulses. Who can deny the ecstatic moment when a desperate fifty-year-old white man shoots up while shooting home pornography, of by and for the Media Congress masses, and then blows his brains out.

I'm telling you this because I have complex feelings about my old friend Brock and respect that he found a way to exploit the libertine fascism that made him at once hilarious, brilliant, and excruciating. His extremes collided like many jolly galaxies and it took a president like Orange Sunshine for his value to our Republic to be fully revealed. And it's because of him that for most of my life I appropriated stories and lives for a living, suckled at adaptability and considered the contours of *resilience*, which has emerged as a new national buzzword. I resent it.

To set the record straight, I fell into a trance-act webcam show

which came to bring this story into light. The sheer clandestine fabrics made their way to my barren flesh which twitched at the near-memory of a politically charged touch. Patriotic ranks of the involuntary celibate, those incels, crept up to the windowsill, voyeurs in the night who offered support. The clamps bit harder and blood squirted from my you know where. A slow-cooker turned the corner with the chicken in the kitchen, a hissing of steam, and I tightened the tie.

I gave the nips a quick car-battery shock, yet they rebelled at the jocosity of my delivery. I ripped off the clamps. *I'll show you.* All their lives they had been victimized by sexual violence, the girls—not my clamped-down nipples, who had issues of their own—and I made sure the crime they participated in was seen in that light. The after-action report says the clamps were redeployed to the nether districts. I knew right then that there was no way this story ended without bloodshed or a meeting with Human Resources.

But I'm resilient. I set out to represent the point of view of the boyfriends as described by the black chef. Those men were possessed of wisdom and fatalism and street genius. Those were men desperate but not groveling for empathy purchase in the hot urban environment where so many in the culture were inured to the violence—who yet embraced patriotic volatility coming through the projects and the nasty nabes. I changed costumes, sweat-suits and faux gold teeth, Saints football regalia around the neck, beaded stuff to go with the red tie, and for authenticity's sake, gave myself a grease-paint applique of the blackface, despite the risk of various thin-skinned diseases. My insurance should cover it, I thought. *You can dish it but you can't take it*, and the stewing chicken agreed. The camera rolled and I told the story again. The boyfriends were rough and ugly-beautiful, they had cruel mommies and hard-case daddies, and the through-line was how to beat poverty by any means necessary. *Roll a bitch.*

I motioned in the direction of antic disregard for consequence, and grabbed the bowie knife from the kitchen rack as I prepared to tell the tale as told from the perspective of its teller, who had a wild if

unrelated scar circumnavigating his scalp, to go along with his parable.

I clutched the bowie knife and cut a long, arcing moon across and around my forehead to about where my upper ears started. The blood dripped down, burned my eyes and mingled with the *coq au vin* vapors burbling off the slow-cooker.

I'll let the chef himself tell it in a minute, his is the only version that matters, but my profession requires that I represent all sides, lest I be accused of harboring a bias, let alone a Syrian refugee or, God forbid, a Mexican one. I opened the icebox and unwrapped an ancho-rubbed pork loin from its butcher paper and then changed into all-white attire to denote a spiritual shift from an esoteric metaphysics of American syncretism, into Yoruba Fundamentalism and its transactional spell-cast dogmas. I present a roiling goddess, Yemaya, who can be quite unforgiving at times. The veil was thin, the *mis en scene* was holding steady, and the establishing shots were in the can. What did I have to lose?

In the final act I guzzled a second bottle of the red decadence, and postured for the cameras as a sort of ferally incomplete metro-sexual stumble-bum in electrified nipples clamps and tight bondage home-wear, tweaked with meat slather—and the re-deployment of the clamps, a particular style. I filmed it all and got on the phone with who knows who to share the news of total artistic emancipation, and set the camera on auto-fellate.

I rejoiced with the broiler raging at an engorged pork loin, I dipped into the simmering on the stovetop slow cooker as counterpoint while I fed reams of Honor Tax documents into the stew. Nearby, a ripe pineapple was chewed to its reptile husk, fruit-yellow drops flecked with blood as I played the sticky crime victim in the tale. Dead flies on the sill. I dreamed a final reckoning with online infamy.

I woke into a sun coming through the big window and lay on the cold kitchen tiles in a pool of blood and *coq au vin* vomit splatter, broken glass everywhere and a message blinked on the machine. I ignored the blinks but reviewed the footage with an eye toward poten-

tial virality, a monetized and fully immersed journalism of national exhibitionism, a poetry of investigative intent met with the clarity of absolution in dissolution. Would you rather die hugging a tree or humping a stump? It's an open question, needs answers. Nude reporters in clothing-optional last resorts, county style, trading info and hand-jobs on the Arm.

I watched and despaired that the various versions of the story did not match up in the plot-line convenience I had cultivated in the recapitulation. The stories were wildly at odds. The strippers lied about their complicity in the theft and said *I never seen this motherfucker*, the boyfriends exaggerated the bounty in his pockets, the splayed victim denied he had a drinking problem in the first place and this was a total aberration. I deleted my version of the chef's story as told from his perspective, too graphic.

I was aware that my efforts were undertaken at risk of Media Congress damnation. I was firstly concerned about the potential for scandal insofar as the tone and inflection of the color commentary, the headline fervor and reaction. Can't worry about it. I took a breath and stepped away from generalized immediacy, and grabbed another manila folder fat with old papers and dumped the rest of the Honor Tax documents into the slow-cooker.

I had thumb-painted a bloody reminder above the couch the night before, signaling the final tweet: *First thought worst thought*. Now I listened to the morning news drone, public radio human-interest features whose birdsong sings a sponsor-pleasing doom. And here I was, making news. I didn't mind rolling blackface around the house, it was kind of fun, a closet-case blues cracker who pined for dreadlock acceptance. The key is to appreciate that there is no single-word antonym to dreadlock in the English language, and rejoice in the knowledge.

By late morning I had cleared up the mess and changed the station. The federal marine-weather station spit out a repeat performance of its own. It cycled through the regional forecasts in a metallic tone that soothed the California angst, now a hopeless home-

grown empire of dope-out policy advances headed straight off the final electric cliff, but not before a few Governor Brownouts or Uncle Jerry Brownshirts have their say. Who will it be?

I'm on the story, I'm in it
Sunday is weather-strong
With the variable whip of the wind

I walked to the cliff and God spoke to me in the voice of Mel Brooks. In 2015, the Honor Tax spread on Brooks was 417-1 for him to wind up as the last living veteran of World War II. Those were good odds but they've changed, drastically, thanks to the president's Calcutta initiative. In life as in dive bars, *The odds are good, but the goods are odd.*

I crawled off the cliff and headed home, where the marine radio is steady with news of a *dominant* swell, the auto-voice is clear and direct and a little playful in the top-end intonation and there are life-threatening long-shore currents, watch out. Gusts of up to twenty and with a *dominant* swell of a whole bunch of them. Gusts of ten. South by southwest at six with gusts to eleven. Synopsis. The inflection. The submission. Gusto. The weatherman says the wind is blowing and when he says it's *pleasant*, he's pleasant-toned. He's *dominant* and a bit louder when he says *dominant*. At least they haven't canceled this federal agency, yet, or that program, yet, even as the Great Leader tweets his preference and the agency scrambles to configure an acceptable weather sensibility.

Gusts of forty. Too much.

I should get back East but for that impenetrable heat dome which has put our middle-gut farm belt on high-red alert. Now come the hot gun mamas threatening to *fisk* the four-eyed editors back East, who are my general tribe or used to be until the *Mother Nation* betrayals. Celebrity sniper Demi Unmoored is on the cable news tube with the taunting rifle commentary, she's a crisis actor in coal-

black eyes and hair, waging American cold war on kids who just got shot up in a socialist public school. Ollie Oops to the rescue, North by Death and nobody's doing the contra dance anymore.

I'm working a few angles here, I told one editor, whatever your disaster, I'll be ready to report it.

The sky rained shredded documents and frittered through-lines, sent in response to a Freedom From Information Request and I scooped them up, into the pot. Let it reign. I did not tell the editors that I came out here to escape the last lash. I saw it coming. I set out to ride eccentric margins, but now I was narrowed to bare escapism and the walls were closing in from a bipartisan Media Congress committee of extremist agreement. The documents float pleasantly, menacingly, from the cloud, half-burned. They contain a serialized warning letter from Albert Einstein.

I heard a story once, almost forgot it. My compulsion to forget is met with an obsession with vengeance, which is why I skip a beat now and again in the blackout season, and especially with Brock's rise in the Media Executive trenches. I'd get back East and check in at the Rod Locker but I can't account for several years of jangled misanthropy, so that's a risky move for the moment. The nascent Free-Push Alliance has accused me of murder and I had to agree. The drugs were prescribed to me, I swear they were. Me and my drugs. What could I do but take them.

The point of the story is that not everyone gets the warning from on high, or wherever.

I'm getting to it now.

He was in a strip club in the French Quarter and got to talking with a couple of the dancers and their boyfriends. It was the 1990s and the chef was then on the cusp of a life of crime, a young man met with local opportunity, the familiar rituals. His story makes me want to read a poem. Don't be alarmed, there are a few of them sprinkled throughout this report.

We have formally closed ranks
with middle passengers
woke to the scam

He'd join the ranks
commit alacrity crimes
until reparations

Who stood and wondered
got mean in the prison pipeline
All ya'll think I'm a criminal anyway

Finally!

“After the club closed we were walking through the Quarter and we came on this guy, this guy who was passed out cold in front of a building, in the alcove, he was just laid straight out like that, cold. Them dancers and their boyfriends looked at each other, I was like watching them, I just met them and they were like, ‘Should we do this?’ And they looked at each other shrugged and said, ‘Yeah let’s do this.’”

He paused and shrugged and looked down at the curb and back up with a quick snap of a laugh.

“So they proceeded to roll the guy, I watched them right there, and they got his wallet, and it had a bunch of cards in it, credit cards, and they grabbed them, the wallet, and there was some cash too and they were saying look, we got to get to the K-Mart across the Lake, how we gonna do that they said, get across the Lake?”

“And I said, I have a car. You know man I was getting in with them. ‘Cool,’ they said, ‘let’s go get your car.’ And so we started walking, we walked to my car, it was a couple blocks away and I, when we got to the spot where I’d parked it, the car . . .” He started to laugh. And paused.

The journalist pokes Frank about it. The walk which traversed the slave walk alleys, slow chains clank a misery beat up the jagged

cobbles, the constancy of a low and wretched moan. The New Orleans music is sacrament offered to drown and baptize ghost wails from slave corners of Esplanade Avenue. The voices are everywhere but you need the ear for them above the melodic blare and punishing thump of the brass band where every member has been shot at least once. The inheritance isn't negotiable and the penance is to listen at long length. A Mother Of All Nations is democratic in the middle-class passage, a striver's POV. Frank scoffed. They have cheated your sons and daughters of their franchise and sent them to jail. "I ain't talking about no McDonald's franchise neither," Frank said. "The fine print. Read the damn fine print!"

I tuned back in as the pause broke.

"We got to the place where the car was, where I'd parked it."

The chef stopped again, and laughed again and shook his head again.

"It was *gone*, the car was *gone*. Do you hear me man? 'Where's the car?' the strippers were yelling at me, and I'm like the car is *stolen*, there was no car, just an empty space where my car was supposed to be—," he said, grasping empty space.

"And you know what man? *I never even thought* about committing another crime, ever again. And after that, I mean it didn't happen right away, but I cooked, went on to travel, lived all over, cooked around the world, came back to New Orleans this year. Lived in Germany and cooked the hell out of Berlin. I loved it there—never even thought about committing a crime ever *again!*"

II

That's some story, no?

But wait a minute. Germany?—whose far-right return engagement is upon us as the last living veterans of WWII are counted up, rounded up, feted and disgraced? And glorified! And, perhaps, exaggerated.

The Great Leader takes his place at the podium.

Let the Honor Tax pass through the Media Congress without delay as we reform it to our new Calcutta America!

I tried to mainstream my opposition but came home from work one night and storm channels blared pornographies of grief and destruction. Given my high government position, total transparency is the ticket and so I have another urgent confession to make. I used to think as a pre-teen that France was the kinkiest country in the world. There was always this French implication of black leather and mass-cultural aloof sexuality that was dirty and intimidating, and possibly anal. Even as a proud descendant of Krauts, I had no idea until I was older that the Germans were much freakier than the French going in, where Aryan blitzkrieg perverts run amok with dildo tariffs these days, but let's forgive and forget if we can, for the sake of the veterans.

Nowadays, scarcity maniacs with maximum prejudice rejoice in their bully electorate, ride the *neo* into neo-nationalism. Neo-libtardism. Neo-Nosferatuism. Stick a *neo* on it and emphasize the phantom-limb pains, Frank. And Frank had to agree. Where the removal of extremities is viewed in some circuses as a measure of decency. For example: a thumb. Where I grew up, they sometimes fell off.

That reminds me. On a related front, here's another true story: I was sixteen when I went to the Navy recruiter. I went there to sign up, it was war. On the home front, my father was absent and my mother was nation. I didn't drive. One of the younger recruiters came and picked me up in the late morning and brought me to the office in Patchogue. It was the summer of 1984 and Orwell was my senior year project, and remains so. At the recruiter's office you could smell the nearby and perhaps adjacent pizzeria, especially on a hot day. This was a scorcher. I asked about a letter I'd gotten from the colonel. The recruiters were having a slow one.

I took out the letter and unfolded it and spread it like it a splashy executive order, for the cameras. Very deliberate performance, what about *this*. Back then I delivered the *New York Daily News*, and sometimes you'd read about this pouty-lip real estate developer from New York City with a Russian wife who rolled with

Michael Corleone— sorry, Roy Cohen—sorry again, Roy Cohn, the great and notorious closet-case killer of communists with those deeply soulful, hateful blue eyes. I also hated the communists, because my mother was dead and I had the letter in my hand which proved it. Back then I couldn't square up the Russian contradiction when it came to pouty-lip. Now it all makes sense, thanks, grudgingly, to Brock.

The recruiter paid the letter little mind as he gave the presentation and bellowed down at the form before us, "Just sign right *here*, son, and you'll be in the United States Navy!" Did I mention that the Navy had sent me a letter after I took the military proficiency test that said they would pay for college and I could wind up in an atomic submarine, I'd qualified for a six-year commitment?

I took out the letter and fondled it nervously. They said, just sign right *here*, son, and you'll be in the United States Navy!

For the last time: I brought the letter to the recruiter and asked, What about this letter? They said, Just *sign right here, son*, and you'll be in the Mother Of All Navies.

There were three of them on a slow day and they seemed a little fat to me, pushy, tight in their uniforms, and they ganged up on me. Wonder how you wind up sitting in a recruiter's office on a hot summer day in Patchogue instead of on a battleship. Pepperoni vapors.

Just sign right *here*.

I smeared ketchup on my arm one time, from a fast food packet, in the mid-1970s and caused great distress to a relative who was looking after me and who later said, with knowledge (a brother had served, her father too, and her future husband): "You mess up, you're painting the deck. That's how it works, letter or no letter."

Two decades later I was working, briefly and sporadically, for a lobsterman on the East Coast. The winter was especially harsh and personally sloshy but one day we got out of the harbor, the ice had retreated and we had a hundred or so pots to pull and the hull pushed through crisp cold chop toward the fishing grounds to the north. As we skimmed across fresh whitecaps I saw the cap-

tain smirk and his brow curled when he spotted the atomic sub as it headed for Groton, which was crossing our path out there in the Block Island Sound a mile or so to the north.

The submarines create a massive wake, a tsunami roller, so be careful, and it hailed the captain on the radio as it crossed our bow and the captain sped up to meet it, mirthfully. He motored on and got closer, and then too close, as a Coast Guard cutter on the scene near Fisher's Island pinged our hull registration number from a triangulated position relative to us and the submarine. The Coasties were shrieking and I was finally the subject of a national security debate. The captain laughed and eased off on the throttle as we watched the sub cruise by and the Coasties yelled at him over the radio, "Do not approach the submarine any closer!" He eased off some more and then commented that, in his opinion, fat women always smelled like peanuts.

I was held in a clear and cold seawater closeness, finding the most uncomfortable truth and dwelling in a comfort of sick surrender. I had not signed right here son.

III

I was chasing Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Walter Lincoln on Honor Tax business, submerged in the anarchist right frontier with the subcontract from Brock's people and lost in thought as I jacked a fruit move for the undersub phalanx in a thrice-removed journalistic investigation whose corollary in the spy trenches was triple-agency. The phone rang. I turned off the blender. Undersub? Well, here is vernacular twisted from federal law enforcement slang where the "unsub" is defined as the *unknown subject*. The unsub is under the radar, killing hookers, maybe we'll figure out who he is someday. The undersub, however, is watchful of offshore accounts, perhaps of Panamanian inflection. The undersub is the unknown-unknown-unknown subject of unknown crimes committed out of patriotic necessity but whose motives are actually unknown. In the old days, a

successful undersub fruit move could see a Media Congress investigation evaporate into thin air as corrupted local lawmen are charged with the bias crime of putting the blacks in prison for the crime of, *I wouldn't put it past him.*

I thought of Lincoln, the Tarawa hero and again with the marines at Okinawa, back in his cell at San Quentin where the smoke had bled from raging fires and men screamed in the acrid, lung-piercing air, and corrections chefs deployed prison-issue pancakes as gas masks to filter the smoke. It was all they had, unless they privatized. *Frank had the quote through the school-to-prison pipeline, did you not think there was educational value? "They just plastered them fucking things on their faces and the smoke filtered through."*

I stood in the kitchen and tuned into the encroaching fires and the scorching air. Doomsayer cottage blues on the radio. A hummingbird hovered out the window. I picked up the phone to drown out the ringing in my ear. A voice in the smoking wreckage in the city burst into song, rich and crackling on the landline. *Join with the vainglorious, she cried. Join with the crisis-jumpers, whose life is a disaster chased with meaning!*

I jumped into the car. The three days which followed are not a blur but a moment. They reminded me of going under the knife after that time I got stabbed in the chest, the cracking compressed lost time of the surgical ribcage procedure as the anesthesia took over. Or the blank ride home on 9-11 after felling Building Seven from the Brooklyn Bridge, the unholy *bleeping* Whitmania, the blackout perils of an ill equipped all-embrace. The lesson from that day is, I never go anywhere without the duct tape.

Here again was lost time and destruction. I negotiated the secret folders at the office in town, but where a routine coffee break to the dead-drop is now up in smoke. I was told to follow the smoke to the money to the possibility of redemption.

I drove through the city outskirts to a big public park, now an evacuation muster zone. Evacuees watched the nearby burning mountain with binoculars and I bee-lined through the frumpy public

golf course over chain-link fences to the forbidden neighborhood where firefighters hurled wooden furniture off decks of threatened houses. One voice humming, “*Stay on the chord, Wayne.*”

I’m trying. I keep giving notice, why then am I still here? I resigned but they would only accept total capitulation. *You people are screwed*, I thought and marched up the melting asphalt, past houses where signs said, “Our pool got 5,000 gallons, boys. Take it! Take everything!” The fire martyrs have arrived and taken over the school boards.

No, they never caught that guy

Yes they did

No, they only found his thumb

I cut through a shaded home lot with a rocky, domelike backyard, and rode a stone seam up between homes, quick-step huffing up the hill. Sound of breath. Pounding heart. *Fascistas vierten sobre el puente*. No water. Buzzing air with bugs as deer crash through the brush and branches, desperate for a legit defilade drawdown from this terror.

I saw the flame through a thatch of trees; it arced across the ridge and I came closer and finally was right up against, and with, the fire. The wind was favorable. The fire slowly crept down the hill while the smoke frantically blew up it. A thin and menacing line of fire-life curved down into the fringe money, the houses of lesser elegance down the ridge but still a million-plus, big cash views that must be spared.

Bulldozers in action down near a threatened house provided a latent rumble of catastrophe unloosed and deeply felt. Smoke blew above and beyond the scorched earth as I basked in the ash and deliverance, expired into a consecration of flame. The order of the day is blind luck and embers in the roof vents.

I straddled the flames, spent fifteen minutes with them and filmed an account that spoke from the fire, that interviewed the fire

and asked—*What do you make of this, in your uncontrollable urge to burn? We humans who gather and pivot into your circle of fiery, impish delights?*

The flames responded: *How dare you sing and laugh and dance when there are charred people and animals, obliterated houses in the smoke-gray aftermath of chimney defiance, new memories to build, new demographics of disaster!*

Now the American people in their greatness would have *their* say, they always did:

We're fire-and-earthquake folks from the West, plus throw in the mudslides and the nearby Yellowstone super-caldera. You?

Oh, we're a mangy pack of hurricane welfare cases who fielded the double-flood victim card given the coastal urgencies in the East.

The Midwest tornado crowd chimes in, red in the face along the new American front, and psychotic calm in the vertex—What about us? We were here before all this severe-weather bullcrap.

There's nothing extreme about an all-abiding extremism, which is why climate and the weather are the same thing, as the Great Leader reminds. At the same time, those tornado hustlers sure could run a game: Give us a say, a vote, or else no one gets one.

The fires raged and the wind whipped around the hill with its slippery dry grasses and gnarled stony surprises which gave no quarter. I sang to the fire and I stood inches from the fire and I felt the cold hand. Yoruba overseers ablaze. I tore down the slope and slipped and crashed a knee but not too bad as a bright red pumper, plump with heroism, rolled up to a house, the last house before the parkland ablaze.

I limped down the greasy hill and slipped again, shook it off and hustled toward the fire uniforms as they yelled and pushed away some barbed wire at a wooden fence-line, the concerned and ticked-off firefighters.

They haven't slept in days and now this snowflake in a hardhat with a camera. No ID, just in case anyone cares enough to ask. The valley cut down to my left, the seam of stones I'd ridden up to the

flame where if it did rain, here's the sluiceway down. I took the hard route up. Now I saw the fuller picture.

The firefighters were building a controlled ring of fire. They pointed the kerosene fire-squirters at me and said, *You are one lucky boy.*

It had been a little too quiet at the frontline, a ghost moment as forces gathered, contemplated, observed. You never go out the way you go in, it's the first rule of infantry and contact journalism. At least I got that part right. The firemen with their kerosene emblazoners, ready to go, glared at me.

Who is this moron, where did he come from?

A reporter. A goddamned reporter. The firemen shook their heads as they lit up the zone I'd encroached. Crazy motherfucker. A little lucky. A *reporter!* The firemen hustled me to the out-of-town cops on borrowed hand to help out in the crisis, and one of them screamed in my face:

This is where the media goes, *here*. He pointed to the television crew parked near the barricades.

Not *there*, screaming and pointing up the hill. *This* is where you belong, this is where the *reporters* go!

I walked back to the car. The emergency response was in full effect, the high bustle was on. Vietnam veteran evacuees in the motor home sprawled with coolers and the dog rugs and donated cases of water and a gas grill. They smoked tense cigarettes, slumped in their picnic chairs, already primed for tailgate retirement as everyone watched the smoke on the mountain.

The car was where I left it but there was a blank space of memory. The sheriff's deputies were waiting for me.

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SOUTHWEST  REVIEW

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Alison D. Moncrief Bromage's debut poetry collection *Daughter, Daedalus* was the 2016 winner of the T.S.Eliot Prize for Poetry. She works as a writing tutor at Yale's Ezra Stiles College and lives in Branford with her husband, two kids, four chickens and one cat.

Jim Cory's most recent publications are *Wipers Float In The Neck Of The Reservoir* and *25 Short Poems*. He has edited poetry selections by contemporary American poets including James Broughton and Jonathan Williams. Poems have appeared recently in *Apiary*, *unarmed journal*, *Bedfellows*, *Cape Cod Poetry Journal*, *Capsule*, *Fell Swoop*, *Painted Bride Quarterly*, *Skidrow Penthouse*, *Trinity Review* and *Whirlwind*. Recent essays have appeared in the *Gay & Lesbian Review* and *Chelsea Station*. He has been the recipient of fellowships from the Pennsylvania Arts Council, Yaddo and The MacDowell Colony.

Elizabeth Edelglass's fiction has recently appeared in *Lilith*, *Tablet*, *The Sunlight Press*, and *JewishFiction.Net*, as well as in three recent anthologies, including Best Short Stories from The Saturday Evening Post Great American Fiction Contest 2017. Her work has won the Lilith short story contest, the William Saroyan Centennial Award, and the Lawrence Foundation Prize from *Michigan Quarterly Review*. She lives in the Greater New Haven area.

Tom Gogola is an award-winning investigative journalist and news editor at the *Bohemian* and *Pacific Sun* in Northern California. He also plays the blues. *Mother Nation* is his first novel.

Nicole Hebdon recently received her MFA from Stony Brook University, where she also taught undergraduate creative writing courses. Her fiction has been published or is forthcoming in *The Kenyon Review*, *The Southampton Review*, *Grain Magazine*, *F(r)iction*, *Smokelong Quarterly*, *Hoot Review*, and *The Whale*.

M. W. Johnston grew up in Nova Scotia, Canada and is a graduate student in literature at the University of Toronto. His fiction and poetry have appeared in *Riddle Fence*, *Your Impossible Voice*, *Vallum*, and *The Puritan*.

American born, French by marriage, Israeli by choice, **Jennifer Lang** writes mostly about her divided self. Her essays have appeared in *Under the Sun*, *Ascent*, *The Tishman Review*, *The Coachella Review*, *Hippocampus Magazine*, and *Full Grown People*. Honors include nominations for the Pushcart Prize and Best American Essays, chosen as a finalist in *Crab Orchard Review's* 2017 Literary Nonfiction Contest.

Lamont B. Steptoe was born and raised in Pittsburgh, PA. He is the author of fourteen collections of poetry and editor of two collections of poetry by his late mentor, the South African poet Dennis Brutus. He has received an American Book Award for his collection *A Long Movie of Shadows*, a Pew Fellowship in the Arts, and was inducted into the International Hall of Fame for Writers of African Descent by the Gwendolyn Brooks Center in Chicago. Steptoe has read his work in Nicaragua, Holland, France, India and Lithuania. A father and grandfather, he is the founder of Whirlwind Press. He is a soldier/poet of the Vietnam War.

Sarah Pemberton Strong is the author of a collection of poems, *Tour of the Breath Gallery*, and two novels, *The Fainting Room* and *Burning the Sea*. She lives in Hamden, CT and is a former poetry editor for *New Haven Review*.

Tom Toro has been a cartoonist for *The New Yorker* since 2010. He's had over 140 cartoons published by the magazine since then. His work has also appeared in *The Harvard Business Review*, *Narrative*, *Audubon* and *The Funny Times*. Previous short stories have appeared in *New Haven Review* and *Shuish Pile Magazine*.

