

New Haven Review

Wes Trexler takes a very long trip 6

R.S. Benedict attracts flies 14

Talal Alyan is in the kitchen 22

L.D. Nguyen breaks up 24

E.S. Tervo is from Russia, with and without love 42

C.C. Reid uses the right tools 52

Jim Cory sees stars 56

Marilyn Moriarty joins the circus 80

Colin Fleming takes a hike 96

Hal Y. Zhang knows what time it is 110

Plywood Stages

A headlong life

Wes Trexler

March 11, 2017
Leticia, Colombia

Listen Dan,

I'm gonna put this as succinctly as possible. After the band broke up and Gloria left New York for good, I spent a couple years in the basement of a self-styled psychedelic traphouse in Bed-Stuy writing a book about fighting cops with Occupy Wall Street. By November of 2013 I was done with court dates. I was wasted and paranoid, my gums were bleeding, and I was only one-third through with the monster manuscript. I had women mad at me and I'd completely lost the stomach for Brooklyn life, so I left town headed south on a forty-year-old sailboat registered in someone else's name with suicide rigging and blown-up outboard. I was leaving New York so hard I would've left in a washtub. A few days later I smashed into a darkened beachhead at 4 a.m. near the border of Maryland and Virginia where wild horses roam the dunes at Asseteage. I skirted the Feds and salvaged the ship to a wrecker, then a friend got me a bus ticket to West Virginia where I spent Thanksgiving with the family for the first time in a decade. I caught a ride down to Gainesville for a while, then hit the old scene in Melbourne where I met up with R. Ellis for a much-overdue soul implosion courtesy my magic jar and the goodwill of several old friends. The Albanian sent me a bottle of L. on the front, and I sold enough over Christmas holiday to buy another sailboat in Cocoa Beach. R. Ellis quit his bar job and he and I went feral, living on the boat on a canal near Saint Sebastian River, making midnight and daytime shroom raids into the cow fields by Sebastian High for two months straight. Dolphins, eagles, manatees; boars and lynx; gators and wild turkeys; midnight owl mating rituals—you know the drill. We stole canoes and found Krishna, and I turned my id inside-out on MXE, saw the holodeck floor reveal itself under R.'s feet on the Spoil Islands one night

smoking chonga and eating 25-I. We rewrote the textbook on such matters. Unlimited intrigue and unparalleled righteousness until the jar was all but empty.

The boat needed repairs, so we anchored near Old Eau Gallie. I unloaded some shrooms and headed to West Virginia with a couple ounces to sell to Goody Abshire's friends (see "Best Intentions of Goody Abshire"), having run out of customers in Central Florida. A few days later, while I was gone, a storm hit and our boat sank in eight feet of water in the Banana River.

With that I headed back to New York City to raise funds for real, which I did amply, and soon I sent R. Ellis dough for a bus ticket, and for a while we shared a squatted room in the practice space at Meserole Street, at the time practically abandoned by the Hasidic pudding cartel who owns that block.

I started running pounds of Cali weed down to Goody in Jackson County, and tried to set R. up slinging to my Bushwick clients, but he lost most of them for me in a hurry, so he went to working the dance clubs and warehouse parties, his natural habitat.

Don't ask me how, but I managed to pick up another vintage boat—a 1977 O'Day 25 with a solid Suzuki motor named *Puff*—for ten dollars. I gave the guy a twenty and told him I was buying ten bucks worth of good luck to go with it. I moved into the marina at 59th Street in the Rockaways and built things up again until November rolled back around.

I doubled down, and cashed in, then bought a clarinet and just split town for Lima, Peru, flying down with a satchel full of comp books to finish *This Machine Loves Fashion*. I got my apartment in Barranco and a quarter-kilo of cocaine, and started banging it all out in heinous rally-race fashion. Just days before finishing my first draft, news came that my father was dead from liver. I was going to skip the funeral but my sister insisted and bought me an expensive last-minute plane ticket. My ride to the airport was late, so I missed check-in by thirty minutes. No refund, but I ended up with \$3,000 worth of non-transferable Delta points. I lost the apartment and went to live

at flophouses in Miraflores, able to finish the manuscript in overnight benders in hallways and on park benches, chipping away at the quarter-kilo and fending off a sudden bout of conjunctivitis that made it impossible to focus on the screen with both eyes open.

In March or April of 2015 I came back to New York with eighty grams of unmolested cocaine hidden in the bottom of my clarinet case. I was so flat broke I had to jump the Airtrain turnstiles to get back to the Rockaways, but me and R. Ellis sold every single gram for \$120 a pop and I managed to pocket about six grand off that one punt.

Then, a spooky thing happened. One day I decided to use up some of my Delta points on a trip to Nepal. I booked a flight online. I got the confirmation email, then went to a news site to check the headlines. The lead story: “Earthquake Strikes Kathmandu.” It hit the exact moment I booked my flight. I spent three weeks in a quake-ravaged Hindu holyland, eating acid and handing out chocolate Cliff bars to kids in tent cities.

When I’d had enough, I made arrangements with Greg the Ox for a ticket to Lima via Abu Dhabi, Qatar, and Sao Paulo, then headed to the Amazon ostensibly to film the wedding of Tenorio, the wannabe narco. After the wedding, Tenorio and I went on a mission into the mountains on a Yamaha 250 trail bike, and that’s where I first met Bernaldo, the Ketchwa *purgero*. Within weeks I bought a jungle house from Berno and began the process of learning his pharmacopeia.

But, when the money ran thin, I moved on, found myself on the Pacific coast where I got pistol-whipped by a masked gunman in a desert canyon near Mancora, then trudged a bus to Quito, Ecuador. I spent the night trying to sleep in the bushes wrapped in plastic. From Quito I rolled back into New York City with eight bucks, a bunch of illegal bananas, and nothing but unsecured drug debt waiting for me in Brooklyn. I started moving heavy doses courtesy of a mini vodka bottle half-full of blue LSD that I picked up from an old source from the university days.

Took a brief stint in Ireland with my mom and my sister, then to Holland where I ran through three-and-a-half grams of MDMA in

a week while editing *This Machine...* in a coffeeshop in Hilversum. In Amsterdam I met a woman from Portugal. That didn't work out well, but I'm telling you it could have been worse. I bought a huge peyote button, brought it back to the USA and mailed it to Magz. Moved pounds of shrooms and Blue Altoids in the city. Somewhere in here I sailed around Long Island with Olivia Shank, granddaughter of the man who founded the Iditarod, but I'm not sure when.

By December of 2015 I was back in Palmiche to become *el padron* for Nurita, one of Berno's young daughters, and soon I started having people come down from the States to drink ayahuasca with the old man.

I crossed the Amazon basin riding on cargo ships en route to Bogota. Got rolled twice by the cops there. Then, Mexico City.

I headed back to New York to shoot a short film with Ty Michael Robinson. It turned out great but we never premiered it. I did nothing but smoke pot for eight months, no drugs, then headed back to the jungle in November of 2016 with Miguelito, formerly the roadie for *Hotter Than A Crotch*, rumored to be one of the world's best. I gave him a small cash loan and helped negotiate the purchase of a really solid farmhouse from one of Berno's brothers. We hung out and made bulk batches of the brew until Miguelito went back to Portland. I left a month or so later, telling my family in Palmiche that I was going to look for an apartment in Bogota.

There was also some scenario about refining a hundred grams of coke powder from a giant brick of coca paste using my self-devised acetone-and-alcohol extraction technique, but that had mixed results, so the less said the better, and anyhow, most of this should be slated as an epistolary that starts: *Dear Dan the Man, Wish you were here. Sorry for stopping in every five or ten years unannounced, making inconvenient and socially awkward demands, wrecking your scene, trashing your house, pissing off your family and ruining your reputation among the neighbors. Thanks for hanging in there even though I repeatedly impugned your manhood somehow, probably (inadvertently, certainly), and thanks for*

not insinuating that the endless battery of chemistry experiments I urged you to perform in the '90s contributed to your brief misdiagnosis as a schizophrenic around the turn of the century. You've always been a real dude, and that's why I never call up asking for money even when I'm flat busted. P.S. You should listen to those LPs I sent you, that's what they're for...

Remember, Dan, this is not a rant but a carefully constructed narrative. There is a sequence of schemes here, an array of moments leading up to this one. The real moment. The *now* moment: Leticia, again. Tres Fronteras, where the rivers rule life and borders are a fluid fiction, existing only if you suspend disbelief. I hear the hymns of an Aventista choir carrying over from the church across the street like a whisper in a crowded dive bar, never meant to be overheard, and I realize it must be Saturday night. I got a clarinet case stuffed with homebrew coke in a false bottom that I just moved over from Peru, and no solid plan for what to do with it. Should have buried it in the cabin, but it's too late now, lying back in the heat of Hostel Leticia where I literally bought the bathroom sink—having been charged after knocking it off the wall one morning months back at 5 a.m. There are options, but all of them are pretty grisly. Maybe in the lonely bunkroom I can find a dummy plate covering the junction box of some obsolete TV antennae wiring in the wall. Maybe I can pull the screws out and cram an ounce or so of raw powder into the empty space, recover it for later. It's some of the best, and a fair chunk of what's left over from *mi procesa*, but it's unfiltered and needs to be strained one more time to screen out the tiny bug carcasses, lighten it up a bit before trying to move it to the States. Besides, I'm already a little surprised that I cleared *migración* this morning—because of that thing in Tarapoto—and don't know if I want to press my luck.

And I got other things on my mind now. There's talk of shooting one of my scripts in New York in the fall, but there's always talk of making movies in New York in the fall, and my days of putting stock in American talk are long over. I hear the rumors I tell myself

about dialing back the rage-years, tempering the edge somewhere for a while to get some work done, but all I know for sure is that Bogota will always have a cold chip on her shoulder for me now.

And other things you should hear about too, things that meant something at the time; fireworks seen from 30,000 feet in the night sky over Panama, so lost on ketamine I thought God was trying to communicate in Morse code; or the mixture of dread and relief I get from knowing *Puff* is always parked waiting for me in the Rockaways if I choose to return, wondering how much of her good luck I've already invoiced. In truth, I'm an expatriot now, and that sloop may be little more than a symbol.

All along the way lit mags and screenplay pitches. *This Machine...* is finished, 600 pages plus, but nobody'll touch it. And what else for your perusal? What else, Dan? The acid reflux of flashback memories: Me and Gloria, unhinged Northwest nights on punk-rock plywood stages.

Beelzebub

R.S. Benedict

I don't know when exactly I began to attract flies. I only

remember when I first noticed it.

I was at my mother's house, brunching. She was talking about her diet, or my diet, or my father's diet, or my brother's diet, or her coworker's diet. It doesn't matter. What matters is that she stopped to say "Oh fuck" at a fat black housefly that had landed on her egg-shell tablecloth to suck on the droplets of peach Bellini I'd spilled.

My mother rose from the table, grabbed a napkin, and chased the thing around her living room, across the white carpet, past the freshly vacuumed couch. It flew out of reach, up to the cathedral ceiling, but still she waited for it below, now armed with a rolled-up copy of *The New Yorker* in hand.

It was when a second fly appeared that I realized something was wrong. One fly could have snuck into my mother's hypoallergenic fortress, but not two.

"Uck! You brought them in with you," she said.

Later, after I went home, I noticed two flies buzzing around my apartment. I took out the trash, cleaned the sink, and disinfected the counters.

The next day, there were three flies.

They found me at work, too.

And at the supermarket on my way home, I saw flies crawling on a pyramid of oranges.

I drove with the windows open, though it was late October, hoping the air would sweep the flies away. But they made it home with me, or maybe their reinforcements hunted me down.

I poured on bug spray. I fumigated the apartment. I sealed all my food in airtight plastic. I put up fly strips, and changed them every day.

I switched soap, shampoo, detergent, skin cream. I washed all my clothes in hot water.

Still the flies came, one or two more each morning, fat little satellites ever orbiting.

I don't think anyone realized they were coming from me yet. But people must have picked up on it subconsciously, for my supervisor at work pulled me into her office on a Friday afternoon to tell me she had to cut my hours. Nothing personal. It was a difficult decision. But with business being the way it was she couldn't justify keeping me full-time.

I made an appointment with a doctor before I lost my health insurance.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Could be a hygiene problem," he said.

"Do I look dirty?" I asked. "Do I smell bad?"

He sniffed. "Guess not. Maybe if you lost some weight...?"

Bloodwork did not reveal the cause, though I found my iron was a little low.

More flies came. I gave up swatting at them.

Their presence around me was at last noticeable, and as a result my status at work went from part time to no time. But now my supervisor did not apologize. It was not a difficult decision.

I was fired, not laid off, so unemployment wasn't an option. I considered going on disability, but "attracts flies" probably wasn't a diagnosis the government would accept. I couldn't imagine who would hire me.

Were this the nineteenth century, I would have joined a freak show. But ours is a more enlightened era.

So I took to the Internet where I quickly learned that yes, there is indeed a subculture centered on fly-covered women, and, yes, the subculture has some very devoted fetishists, and yes in fact there was one of them living not too far away. Having no other options, I accepted his offer.

We met at a restaurant of his choosing—an upscale bistro that served cocktails in mason jars and needlessly expensive interpretations of mac and cheese.

I arrived first and sat at the table he'd reserved for us under the

name Geoffrey-with-a-G. He was late. I was about to leave when a surprisingly normal-looking man in his mid-thirties appeared and sat down across from me. He had brown hair and an average build. He wore business casual attire. He smiled at me and said, "It's you."

I plucked a fly out of my Merlot and dropped it in a napkin. "Sure is," I said.

"What's that joke?" he asked. "Waiter, there's a fly in my soup."

"Well, don't shout or else everyone else will want one," I said.

He laughed long and loud.

Nervousness killed my appetite but I ate anyway because he was paying and all I'd had so far that day was a sleeve of saltines. We chatted about our favorite Netflix shows, skincare, hobbies, and so on, and all the while he marveled at how I endured the insects crawling on my shoulders. "You're the real thing," he said. "No tricks. No honey perfume or anything like that. Wow."

After the meal was over, I joined him in a room at the Marriot a block away. There, as negotiated in a private chat the day before, I lounged in an easy chair with flies buzzing about while he politely masturbated at my feet. I wasn't ready for more than that. Not on a first date.

I earned three-hundred dollars for the evening's work (which I later learned was far too little), plus dinner, plus a hotel stay. The experience hadn't been anywhere near as degrading as the time I'd waited tables at an IHOP, so when I got home to my empty studio apartment I logged back on to find more clients. This, I understood, was my life now.

Geoffrey was my sole source of income for the first month. We met twice. But soon I found a banker who lived an hour and a half away. He wanted a cam show first, but because the Wi-Fi I mooched off the struggling vegetarian restaurant below my apartment was patchy, I opted for a phone call instead. When he heard the hum of little wings over the receiver, he decided I was worth the commute.

The banker was short with soft pink skin and hands like a

baby's. I refused to let him touch me. I tied him to a chair, as requested—much too slowly, for I'd never done it before. This annoyed him. But when I sat on his knee and my flies began to flit around his head and alight upon his flesh, he moaned in ecstasy. He came, hands-free, spraying onto my jeans. I left him tied to his chair as I cleaned my pants in the bathroom sink.

The banker introduced me to a friend of his, and my career took off from there. I moved into a better apartment and paid for my own Internet. I streamed live shows online, where I sat with flies crawling on my face while I talked about how their little feet felt on my skin.

Now that I had a steady income and a job that didn't eat up much of my time, I exercised more, wearing a cloth mask so I could pant without choking on bugs. I ate leaner—meal replacement shakes and kale smoothies, things I could suck through a straw so the flies could not land in it. I lost weight. I looked fantastic.

Business picked up. I learned how to breathe through clenched teeth and how to speak in short utterances with pursed lips so as not to swallow a bug. I bought new clothes for my new body. Geoffrey gifted me a beautiful pair of knee-high boots for fall, and he kissed them as the flies crawled upon the leather.

One of my clients invited me to an art opening in New York City. There, I sat on a dais and sipped free pinot noir, wrapped in a fluttering haze. A crowd watched. Nobody masturbated.

My flies infested a found art piece consisting of a roll of hay from a farmer's field. The audience loved it. The sculptor declared it a brilliant work of spontaneous mixed-media collaboration.

A painter asked me to model for him. When I asked about payment, he called me a whore, which was fine. Whores can pay the rent. Muses cannot.

Despite his ire, I managed to ooze into the art scene, somehow. I was invited to parties, and if I did not attend them my absence was noticed. People praised my enigmatic silence, which was nothing more than a way to avoid inhaling insects. People adored my stoicism, which was nothing more than weary resignation to forces

I could not control. Potential lovers surrounded me, wrote songs about me, painted pictures of me. Men are fascinated by a woman who doesn't say or do very much.

I learned, soon, that once you are loved by the rich, you don't have to work to survive. Things somehow find a way of being paid for. I was treated to dinner at the Four Seasons, where I watched flies crawl on my Asian gravlax. Acquaintances passed me unbelievably pure cocaine. An avant-garde composer I'd befriended offered me an apartment in a building he'd inherited from his parents. The entrance had a doorman and a marble floor. It was the most beautiful place I'd ever lived in, and I filled it up with flies.

I was interviewed by *VICE*, photographed by *Fusion*, and profiled in *The New Yorker*. Then came the inevitable flood of think-pieces. I was accused of plagiarizing Yoko Ono. I was said to be taking advantage of the twin privileges of whiteness and conventional beauty—a homeless person of color would not have been rewarded for being covered with vermin.

Then came the backlash to the backlash. The art world was the villain for enabling and exploiting a woman with a terrible medical condition. Or, I wasn't being exploited: I was empowering myself by owning my physicality.

All of them were true. Or none of them. It didn't matter.

The swarm around me still thickened. It occurred to me that their ever-growing presence could be a sign of worsening health. I knew it would be best for me to treat my condition, or at least keep it from getting too severe.

Now that I had the money, I saw specialists: endocrinologists, dermatologists, toxicologists, entomologists, Reiki practitioners. Each diagnosis contradicted the other. And none of them could fix me.

I felt unfaithful, somehow, as though I'd betrayed the flies after they had given me so much.

I got older. At my agent's advice I began to shift to the inspirational self-improvement market. A ghost writer pumped out a book in my name titled *From Flies to Fortune: How to Make the Best of a*

Bad Situation. I gave a TED Talk about body image. I taught self-help seminars and visited talk shows. The rich loved me; they held me up to the world to say, “See? You don’t need health insurance to succeed.”

And the flies still came, more and more. I could conquer a room with my personal swarm. I started sleeping under a powerful fan to keep them from clogging my breathing passages at night. For this reason, I began to wear my hair in a braid.

My mother stopped inviting me to her home. In our phone conversations, she took great care to avoid mentioning my talent. Instead, she asked why I hadn’t found a husband yet. That Geoffrey guy seemed nice. She didn’t understand why he wasn’t interested: Some girls you date and some girls you marry, and you don’t marry a girl covered in flies.

I amassed a greater social following that now included prominent medical researchers and spiritualists. I smiled gently through endless conversations with strangers who thought my silence was noble. Their questions and comments and business pitches melted into the buzzing, forming an ever-present white noise.

To get away from it all, I booked a single-occupancy yurt at a mountain pond in Vermont. I drove there alone, windshield wipers plowing clear arcs through the layer of glimmering black bodies on the auto glass. A few of the flies got trapped in the car when I shut the doors. I left them there.

I dropped my cell phone, vibrating with messages and unanswered calls, on the cot in the yurt, whose white canvas walls throbbed with insect life. Shrouded in a cloud of wings and segmented eyes, I walked to the end of the dock, stepped into the water, and sank to the bottom, where my entourage could not follow.

Above, the flies wheel and wait, or dash their bodies against the surface of the pond to drown.

But down here, if only for a moment, it is painfully, gloriously quiet.

Midnight Arcade

Talal Alyan

first the dress falls,
beneath that cotton,

you are naked.
you are also alone.

next the kitchen,
underneath the

fluorescent lights
you spread the cast

of your body across
the tiles on the floor.

every light of the house
will be on. you will sleep

like you haven't
slept in a year.

like you've just returned
or departed

whichever feels less
like loss.

The Most Intimate Enemy

*Love, sex, and coming to
terms*

L.D. Nguyen

“It was dark on the street,” Jorge said to me. He’d been walking alone through his L.A. neighborhood when a car pulled up beside him. A couple of guys climbed out, tall and shadowed. A bolt of fear jolted Jorge into action—he turned to run, but one man lunged and grabbed him around the knees. Jorge hit the ground, kicking and yelling and squirming until he got a foot free and booted the guy hard. Then he ran like lightning, asthma be damned.

“When I got home, my mom could tell that something had happened,” Jorge continued. Maybe it was the sweat on his face and how his knees couldn’t stop shaking. And yet, he hadn’t even really reached home. Jorge, his mother, and his sisters had taken shelter with a family friend for the past weeks; Jorge’s father had been discovered cheating yet again, and this time they had all bailed on him. Despite the limited breathing space—seven people, one apartment—they stuck together, furiously adamant.

Then, Jorge’s father was lighting up their phones. “What’s going on? These bastards are calling and saying that they’ve got Jorge and that if I don’t pay up I’ll never see him again.”

Jorge explained—not to his mother but to me, his girlfriend, sitting bewildered as he dramatically recounted his summer vacation—that his family had money. That his family, who scraped by, week by week, squeezed tight into their closet of a townhouse, were juicier pickings than the majority of the Mexican border-town populace. Just a few dozen miles south of San Diego, where we lived and went to school, some people were so money-hungry that they’d kidnap your kids and send back their fingers to force you into submission. They targeted families who lived in the dreamland.

Jorge was the only member of his family to attend a four-year college. If he made it to graduation, his computer science degree would lift his family out of poverty and carry them into the star-studded horizon. That meant they might cough up all they had and more

to get him back. Also, they loved him.

“Anyways, we didn’t give them what they wanted. Everything turned out okay,” Jorge said. “But what I really wanted to tell you, Liz, is...”—he took my hand—“that night, as I was going down and fighting for my life, I thought to myself, I wish I could see her one last time.”

He gazed into my eyes, finished with his tale of heroism and undying love.

“You are so full of shit!” I yelled in his face.

It had not been a good summer for our romance. Over the last months, we’d taken turns interrogating each other about various crimes:

JORGE: I saw your browser history. You read *Yu Yu Hakusho* fan fiction when I’d asked you not to! I know what happens in fan fiction!

That series is my childhood favorite and now you’ve soiled it!

LIZ: You didn’t tell me not to. You said, “If you do read, don’t let me find out!”

JORGE: What? No! Well, whatever, now I know! What exactly did you read? Show me! [*He shoves his laptop forward.*]

LIZ: [*Thinks: only a story about one of your favorite characters boning his mortal enemy.*] I don’t remember.

JORGE: Lies! I bet they were doing weird sex things!

LIZ: It was just a random story.

JORGE: I bet you masturbated to it!

JORGE: What is this? [*Holds up a small, black notebook.*]

LIZ: My old poetry homework?

JORGE: What is this?! [*Opens the notebook to an erotic poem featuring him and a mutual male friend.*]

LIZ: Uh, you were never supposed to find out about that... Sorry.

JORGE: I—I can’t even—! [*Tears up the pages.*]

JORGE: [*Over Skype*] I wanted to call you to cheer you up.

LIZ: I feel really guilty about doing all this stuff to you. I think you'll be better off without me.

JORGE: No! If you break up with me, I will kill myself.

LIZ: I'll call the police.

[Jorge grabs his inhaler and starts huffing and puffing, dead set on overdosing. Liz picks up their phone but can't remember his address despite having bunked in his apartment for so long that his roommates tried to charge her rent. In her panic she can see it clearly: wailing ambulances and police cars racing around and around his block their sirens smearing into red streaks of light while Jorge lies prone in his room breathing better than he has ever breathed in his life...]

Jorge had charged into our relationship ready to drink deep from the soul of a beautiful, pure-hearted maiden who would give him marriage, babies, and 'til death do us part. But over the course of our first year together, he slowly discovered the true me: a money-hoarding porn enthusiast who was as feminine as a piece of cardboard. It did not help that I mistakenly told him that I was a masturbation addict. Combined with the fact that I had a thing for one of the characters in the musical *Cats*, Jorge decided that I was some sort of perv extraordinaire.

He was not far from the mark. The earliest fantasy I can remember was hatched at age nine and involved Luke Skywalker, a cage, and several giant space worms. Every morning I would spread my legs into a taut V and rock my clit against a tiny fist. Afterward my knuckles would smell tangy, my damp underwear riding up into sensitive seams. Later, I would masturbate on loop underneath my school desk and in the backseat of the car.

For the most part, I tried to be discreet. The only sure witness to my sweaty, sticky magic was the family golden retriever. One day, I decided to rub one out right in front of him as he dozed on the couch. Buddy perked to life, wide eyes asking, *What the hell is she*

doing? I imagined that he would tell his dog-friends about me and was suddenly filled with shame.

As I grew older, my exhibitionism evolved into a hunger for knowledge. My family was no help, for there was an unspoken rule that we should not speak of sex. My few questions hit a wall of angry dismissal—“This is trouble!”—or discomfort—“Let’s stop talking about this!” Even my sister, older by only two years, maintained the silence my parents had laid down. And so I found better teachers deep in the asshole of fanfiction.net. There, formed under the heat and pressure of innumerable collective minds, I found diamonds of the human imagination—glittering, raw fantasies waiting for anyone who dared unearth them. As I read, I learned many things and asked even more questions, like “why is he touching his nipples?” and “why does this horse have two penises?” and “people really like this stuff?” and “maybe I do too?”

I emerged from the internet no longer a girl but a woman. I continued to study sex with a relentless fascination. In college, I majored in gender studies and interned at the local LGBT community center. I hung out with ardent feminists and angry queers, my own budding activism revolving around queer, positive sexuality. My enthusiasm for the subject was something Jorge cursed during our relationship—he remained convinced that I was a deviant in need of correction. That I was rotten to the core and, what’s more, that I liked it.

“Sometimes, I think God wills me to live,” Jorge once said. So far in his twenty-five-year-old life, he’d survived three near-fatal accidents.

The first involved being speared on a table leg. He’d tried to do a back flip off the couch but crashed into a glass table and stabbed himself in the back. Several stitches later, the doctor showed him an X-ray of his chest. He’d almost punctured a lung.

The second was a stroke. When his dad beat his mom, Jorge would crawl into a corner and will his chest to not explode from the

need to cry. He held it all in until he woke up one day and couldn't move half of his body. Each night his mom coated his paralyzed side in a white, creamy, chili pepper paste to wake up his nerves; a single whiff would burn the inside of his one working nostril. It took a month for his body to wake up, his flesh on fire.

The third was a car accident. He'd been riding shotgun along the freeway when a neighboring car rammed into his vehicle. All passengers emerged unharmed save for Jorge, who hadn't buckled his seatbelt all the way through and was hurled through the windshield. He spent the night in critical condition.

"God wills it!" Jorge said.

I didn't really know what it meant to be a Jehovah's Witness. One of the first times I tried to talk to him about it, I accidentally called his god "Jenovah."

"That is a *Final Fantasy* character!" he howled.

His family, who were all Jehovah's Witnesses save for his father, had strict rules. No sex. No kissing. No blood transfusions, including rare steak and sushi. Some of the rules also loosely applied to romantic partners. "If you got a tattoo, I would have to dump you," he said.

The unspoken rule was that he could only date straight. "I'm giving up God because I love you. Please don't tell my family you're queer though!" he said.

"Don't give up your religion for me," I said.

"Well, I sort of already am, if we are together."

Jorge had kissed me on our first date. He slept over that night, and the next morning he climbed in bed with me. Within a few months we started taking off our clothes. He had hardly needed any convincing. He thought himself in love.

Jorge's craving for romance was fueled partly by his dad, a rubbernecking husband who, at critical times, had no interest in fatherhood or family life. "He wasn't present at my birth, nor the birth of my sisters," he said. "He was out partying with friends. My mom went into labor by herself." He had even once badgered Jorge's

mother into sex despite having “a strange something” on his penis.

“I will never be like him,” Jorge said, more to himself than anyone else. Even before meeting me, he’d have dreams of rescuing his beloved from zombies, demons, and other whatnots of the underworld. Maybe he’d get torched, mutilated, or even die, but it didn’t matter as long as he could be her hero. “She used to be in shadow. Now she has a face,” Jorge said dreamily, his head floating up, up, and away. Three months into our relationship, he started speaking of marrying me and how many babies he wanted.

“So you like babies,” I responded, my nose buried in homework. He could talk all he wanted. It wouldn’t affect anything I said or did.

The one thing Jorge could not be for me was, to his deep shame, a dashing prince. His prominent nose was slightly hunchbacked, and his face was so round that it made him feel fat. Also, he was dark-skinned enough to pass as Indian. He told me about how, as a kid, some of his schoolmates had teased him about being so dark.

“They told me I was dark because I was dirty,” he said. “I went home that night and scrubbed myself all over with a pumice stone. Scrubbed myself raw.”

I reassured him that I found his nose to be powerful and distinguished, and that, yes, I knew he was not Indian. More importantly, I liked him because of how he cried when talking about his mother, a woman who belted him over poor report cards because she envisioned for him a future. I liked how he’d turned down an internship at Raytheon Defense Company because he didn’t want to build weapons. I liked how his teachers thought he’d flunk middle school yet here he was in college. It was his understanding of struggle that initially drew me to him, stories that he imparted to me during late-night bus rides home from capoeira practice. I was too self-aware of my own naiveté, a girl who didn’t understand the word “fortunate” despite the many chidings from her parents. Every now and then they would impart upon me short clips of rebuilding their lives after the Vietnam War, and that hardship was something that Jorge knew, or at least more than I did. From that well of admiration sprang caring, then love.

Neither of us truly understood the difficult intersections of our relationship. Most of the time, the field of war was quiet. I kept most of my sex politics at school, and Jorge was too busy with *World of Warcraft* to rag on the gays. Our honeymoon months were filled with taco runs, capoeira on the beach, and watching anime while burritoed in the same blanket. Our time spent together sated my craving for close companionship, the sort of easy bond between people that I had sought since beginning college but could never cement with anyone else. He was easily the closest friend I'd made since middle school. And despite my aromantic personality, I found myself giving nods to Jorge's cliché declarations.

"Love in the face of all odds! Opposites attract!" Jorge said.

"Um, I don't really think so but sure, whatever," I said.

Our love flowered in the darkness of our ignorance and shriveled under the inevitable dawn of reality. Near the end of things, Jorge admitted that, at times, he had been on the verge of believing that LGBT people really deserved equality. Each word was a cinder on his tongue.

"Good! At least I had gotten somewhere!" I almost responded. I reined it in because I, in my own private moments of emotional exhaustion, had thought that maybe homophobia was how things should be.

In high school, I read the entirety of *The Rape of Nanking* without ever knowing what rape was, for how can we understand rape if we never know consent?

Day One of seventh grade sex-ed: anxious silence, my classmates gripped by a peculiar disturbia. Not a peep from the usual troublemakers. All eyes were on the teacher, who spoke in a slow, soothing voice, pausing many times for gravity. She laid down a new set of class rules: no laughing, don't ask dumbass questions, etcetera.

The tension in the room confused me. Reproduction. Big deal. Animals even did it on TV as delivered by *Nature* and other documentaries. I spent most of class time attempting to puzzle out the

tension and therefore failed to absorb most of the educational material. As the days passed I grew more disturbed, for underneath my teacher's solemn sobriety and the anxiety of my classmates I could feel fear—a fear of sex buried in their hearts, buried so deep that they didn't even know it was there.

I could have stayed quiet, but for a good student I have always been a tad dimwitted. I stuck my neck out. “You said sperm travels through water. Does that mean we can get pregnant in swimming pools?”

Giggles—the scornful kind that slips between tight lips and nests in brains. The teacher did not shush the laughter as she had done at previous times. Instead, she asked me what was required of a girl to become pregnant. I failed to give any answer because I was too busy wondering what I had done wrong.

After my two minutes of public shame, my deskmate turned an inch in my direction. “That sounded *perverted*,” she said, glaring at me from the corner of her eye as if a full-on stare might soil her. Throughout the rest of class, I felt like an alien lost amongst the human race, clueless to native customs and terrified of its own difference. Everyone understood something that I didn't, and not only was no one going to explain, they were also going to judge me for not knowing. That something wasn't sex itself; it was how to talk about it, what opinions to have about it, and how to be appropriate, polite, clean. As my deskmate spent the remainder of the year flinging similar admonitions for my slightest innuendo or slips of tongue, her fear and shame took root inside of me. I spent the next years skirting the borders of sexual propriety, terrified of crossing lines but also unsure where they were drawn.

The process of initiation was never discussed. I left sex ed with the assumption that sex simply happened, natural as the seasons. While I understood more by high school, some of the pieces were still missing as my history teacher handed me back my *Nanking* paper, commenting that I hadn't delved into the true horrors of war. My paper analyzed straightforward violence—massacres, executions, the brutalization of corpses. Nothing about rape. I would have written

about it had I managed to comprehend what it was. I had looked it up in the dictionary multiple times yet consistently failed to understand.

Sex—the raw, basic act—I understood. Society’s lingering puritanism, I also understood, having been bullied in its name. But as I delved deeper into the porny pit of the internet, I began to grasp the fuller spectrum of human sexuality and its best friend, the sexual fantasy. The smut I read made me quiver with anticipation. Made me laugh so that fruit juice jetted from my nose. Made my heart pang because sometimes sex made love hurt all the more. I’d curl up on the floor with a terrible grin and think, *yes, this is why people love sex.*

And so I felt a warm swell of pride when, after a heavy petting session, Jorge came to the same realization. “At first, I thought this sort of stuff was bad. But now I can see that I was just afraid.”

I should have known that it wouldn’t have been so simple, that he would miss something along the way.

Jorge’s sexual repertoire consisted of kissing, hugging, and mumbling sweet nothings to me while I studied. I therefore took it upon myself to introduce this virgin to the ways of the ass.

“Hand.” I placed him appropriately. “Now grab.”

He grabbed. *Amazing*, said the light in his eyes.

However, he didn’t know when to stop. He groped me morning, noon, evening ... on the street, at the park, outside of class, up the stairs, down the driveway. Once, on our way to the bus stop, he grabbed me so hard that I yelped and leapt out of his hand. I whirled around and was met with a smirk.

“Respect!” I shouted.

“You think I don’t respect you?” he said.

Telling him to stop was like talking to a wooden door. A door that adored me, and had legs with which to follow me around and feelings that hurt. I wasn’t sure how to deal with it. I had previously only encountered men who were feminists, ignorant men who should become feminists, or lost causes. Never before had I met a man who thought himself a champion of women but was actually one of the dickheads we both complained about.

Quickly, Jorge was moving on to phase two. One day, he honked both my pancake-tits and declared, “These are mine!”

“No, they are not!” I said, too baffled and outraged to say anything more.

“Okay, they’re ours!” His hands continued to squeeze me.

Jorge’s many violations were not simply those of my body. “I’ve done something bad,” Jorge said. He smelled of both shame in his wrongdoing and pride in his own cleverness.

“You’ve broken into my laptop,” I said. I had noticed him eyeing my keyboard numerous times.

“It was really easy!” Jorge pulled the computer out of his backpack and put it on my lap. “Password?” An insult.

I typed it in, knowing what was coming.

“Your browser history,” Jorge said, “is full of this—“

Cue assorted thumbnails of ninja porn: anime boys tangled together in various positions of rapture.

To me, these were fodder and nothing more, yet when I saw Jorge coiled tight with hurt, my confidence wavered. The old fear of sex—the voice that had shamed me for so long—rose up from deep within me. It had lain in wait for this moment of weakness. I tried to imagine things from his perspective, that sexuality outside the bounds of our relationship was betrayal, and suddenly I understood his hurt.

Guilt held me in the palm of its hand. If our relationship was to survive, one of us would have to cross over and leave their truths behind.

“From now on, you will not look at anything sexual,” he said. There was no questioning his authority, for he was righting an inherent wrong. I nodded not out of shame, but because I could feel his wound.

The madness had begun:

Yes, I will not look at any more porn.

I won’t masturbate by myself.

I will not read or look at anything with a sexual theme, even

purely educational material.

I will not take an LGBT-related job in the future. No working at community centers or activist nonprofits.

I am straight.

Though my vibrantly queer and feminist school circles slowed my descent, no parachute could save me from self-demise. I strove to drain myself of my sexual identity, even verging on refusing to do parts of my gender studies schoolwork. My relationship with Jorge ceased to be about loving him and became about being a proper girlfriend. Loyalty was due to the man who had showed me so much devotion and sacrifice, or so we both believed. Still, deep inside of myself, I clung to the belief that my sexuality was a good thing, a wonderful thing. As long as I kept this secret close at heart, I felt I could still be a whole person.

His assaults picked up again when we were on better terms, flagging when he was mad at me. When summer break hit, I gained a bit of sanctuary and kicked my brain into gear, pushing the issue with a Skype call.

“You’re molesting me, and you need to apologize,” I said.

It was a word he recognized—one meant for criminals. He whined and writhed, but I kept him pinned until he surrendered in a burst of heat: “Fine! I’m sorry!”

Soon after we rejoined in the fall, I had been heading out the door when I felt his hands squeezing me through my jeans. I spun around in time to catch the fringes of him darting into his room. I found him curled facedown on the bed. He looked so pitiful that I forgot that I was the victim in the scenario.

“If I tell you, you have to promise not to laugh or joke about it.” Jorge said.

We were muddling through an evening at Islands Restaurant. We had just finished a round of arguing about each other’s shortcomings and were nursing our bruises with hamburgers. The waitress had just brought Jorge a root beer, his go-to drink whenever

eating out. I thought he'd forgotten to ask for one when the waitress delivered one seemingly unbidden.

"Well..." Jorge climbed over a hitch in his throat. "I told the waitress to bring me one. With my mind."

A gulf of silence. Then, I said, "How about you tell me something right now."

"It only works with people who believe," he said.

"Well, how come that waitress?"

"She believes!"

According to Jorge, his grandmother had some *índio* in her, and it was through her blood that he was able to tap into the minds of others. Later on in the year, he would claim that he also had the power to teleport.¹ I should have hauled my ass out the door, but I was busy drowning in my own inertia.

Despite his superpowers, Jorge still managed to get his ass beat on a routine basis. Each new quarter shot bullet holes through his GPA. Even so, he was too strait-laced to use his powers to cheat, letting himself inch closer and closer to academic expulsion. Sometimes he squeezed by with no more than a few points or the pity of certain professors. I pushed him to study with classmates. Two hundred students in one lecture hall—at least a few of them couldn't be jerks. Then one day he came home, livid, shocked, and demoralized.

"I went to the library for a group project meeting. The rest of the dudes were a bunch of Asian and Indian guys," he said. "When I walked up to them and introduced myself, one of them was like, 'Phew! You're Indian! From your name on the roster I thought you'd be Mexican. Good thing you're not!' I just turned around and left.

¹ It is in my opinion that, science aside, Jorge does not possess any supernatural powers. This is because, in casual conversation regarding a superpower of choice, he would often forget that he was already gifted. "If I could have a superpower, I would want super-speed. So I could run around and save all the women in trouble," he said. When teleportation renders super-speed obsolete, the latter is only for stroking your ego.

“By God, I’m tired,” he continued. He looked up at me from his position on the carpet, half-cast in gloom. “Liz, if it weren’t for you I’d already be gone. Thank you.”

I could feel his need, and not just emotionally. I felt him in the way his breath trembled on my skin. In the way he’d take my hand and, with painful embarrassment, placed it over the wood pulsing beneath his zipper. Our heavy petting had awakened the beast within, and it went unspoken that Jorge wouldn’t tame it on his own. He’d not fared well over the summer—twice he’d sprouted a raging erection in the middle of the day. It had been choking to death in his pants so he let it out. He tried playing video games and taking a cold shower and napping and thinking unsexy thoughts, but it remained a terrible and mighty obelisk to the gods. He had class but couldn’t bear to stuff it back inside his jeans so he waited and waited and finally, finally...

Eight hours, birth to death.

Here sat a man who had faced incredible challenges yet who was rendered helpless by his own erections. I leashed in my ire by thinking about where he was coming from—that to him, God was good in a world of barbed wire fences and drug clans for neighbors. I wanted him to survive school. I wanted him to graduate, to grab that computer science degree and fly. My own work dealt greatly with underprivileged students, and here was one of them, right in front of me. How could I turn him away?

Each time I would take him in hand, thinking, “this is what justice looks like.”

He felt like such a whore, splattering himself with yogurt while I hunkered over him, my exhaustion hidden behind a plaster mask. During one session, I gave up and lay my head on his stomach, to which he said, “awww, Liz what’s wrong?” Somewhere along this timeline of hand jobs he’d begun to believe they were acts of love.

His hands kept diving into my pants. Telling him off grew so tiring that I took to armoring myself with baggy underwear. Upon touch he’d whip his hand out of my jeans with a giggly “ew!” and I could continue on with my day. My best defense was a satiny,

champagne colored butt-bag that I had accidentally pilfered from my mom's cabinet. I told him exactly whom it belonged to and business had never ended faster.

Once in a while I would wake up in the middle of the night, roused by his fingers stroking my labia. I'd yank him out of my underwear and roll back over, too tired to say anything.

"There will be no secrets between us," Jorge once said at the beginning of our relationship. I'd nodded, because what do you say to a boy who'd just finished shining a light into his father's basement of parental failures and asked you not to fail him too? I felt like I needed to confess every piece of shit I'd ever rolled myself in—the fantasies, the weird crap I'd written, even the things I'd done before we were together—so he would know what sort of degenerate he was dating. My back ached under the stone slabs of my guilt. My emotional world narrowed down to weeks of anxiety, painful confessions, and the cool balm of his mercy. He doled out forgiveness like favors, his resentment lying underneath because how dare I have such a dirty history?

Sometimes you ponder someone's future, what they might be like ten or so years down the road. The specter of violence loomed over Jorge's shoulder because he'd been the one to pry his father's hands off his mother's throat. I wondered about what I'd do if he'd turn his fists on me. I'd tell someone and leave, or so I had thought at the beginning of our relationship. Now, as I sat on the carpet of his apartment, submerged beneath the cold, cloudy waters of depression, I knew that I wouldn't do anything at all.

The question of my own desires never arose until I graduated and followed my financial needs back to my parents' home in San Jose. Jorge stayed in San Diego, having flunked too many classes, and was preparing to embark on a grueling sixth year of college. The distance allowed my mind to clear. The trance of routine lifted, as I was no longer in close enough proximity to be groped, give hand jobs, or be shamed on an easy basis. I took my first fresh breath of sanity. Then another, another, another.

I called him over the phone to break it off. At first he resisted, but then he came up with his own excuse to mutually end our pain. “You don’t believe in God? We’re breaking up!” he shouted. Never mind that I’d told him my religious viewpoints on our first date. Perhaps he was realizing it for the first time.

Whichever it was, I did not care. I had freedom.

Freedom?

The rage awakened several months after our break up. Blasts of heat that would flare up and overtake me at any point in the day. At night I lay in bed, my mind buzzing with curses and comebacks that I wish I’d voiced when I had the chance. And sometimes the trauma pursued me in sleep. Once, I dreamt of Jorge looming in front of me, squeezing my breast. In the distance I could hear screaming, but I couldn’t think or move, a nuclear storm cloud building inside my chest. With that I lurched upright in bed, mouth open, my voice dying in the darkness of my room.

A couple years passed, but the nature of my anger remained relatively unchanged. At one point, my hatred flared to the point that I had imaginary violent confrontations with him. In an effort to blow off steam, I wrote him an email:

LIZ: The memory of your sexual abuse is causing me a lot of stress.

Sometimes I get so angry that I imagine myself chopping your arms off with my forty-inch, carbon steel longsword. In self-defense. Don’t worry, though. These are just fantasies. I won’t actually harm you.

JORGE: [*texting*] A:prOJK/g:\$. @&mpeG. S#.sWd:[\$q [*interpreted as: What?! What?! But I was a great boyfriend!*]] Can I call you? I’m at work. I can’t concentrate.

LIZ: I want a sincere apology. Respond to the email if you’re going to talk.

JORGE: I need some time to think this over. Is that okay?

Never another word from him.

That was fine. Deep inside I knew he was not my enemy.

Biochemically, anger only lasts for ninety seconds. When triggered, the brain releases chemicals and the body rises to the challenge. Once the timer rings, the chemicals dissipate, but when we return to our angry thoughts we willingly reignite our own pain. Jorge is gone, yet always present, and I am burning, burning.

My sister once asked me why I insist on being hateful despite the years. The truth is I wish I could learn how to forgive. But it's not a matter of forgiving Jorge. I wish I could learn how to forgive myself. For all his violence, it is my own weakness of character that hurts the most. I want to forgive myself for being weak. For weathering his wrongdoings. For giving up my truths. For believing that he loved me when what he loved most were his fantasies. For blaming him for my misery when all I had to do was walk away.

Once in a while, I remember a moment when I was crying on his shoulder from the stress of our abusive relationship and he scooped me up off the toilet seat and rocked me like a baby. The dignified part of myself stirred, though only faintly; how small she had become, buried beneath self-doubt and a mistaken sense of responsibility. I was too weak to feel properly insulted and so mired in my own inertia that I couldn't even stop crying.

I hate that crying girl with a cannibalistic passion. She is a specter living somewhere in between my ribs, and I am always attempting to purge her. Sometimes I wish for men to try to wrong me so that I can prove to myself that I'm strong. Whenever someone offends me and I fail to rise up, the anger takes hold. My thoughts fester in my brain for days, coloring the later weeks, echoing into the months. Only when the situation is righted does the noise stop. *If* things are righted.

They say that the strongest people are the ones who love themselves. I barely loved myself during my time with Jorge, and I certainly don't love myself now. But maybe I can extend a hand of kindness to that lonely, crying girl. If I can spare some self-compassion, maybe she can, after so long, find a way to dry her tears.

Glastnost Bride

E.S. Tervo

One time at Sasha's place we tried to teach Kathy to smoke, but it didn't work. She kept burning her tongue and laughing. I tried to tell her, why do you need this? But she was having fun being the center of attention and wouldn't listen. Borya was the chief instigator. His wife, one of those women with a skull like a lightbulb, was not pleased, and as usual Kathy had no idea what she was doing and what it meant and she didn't know when to stop. I tried to shut Borya up, but he kept urging Kathy to try just one more time.

Later he gave her a ride home, and then we understood that he had organized the entire evening just for the purpose of taking Kathy home. This was during one of the times when Andrei was away. Some men can't help noticing a dying marriage and then they begin circling like vultures. Borya was like that. We all knew how this play would end, so we were surprised to see Borya return almost instantly.

"She jumped out of the car and ran away," he told me and my brother Pasha in a low voice as he hung up his coat. His wife was in the kitchen.

Pasha was worried because Kathy was impulsive and might do anything if Borya frightened her.

"While the car was still moving?!"

"No... no... Well, yes... but it wasn't going that fast.

She ran into their place and shut the door."

"So, you see," I told him.

Then we cleared out because his wife was looking murderous and one of our chief goals in life was avoiding scenes which involved women yelling at us.

Another time we were at our apartment near Yale. Sonya was getting dishes out of the cabinet. We let her hang around and do all the work in exchange for being Pasha's girlfriend. The place was pretty spartan—just table, chairs, dishes, and all of us. Hopefully

Sonya would come up with some kind of dinner soon. Then we'd have something to drink.

There was a knock at the door and Andrei walked in with Kathy. She wanted us to read over her questionnaire, because she was going to do some kind of research in Russia for her dissertation. We always helped each other with whatever was going on. We didn't mind, and we were expecting her to come along sometime, but not really at this moment.

The room got quiet. We looked at Kathy and then away again. We could not believe Andrei brought her now.

He told her to sit down at the table while we looked at her *anketa*, and right away I forgot about the situation because I saw so many problems on the paper.

"Kathy, you wrote here that you'll use the information to improve medical care. People are proud, they don't want you to improve their medical care."

"But it has to be on there," she said. "You have to inform the subjects about the purpose of your research."

"But it's offensive."

"It has to go on there... it's part of informed consent."

That's how it went. We would point out a problem, and she would explain why it had to be that way and she couldn't change it. I don't know why she even asked us to help. She was so stubborn. It must have been on the university protocol: *Review the questionnaire for your study with a focus group beforehand.*

We were annoyed with her, but even more with Andrei because he put us in this situation. We'd never give him away, of course, but we could not really thank him either, because he made his own situation into everybody's situation. It was a beginner's mistake to put Kathy and Irina in the same room, let alone at the same table.

We tried to get through the *anketa* so they would leave, but meanwhile Kathy had time to befriend Irina, which should not have been allowed to happen. We Russians always like Kathy. That is, until we get tired of her. But Irina wouldn't talk with her. Kathy began

to chat with her in her soft, funny, Russian, asking her how old she was, when she came over, et cetera.

Irina was radiant, sitting up straight like a ballerina, with her luminous hair in a high bun, her eyebrows curving high above her attractive face. She was actually only sixteen, hence Andrei's usual jokes about 'Lolita.' Irina gripped the edge of the table with both hands and looked down, a smiling rictus on her face.

She would have liked to pretend that Kathy did not exist, or that if she did exist she was a monster, but here was Kathy herself, bending close to her, talking to her kindly, and trying to overcome this mysterious shyness. Irina looked sideways at us and at Andrei, who was ignoring her while we discussed Kathy's *anketa*. Anyway, in a few days Kathy would be far away and wouldn't exist anymore for either of them.

You could tell that Kathy was puzzled.

Irina probably enjoyed sitting next to Kathy, because there was no question who was more attractive. Kathy is a nice girl, of course. She has that open expression, that vulnerabil- ity that some people, especially children and Americans, have around the eyes, as if they are not sure whether you are about to hit them. She was the kind of girl with a heart full of love for the first taker, and Andrei had been the first taker and he took everything. She obviously wondered why he was different now and blamed herself.

We all put on a mask when we fall in love. Maybe someday, she would realize that there was a completely different and unique person behind the mask. Maybe not. Either way, we knew that her life with Andrei was nothing but suffering.

We tried to look out for her. When she and Andrei fought for the car keys in the street when he was barely sober enough to drive, we kept an eye on the situation from our door. We had our standards. Driving your wife home while drunk was okay. Beating your wife was not okay. But it didn't come to that—he kept the keys, easily—and we went back into the house as the car screeched away.

Another time when she was leaving alone, snow had fallen and the car was buried deep. She said goodbye to us, brushed off the

snow, got out her shovel, and dug the car out. Again we watched from the door. She was like an elf in a fairy tale, jumping about. She was so small and there was so much snow—we would have helped her if she asked. But she didn't ask. She never even looked up at us. It was cold, so we went back inside.

That was the problem with Kathy. American women are too much like men. They shovel their own snow, put on their own coats, drive their own cars, and just like men, they can't cook. She used to cook some awful messes for Andrei. He didn't care—he just added more ketchup. But we all found it more congenial to hang around at Sasha's where the food was better. I can't remember Sasha's wife's name now, but she was always cooking something for us.

Kathy was also a bit of a *zhidka*, which we found both fascinating and repellent. When she was not around we used to argue about how much Jewish blood she probably had.

Irina was different: a real long-legged Russian beauty. A girl you didn't want to get on the wrong side of. She knew who she was but would keep you guessing, and self-confident, like an Olympic skater or a famous ballerina, and you'd race around the table to light her cigarette.

Finally Kathy gave up trying to get acquainted with her. We got through that nightmare *anketa* and told Kathy that her own words, faulty and strange Russian as they were (though we did not say this) expressed her ideas and her personality very well. Then we were embarrassed because she thanked us so gratefully.

I walked her and Andrei to the door and I told him,
“It's not necessary to behave like this.”

He raised one eyebrow at me and nodded toward Kathy.

Sasha must have told him, sometime before Pascha.

Just a few days earlier, we were all outside the church at midnight, kissing each other and wishing each other Happy Easter, saying *Christ is Risen!* and answering *Truly he is Risen!* Perhaps we did not live much like Christians the rest of the year, but on this one night we felt that it might be possible to obtain forgiveness for everything. We always kiss each other on the cheek at Pascha—that's the

tradition, and it's not erotic, it's a normal custom. When it came to my and Pasha's turn to kiss Kathy, Andrei gestured to her, smirked, and said,

“Friends... my wife.”

Here she is. Kiss her. It's fine with me. You know you want to and you probably have.

This was meant for me, but Pasha and I both recoiled and refused to kiss Kathy or even go near her. Kathy was crestfallen because all she wanted was to say *Christ is Risen!* and exchange the traditional greeting with us and now she couldn't.

I don't know how Andrei knew. And there was nothing to know! The simple fact is this: yes, while Andrei was away, I used to help his wife on with her coat. Was that a crime? Was that something that he should use to torture both her and me? To spoil Pascha for everyone?

It started back at New Year's when Andrei was away. We were all gathering at Sasha's as usual. When I arrived, I suddenly understood that I was glad to see Kathy and she was glad to see me. I didn't expect that.

We were never alone together, we never even spoke to each other, but I was sorry for her. I got fond of her too. When I saw her, I felt sorry for the wife I had left behind in Moscow—but that's another story.

Anyway, we both knew. Pasha knew too.

As I said, she wasn't unattractive and there was really something about her eyes that went to your heart.

Andrei was supposed to be coming home soon and he called us all at Sasha's. He should have called to wish us all a Happy New Year, but instead he called to ask Kathy's permission to stay away longer.

Why ask permission, when he always did exactly what he wanted? Because this way he entangled her in his plans, and so made her his accomplice. Then he could blame her later, as in, “Why did you say I could stay away longer if you didn't want me to?”

Kathy was usually a quiet girl. Too quiet, until you gave her some vodka and she became normal.

This time she freaked out. She cried and screamed into the phone. We all had to listen to this, and it was not very festive for our New Year's celebration.

In the end she gave him permission, of course. She always did. She hung up, still crying and wiping her eyes and nose on her sleeves like a little kid. She wanted to leave, but we couldn't allow that. It's no fun meeting the New Year after someone storms out. We told her Andrei was happy over there, that's all. She said a Russian man can't be happy alone, he must be happy with someone. She was right of course, but we convinced her that possibly her husband was happy with some of his old schoolmates. In the end she got a grip. She agreed to stay and we all sat down around the table again and went on with the party until midnight and after.

She didn't look at me. But I think all she wanted was to rest her head on my shoulder.

Starting that evening, I always got her coat and helped her on with it. It got so that she would wait by the door for me. We never spoke to each other, but I was her "cavalier" as they say.

Andrei came back a few weeks later and this pleasant rhythm was disrupted. The first time, when it was time to say goodnight, Kathy hesitated at the coat rack. Then she turned her head and looked at me. This was maybe the first time our eyes met.

I shook my head at her, almost imperceptibly, just once. I kept my mouth in a straight line and did not look back at her. She understood me. Something had been going on, but there wasn't going to be any more of it. She turned back to her coat.

Maybe everyone noticed this. I don't know.

Kathy looked around for Andrei to get her coat instead—but he was already outside. He wouldn't care if she froze to death and he would certainly not try to outdo anyone in chivalry. As for me, I wouldn't help her now.

She stood there looking at her coat.

I have my own code of behavior. Messing around with your

friend's wife while he is away, is okay. Messing around with your friend's wife when he comes home is not okay. We all have our standards.

She made a sudden movement as if to throw the coat on the floor. But then she seemed to remember that she was an American woman and could put on her coat herself. Slowly she took it down and struggled into it.

That's the whole story.

The day after we read the *anketa*, Kathy called Pasha on the phone. She never used to call me. Her childlike voice rang through the receiver.

"Pasha, who was that girl? She is so beautiful!"

He did not want to answer this question. Andrei needed to tell her himself, if anyone did. There was going to be a terrible scene soon, a screaming fit, and we did not see why we should have to field it instead of him.

Kathy persisted.

"Is she your girlfriend, Pasha?"

Pasha's voice came out in a reedy whine.

"Noooo, Katya!"

Kathy should have understood that this usage of her Russian name meant that the conversation was taking an intimate turn, but she didn't.

Pasha wanted her to come to the right conclusion, but he did not want to be the one to tell her. Neither did I. We were fond of her in our way and wanted her to be happy, but if that was not possible then we did not want to be there when she went to pieces, as she inevitably would.

I and Pasha looked at each other. We waited, but she did not pose the next, logical question.

We never saw Kathy again. She went to St. Petersburg that summer to do her research, and Andrei promised to join her there two weeks later. (He had abandoned her under some kind of pretense the

previous summer, so this year she planned to go straight to where she thought he would be.) As far as we knew, he never intended to go at all, and he put off his departure by means of strategic phone calls, always saying that he was coming in a day or two and that she should by no means come back. Whenever she begged him to come, he blamed her for misunderstanding him. That was how he managed her.

Meanwhile he moved all her things out or hid them, and moved Irina's things in, and she became a regular with him and all of us at Sasha's instead.

Months later when we arrived in Moscow, Kathy was still waiting.

Andrei even roped Pasha into calling her.

She answered on the first ring.

"Alyo."

"Hello, Kathy, this is Pasha."

She was disappointed only for a moment.

"Hi Pasha!!! How are you??"

"Ah, hi. Andrei asked me to call you and say hello."

"Oh! Are you here in St. Petersburg?"

"No, in Moscow."

"Oh... Do you have a letter for me? A letter from Andrei?"

Apparently when he was courting her in Soviet times he wrote her a lot of charming letters, but once they were married there were no more letters. I've heard her ask him sweetly, "Andrei, would you please write me another letter?" But if he ever did we never heard about it.

"No, Kathy, no letter."

"Oh..." I could hear her lose hope. It was almost audible how it fell away. Then she went on desperately,

"Pasha, your brother, how is he... is he okay?"

There is no reason I wouldn't be okay—I am pretty sturdy—but Pasha understood.

"Yes, Katya, he is okay."

"Well... tell him... tell him hello, from me."

“I will. I will, Katya.”
His voice was very tender.

Two Poems

C.C. Reid

Second Marriage

Mortar joints are intended
to be sacrificial, sensitive
toward the needs of historic
brick and stone. Slaked
lime and local sand
destroy a structure
if overly strong. Analysis
requires interpretation. Repointing
restores physical and visual
integrity, or detracts
and damages the masonry:

Mortar as bedding
rather than glue,
pigmented by lampblack,
brickdust, oystershells,
coral sands and locks of hair.
The joint is tooled
when thumbprint hard
to match existing bonds.
New construction bloom
fades through normal
weathering.

River-rounded sand,
free from impurities,
a handful is part void
between the grains. Good mortar
fills each emptiness. And vines
weigh down one corner
of the building, vines
planted by another.
I say they'll drag
the whole wall down. You
swear they hold it up.

Self-Taught

there's a radial arm saw in our family my father
gave my brother headed north looking for land
with his lover and child I remember my great-
grandfather Charlie balancing a pool cue on the
two-and-a-half fingers making his left hand how
winter came and he didn't have shoes for school
and a teacher gave him her old pair a kindness too
big too pretty too essential to be squandered you
can't get back the things you needed when you
had them the man who raised my father took the
safety off to best cut teak candlesticks that burned
the first time I tried candlelight a good case for
precious metals better hand-me-downs what hap-
pened to his missing fingers I know without ask-
ing—in our family you pick them up yourself

What Was She Like?

A trip to see Janis Joplin

Jim Cory

A few years back I'm at a party chatting with Paul, poet and fervid music fan, when the topic defaults to Memorable Concert Experiences.

"You *saw* Janis?" he asks.

"Uh, yeah."

"What was she like?"

I had to think about it. Any answer would be somewhat complicated by the fact of my having been, at the time, cruising "comfortably in the neighborhood of 70,000 feet off the ground," to quote "Everything you could ever want to know about flying the U-2 spy plane." You know, the one the Russians shot down in 1962, capturing the pilot, Gary Powers, and nearly precipitating a diplomatic rupture?

Seventy thousand feet is thirteen miles up, and at various points in the course of that day, August 5, 1970, the day Janis Joplin performed at the Ravinia Theater in Highland Park, IL, it felt like I was tuning in from the stratosphere.

Drugs can do that. A friend and I once climbed a tower some Explorer Scouts had built in the woods. Solidly constructed of cut branches, fastened with nails, the joints reinforced with twine, it rose about forty feet. We didn't ask ourselves why it was there. It just was, and since it was and since we were fifteen at the time, it seemed like a hashish picnic on the platform at the top was called for.

One problem. Once we were wasted we had no idea how to get down.

We sat there for a few hashish minutes, staring at the ground, which appeared at least as far away as Siberia must've looked to Gary Powers.

"We're fucked!" I said at last.

Kevin nodded, wide-eyed. He made to speak. A broken syllable, a grunt that wanted to be a word and changed its mind, came out.

Being in a problematic situation is one thing but having to manage someone seriously scared can make it really fraught. Add to this a substantial dose of cannabis paranoia. What if the fasteners separate and the tower falls apart? What if Kevin panics and jumps? What if, after sundown, searchlights begin combing the dark from police car windows? What if the wind accelerates and bends the tower far enough over so that it...

Each of these thoughts made the ground seem that much farther away and, as if cued to that last one, the wind intensified. It was early spring and a cold wind, strong enough so that branches were bending and waving.

Waiting is rarely the choice made when there're options, but ultimately we concluded that we could only get down by coming down, which happened a few hours later.

It's easy to get to an altered state, it's not so easy to manage one. You find yourself transformed into the plaything of whatever happens to happen. You climbed to the top, then forgot how to climb down. It was like smoking a chunk of dementia.

So the answer to the question—*What was she like?*—is not necessarily a straightforward one. At Janis's concert, altered states were the order of the day.

Five of us sit on the grass. What looks like a white twig, moist at the mouth end, an ember at the other, makes the rounds.

It's early afternoon on a weekday in July 1970, in Lake Ellyn Park, IL. Brian has the floor.

Brian's the youngest in our high school pothead intelligentsia band. He's also the most political, the most culturally attuned. He quotes Allen Ginsberg, Nietzsche, Joyce, and William Carlos Williams, usually without attribution. He despises buckskin, bangs, and bellbottoms, the hippie accouterment of the moment. He combs his black hair straight back from the hairline and wears shoes with about two-dozen eyelets for laces. The shoes somehow curl upward at the tips, like clogs, which works with the big, baggy trousers he refers to

as his “pimp pants.”

Wherever we go, people look.

Brian holds forth on “pigs,” pot deals, arson as a necessary and legitimate political tactic, and on the book he’s reading. The book is on the ground beside him: *Selected Poems of Ezra Pound*. Today he’s saving the best for last.

“I’ve got acid,” he says, taking as big a pull as lungs permit and holding it.

His eyes get huge.

“And... “ releasing the bluish vapor into summer’s torpid air, “... Janis is coming.”

Stoned expressions become startled ones.

“What?”

“Janis?”

“Did Brian say ‘Janis?’”

“Yeah, Janis.”

“Far out, man,” says Far Out. He nods, grinning.

Far Out is the anomaly here. Rolling beard, shoulder-length hair, maybe eight years older than the rest of us. No one knows where he’s from or, for that matter, what his given name is, except Brian, who met him buying drugs in Wheaton, one town over, and Brian pretends not to know.

“Where?” Lev asks.

Brian passes Peggy the joint and inserts a plastic fork into a box packed with pork fried rice.

“Ravinia.”

“Far out,” says Far Out.

Located twenty-five miles north of the Loop, Ravinia Park, a thirty-six-acre wooded tract that includes a performance space, is just that for five people without a car. How to get there?

It must be done. This is *Janis*. Janis Joplin. In addition to the pleasures certain to accrue from her performance, just being there comes with considerable countercultural cachet.

Still, the challenges appear formidable. Besides transportation,

there's money. Peggy and Lev will be at Grinnell College in two weeks. They're not working. Far Out deals weed, but he's somehow always broke.

A seed pops.

"I've always wanted to see her," Peggy gasps, passing the joint to Lev.

In the distance, a commuter train rumbles past.

"It could be...interesting," Lev says, studying the object as if we were all anthropologists on a dig and he lucked on a pottery shard.

"When is that?" says Far Out.

"When is what?" everyone at the same time asks.

Far Out's expression is that of someone forced to switch languages in mid-conversation. It takes him thirty seconds to relocate the trail.

"When is she coming?" he says.

"First week, next month," Brian says. "The fifth." He clamps the roach between bobby pin tips.

"Wow," says Far Out. "That's *too* fucking far out."

Strategies are formulated, plans laid. Peggy lines up her father's car. I take a two-week job washing dishes in a pizza joint to help finance admission and the bottle of whiskey Brian insists we bring. With our pooled funds Lev buys the tickets, negotiating for cheap seats on Ravinia's lawn. Brian's contribution is the vaunted acid stash.

The evening starts at 8 o'clock. We'll meet at "the commune," a house in Wheaton Far Out shares with a half dozen other hippies.

Since Peggy's driving, we all agree she shouldn't trip, which is fine with her. She regards the counterculture scene with bemused detachment. So, in his way, does Brian. His oft-expressed distaste is rebellion for its own sake, a defiant nihilism. Lev? His first interest is philosophy, his second, politics, his third art and music. He's the resident Spinoza, more interested in the Isaac Deutscher biography of Trotsky he's reading than in Rock & Roll, though Janis's Bad Girl image and hippie celebrity definitely intrigue.

And Far Out?

A soul in druggy free fall.

Two weeks elapse. Invariably, complications arise. Janis is advertised in the papers. DJs are talking about her on the radio. But in the summer of 1970, things have a way of changing, suddenly and for the worse. Politicians and the press raise concerns and make threatening noises. By late July, the prospect of her appearance arouses controversy. She'll whip up a drug-fueled frenzy. The hippies will burn Ravinia down.

Not likely. Janis occasionally appears, for free, at concerts to raise money for the peace movement. Mother Bloor, she's not. She's a blues singer who is usually introducing the next song when she's not singing, though she sometimes delivers a quasi-political rap from the stage. Her concerts are all about inspiring the audience to get loose, party, and dance.

Then, a little more than two weeks before her gig, a free concert by Sly and the Family Stone, in downtown Chicago, becomes a melee. The Grant Park audience swarms the stage and can't be persuaded to leave. Sly refuses to go on. Furious, the crowd streams onto Michigan Avenue. Rocks and bottles fly. More than a hundred people are treated for injuries, at least 150 arrested. "Several thousand Negro and white youths, hurling rocks, battled the police for more than six hours tonight," reports *The New York Times*. "They roamed into the Loop business district and smashed windows."

A rumor makes the rounds that Janis will cancel her Ravinia gig. Another has it that Ravinia will cancel Janis. Highland Park's police chief, Michael Bonamarte, tells the *Chicago Tribune* he is "waiting for a riot."

"They'll be patting people down on the way in," Lev says.

We're back in Lake Ellyn Park, passing a joint, pooling cash for a run to Luck Chow House.

"The motherfuckers wouldn't dare," Brian says.

The rest of us aren't so sure. A month earlier, at a Traffic concert at the Aragon Ballroom in Uptown, word spread that the

cops were waiting outside to frisk all upon exit. “Pigs are busting people,” the guy next to me shouted, handing me a half empty bottle of red wine. I tilted it back—*glug, glug*—passed it to the stranger on my right and fished in my back pocket for the dime bag of weed I’d brought.

*Dear Mr. Fantasy, play us a tune
Something to make us all happy*

When the last sounds faded and the lights came up, baggies and prescription bottles littered the floor.

“Are you feeling it?”

Lev asks this question as if he were talking to one person instead of a roomful. He’s not putting us on. If anything, he’s being earnest, in the manner of scientific inquiry.

There’s a pause—that split second before a bomb goes off—and the room breaks up.

I guess we are. Feeling it.

Imagine having a car battery wired to your hippocampus for eight hours. There are other dimensions to LSD but the first is a kind of internal glow, as if someone had switched on some unknown energy source, purring away without a governor switch.

You can be tripping and appear mentally intact, even while on the cusp of full-on hysteria. It’s a state of mind some learn to love.

I had a friend who would drop acid in the morning and wander around Philadelphia looking at things all day.

“What did you see?” I’d ask.

“Swan champagne,” he’d say, grinning maniacally.

“Really?”

Had some chic new beverage hit the market? Had ornithologists discovered a new species of swan somewhere and broken out the bubbly?

A few months later it occurred to me he was describing the fountain in Logan Circle, where patinaed cygnets joyously spout.

Two points: 1) on acid the mind defaults to absurdity at the first invitation, and, 2) acidified brains move in sync like murmuring starlings.

Imagine reading aloud to a room full of people, as if sacred text, the instruction booklet for assembling a stereo.

Someone claps.

Now the whole room's laughing and applauding.

Triggers come out of nowhere. Why, I think, as we sit in Far Out's living room, are Lev's socks blue? Shouldn't they be...yellow? Or red? Why not yellow *and* red? What is the point of socks at all?

"Lev," I say. "Why are there socks?"

Lev smiles one of those rare smiles that could genuinely be called 'beatific.' It's as if he knows the reason but because it's rooted in some incredibly detailed historical explanation having to do with the invention of sandals, then shoes, then boots, with a detour, maybe, for mukluks, and for the very reason that it's just too complicated and none other, he will do me the favor of declining to respond.

It's two in the afternoon. The acid kicked in half an hour ago. I've tripped a dozen times but never in daytime and never quite like this.

How high are we?

Think Gary Powers.

Furniture breathes. Voices cast shadows and the shadows dissolve at a touch.

On the other side of the room, Brian scowls, reading book titles.

"What are you looking at?" Peggy asks.

"*One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest*," Brian, glancing up, replies. HAHHAHAHAHA

"Far out," says Far Out, when, a quarter hour later, it all stops.

We're spread out on two or three cat-clawed sofas and chairs, staring at the ceiling or gazing outside. An old rag rug lies in the center of the floor. Is it purple or gray? Are they the same? Suddenly, we're all leaning forward at once, keen to catch the sounds everyone's just noticing, which is Joplin's *Kozmic Blues* spinning on the turntable:

*Time keeps movin' on
Friends they turn away
I keep movin' on
But I never found out why*

Why? I think. What an odd word. Why is the room shaped like a rectangle when a triangle would work just as well? Maybe better. Fewer corners. Why is...

THUNK.

A strange noise.

Where?

Heads turn right to left.

What made that sound?

Brian vaults from a sofa. The screen door bangs shut. He returns, strips the green rubber band away and drops the *Chicago Tribune's* afternoon edition, open, onto the rug.

RFK Jr. BUSTED FOR POT

“Far out.”

Once triggered, the laughter has no end point. It leaps body-to-body, some crazy contagion for which there is no vaccine, its symptoms this blubbering, rib-clutching, head-shaking seizure, complete with back-and-forth, up-and-down rocking motions. It's a laughter that paralyzes all functions so that you can't do anything but huff, pant, bawl and finally cry. Any stranger entering the room would've immediately phoned for a priest. Only Peggy holds back, a DaVinci-esque smile while the rest of us gasp and shriek from halfway inside some other dimension. Was she regretting her decision not to trip, or congratulating herself for avoiding this Kodachrome squalor?

Brian looks down at the turntable and the motionless record. Where did this silence come from?

“Who's hungry?” he says.

The Dairy Queen's Lev's idea. We push and tumble past the door, yipping like spring coyotes.

Lev wants a banana split. No one asks why, fearing an extended dissertation on fruit farming in Honduras or a discourse on the evolution of human taste buds.

The glitzy franchise is take-out, mostly, with four black tables set against glass walls. Two cash registers are mounted on the counter and a few feet behind it a stainless steel thing like a Strong Box as big as a refrigerator, complete with some weird gearshift, flanked by stacks of ice cream cones. Over the counter floats a menu.

A kid no older than us, white smock, leans forward on the counter. We stand, staring. I hear him clear his throat.

Now someone with a salt-and-pepper brush cut, pencil wedged behind the ear, steps out from around back. Same mad scientist smock, which must be the reigning drag here, except that his has *General Manager* embroidered in red above the pocket.

His eyes take us in. It's the old up-and-down, the Fuck You look-over that starts at the feet and inches upwards, pausing at a missed belt loop, a grease stain, last week's unhealed zit.

In old age you view youth as just another opportunity lost along a long trail fairly littered with them. You might even sympathize with its follies. Middle age is another matter. What does *General Manager* see in a pack of longhairs, loud and crazed, pupils dark and blazing?

The eyes move up and over Brian first, the most obvious spectacle, then Lev, with his *Out Now!* and *Stop The War* buttons, craggy Semitic nose, red-blond goatee. They widen at the sight of Far Out, a werewolf in search of adulthood, and finally alight on me. When you're a teenager in the closet, all scrutiny comes with its own dose of fear. If your friends carefully steer all conversation away from the subject of homosexuality, that says they know.

Only Peggy, the calmest person in the room, is spared.

"*What do you want?*" General Manager hisses.

We look at each other. It's not like we're touring the Vatican. It's a fucking *Dairy Queen*, for Christ's sakes. We're trying to read the overhead menu board. Lev giggles.

“I’ll have a Dilly Bar,” Peggy says to the kid at the counter.

She’s getting the ducklings in line, trying to guide us back to the safety of the pond.

“That it?”

She nods. And just when things seem to have settled down, Brian turns to the group and asks, in his most mock-innocent: “Who’s Mr. Misty?”

Everyone—the kid, General Manager, us—looks at Brian as if he’d just materialized out of thin air into our midst. His eyes gleam. The energy rolls off him in waves. He’s all lit up like a casino.

“Is Mr. Misty the owner?” Lev asks, picking up the thread, but it’s not a put-on, he’s just that blitzed and seriously trying to get his mind around it, the source of this name.

Peggy shakes her head.

“Brian, what flavor do you want?” she asks, firmly.

“Lime.”

“Far out.”

Far Out also wants a Dilly Bar.

“I’ll have a banana split,” Lev announces, remembering why we’re there.

The minion peels a banana, slices it in long halves, sets the halves on opposite sides of a black plastic dish and—*splut! splut! splut!*—releases from that big churning Strong Box three twisty dollops of soft serve on each of which he ladles separate syrupy toppings. General Manager, arms crossed, watches. The pineapple chunks look like a fistful of melting yellow dice. The chocolate I can taste just by looking at it.

Now that tongue-twisting Mister Misty mixer slams into action. It sounds like a chipper shredder eating a skyscraper, grinding ice, mixing it with sugar and dye, whipping it into a frosty green blend in a tall paper cup. Brian stares into his, as if waiting for the face inside to say something.

The parfait I’ve ordered is a curious thing, like valentines slathered in frozen cream tucked in a triangular glass.

We carry it all to a table.

Lev spears a strawberry, peers, pops it in his mouth.
“Far out,” says Far Out
Far Out lifts his Dilly Bar like a scepter for us to admire.
I feel a gut-buster start up inside. It’s working its way forward,
one ticklish inch at a time.
Out of nowhere, General Manager looms table-side.
“*What the fuck’s going on here?*” he says.
Silence for thirty seconds or so until Peggy says:
“We’re on our way to a concert.”
It’s not the answer he’s expecting because he’s not expecting
any answer.
That trick again.
“It’s Janis Joplin,” Lev says, as if he’s introducing her onstage.
A titter. A cackle. Now it’s impossible to stop. We’re roaring.
The table shakes.
“GET OUT OR I’M CALLING THE COPS!!”
General Manager turns. He disappears behind the counter.
Ten minutes later, from a broken sofa on Far Out’s front porch,
we watch a cop car speed toward downtown Wheaton, lights flashing.

Of course it’d be far easier to describe what Janis was like
at Ravinia if we’d been in the box seats, near the stage, me with
notebook in hand, listening with unimpeded concentration. On the
contrary, we were, as they say, ripped to the tits—all except Peggy—
and comorting on some blankets she’d had the good sense to bring.
Maybe 200 feet from the stage, we wait: Peggy vigilant, Lev curious,
Far Out buzzing like a transformer, Brian and I banging back Jim
Beam. Concentration was compromised that evening, so if it’s analogy
you’re after, an image in the form of quick and painless comparison,
she was like a fire seen burning at some great distance.

Whiskey and acid might sound like a recipe for epic social
disaster, but combining them, I discovered, contains a certain logic.
The booze has little or no visible effect—no staggering, stumbling,
slurring—except to keep the acid from reaching the flat-out cuckoo

stage. It's like pouring water on moving lava. Meanwhile LSD's inherent caution, that sense of setting foot on a strange planet for the first time, puts a brake on the jackass behavior typically associated with whiskey. It works.

Good enough, since Ravinia, once we step past the gates, is alive with blue. Four or five cops gathered anywhere you look. Meanwhile somewhere around 20,000 fans have assembled and, assuming safety in numbers, a few light up joints while the cops look the other way.

A country rock band from Indiana, called Mason Proffitt, in buckskin, fringe and round Mountie hats, opens and is off soon enough. Figures appear, yank cords, lift equipment. It's Janis's crew, setting up for her band, Full Tilt Boogie. A frenzy takes hold. The congregation awaits its priestess.

The night we went to see Janis at Ravinia, my—to date—half-century of active concert-going was in its infant stages. I discovered music the way I discovered sex: something that starts out as one of life's fringe benefits and goes on to become almost a defining purpose.

For those who love it, music becomes a kind of timeline for life. The great performances we were lucky enough to be at, or the albums we played several times a day every day for six months, the single we absolutely loathed on the radio that came to be a favorite song, these pin experience to a time and place, creating small monuments within memory. The end of 1968, for instance, was when the Beatles' *White Album* came out. Someone bought a copy—there was a line at the store, and it sold out in minutes—brought it back to some den in which ten teenagers waited, unwrapped it and gingerly set the first disk on the turntable. It was like receiving a telegram from the divine.

That was an early moment. Another is from 1973, the year Seiji Ozawa conducted the New Japan Philharmonic in Berlioz' *Symphonie Fantastique* in a tour that included Penn State, where I heard the ensemble with no small enthusiasm. Later that same night, quite by chance, I encountered the Maestro in a State College bistro seated alone with a glass of wine. I complimented him on the concert. He seemed surprised to be recognized and invited me to join him. We

ended up talking for an hour and a half about Berlioz and French music.

Ravinia that night was another lucky accident. Who knew she had two months to live? I owned her three albums and played *Cheap Thrills* till my mother got annoyed enough to question my sanity. (“Turn that goddamn thing down! Are you crazy?”) So on the night I went to hear Janis, the only basis I had for evaluating what she did or how well she was doing it were those records. I could only compare Janis to Janis. And Janis in concert neither expected nor wanted her audience to sit in deepest concentration. She wanted the crowd on its feet, dancing. That was clear from the moment she arrived.

There are various ways for a star to make an appearance. Sun Ra’s band would take the stage, launch into a number with multiple percussion instruments and all sorts of overlaid horns, while the keyboard bench stood empty. Sooner or later you’d think: where’s Ra? And right about then he’d appear in the wings, discreetly make his way through and around people, instruments, and amplifiers to the piano, so that the effect of his first chords, struck in a way that seemed tentative, as if the thought behind them was still being worked out even as the sound was being made, was electric.

Janis is the opposite. Her entrance is unsubtle, unstoppable and unforgettable. She takes the stage whooping, hollering, and waving her microphone, which looked like a light sword, before there was such a thing. Feathers appear and disappear in the Kliegs, an effect lysergic acid renders numinous. No matter how far out you’d traveled, there’s no ignoring this arrival, which affirms that her presence is the entire point of the evening.

Full Tilt Boogie kicks up. Janis grabs the mike stand and rocks back and forth. She stomps. She stamps. Her beads swing. Her passion and fury put me in mind of someone indignantly resisting arrest.

Given that I’d subjected my brain to relentless levels of uninvited stimuli over the previous, uh, eight or so hours, and that yet more stimulation would be forthcoming as the night wore on, it’s probably no surprise that Janis, onstage, is recollected in mostly general terms

with specifics coming in and out of focus as the trip wears down.

Meanwhile the lousy sound system is making things difficult.

“Can you hear me out there?” Janis yells.

“NO!”

The sound blares, wobbles, fades and blares again but it isn’t anything anyone’s going to riot about.

That we got there and that the evening even happened at all seems a kind of victory, as any undertaking we’d never think twice about seems triumphant under the influence of substances. She’s here, we’re here, and—as the sun goes down—there appear, briefly and everywhere amidst clouds of marijuana smoke, fireflies timidly signaling about a foot off the ground to potential mates, Nature’s assertion of its place in all this human vanity.

The thought of what this might look like in retrospect isn’t even there. Who at sixteen thinks of posterity? What does that word even mean then? You can’t get your mind around the idea in any real way because if you did, that would indicate you understood what it’s like not to exist anymore, to be dead, or at least old, which for many under twenty amounts to the same thing. It’s way too much for the average teenage imagination to engage.

What was she like? Well, if I’d been expecting a reprise of *Cheap Thrills*, ostensibly a live album that was studio-recorded except for one track, with the live effects (applause, catcalls, etc.) dubbed in later, it was not that. At another point in time, when I became a fan of symphonic music, I realized that when you go to hear an orchestra, the point of the performance is that it should resemble all others. Standardization is the aim. With Janis, on the other hand, this instigator of Dionysian revels, everything is adjustable and anything could happen.

Her set mixes Janis standards with songs we’ve never heard, since they’re on an album—*Pearl*—scheduled for release in two months. In fact, once she and her band get started, it’s clear that Full Tilt Boogie’s arrangements of Joplin hits don’t sound like Big Brother’s except (“Piece of My Heart”) when they need to. The arrangements are more polished, more rhythm-driven than anything

she recorded in her acid rock days. They work with what she does, which is to stand behind a microphone and beg, shriek, wail, croon and plead in a vocal tone that registers as both playful and hard at the same time—a feat—and is dominated and defined by its gritty East Texas twang.

We're lying there listening and here comes that seventeen-note figure on electric guitar, which anyone alive and over the age of twelve in 1968 would recognize immediately (#12 on the pop chart) as the opening of Jerry Ragovoy and Bert Berns' "Piece of My Heart," a song since recorded by everybody from Dusty Springfield to Bryan Ferry and Melissa Etheridge:

"Didn't I make you feel
That you were the only man, yeah"

We're on our feet. Even Brian, the perennial non-participant in group displays of countercultural solidarity, even Brian stands, face transfixed, sweeping his black hair back with the hand that isn't holding the Beam bottle.

Janis singing "Piece of My Heart," then and now, makes me think of the last stages of an impassioned argument between lovers, an argument that finally comes down to whether or not the love should exist at all. And if what she sings moves us it's because it reminds us that love never was or ever will be easy. She puts her own insistent spin on the song's blatant masochism, somehow transforming obeisance into defiance.

So we're grooving high, temperature right about 70, zero precip. We've been pulled wholly and unthinkingly into the spell. Whatever you may have heard about the limits of her talent or of that talent having nowhere near enough time to mature, her act was as much presence as anything else, a force in whatever space she happened to occupy.

At some point—was it an encore?—Janis is talking about someone named "Bobby McGee."

Lev wants to know who this is.

“She says it’s a new song,” Peggy says. “On her next album.”

This song seems different from the rest of the set. It’s not a plea like “Piece of My Heart,” or a romp like “Move On,” but a reminiscence. It’s also a showstopper. Or am I only remembering that because of the mega-hit it became? No one’s dancing. Everyone’s listening.

A month or so after Ravinia, I got a job at a supermarket. When there were lines at checkout, I bagged. When there weren’t, I collected carts.

The parking area sloped just enough that every few minutes one of those wire cages on wheels would suddenly go rolling toward the bottom of the lot, picking up speed as it went and—WHAM!—slam into someone’s Cadillac. The carts always made for the expensive cars, never the clunkers, so that the owners would storm back into the store yelling and threatening suit.

I’m out there one Sunday. It’s about 3:30 in the afternoon and cool enough for a jacket. I chased a cart and snagged it. I jammed another cart inside it and grabbed a third. Six was as many as I could push back up the hill and into the store. On the baby seat of the last one someone had left an afternoon tabloid. Her picture filled the cover of the paper.

That winter, “Me and Bobby McGee” became a Number One hit. Her first. On the radio, Janis’s reading of Kris Kristofferson’s tale of two drifters and their lost love felt like a valedictory:

*Busted flat in Baton Rouge, waitin’ for a train
And I’s feelin’ near as faded as my jeans*

Artists, especially entertainers, rarely go out on a note of triumph. Often they falter, fail, or die some grisly public death that leaves the Philistines tsk-tsking. Why would people expend so much time, energy and anguish to risk ending up like that?

One reason, I think, is that artists, of every kind, are out to show us, in the beauty they create, the beautiful thing they know

themselves to be, or contain. When they succeed, the attention that results sometimes feeds a maniacal need for more. Artists want to be loved not just by one person, or a loyal handful, but by everybody. What they make is the product of discipline's ability to bring the power of imagination momentarily under control. Still, we're drawn to this glamorous sorcery. We become a necessary part of it, the audience part, precisely because it allows us to imagine the chaos of our own inner worlds somehow tamed. We indulge in the fantasy that we could paint as well as Degas, write stories as brilliant as Chekhov's or sing about the love we want and need but aren't getting with the same convincing intonation as Janis Joplin. The power to do that, however, comes with a certain risk.

In March of 1991 I went to hear trumpet player Red Rodney—AKA Robert Chudnik—at the Jazz Showcase in Chicago. Red Rodney's appearance at that esteemed venue followed by maybe a year the release of a bio-pic on Charlie Parker called *Bird*. The film features a Red Rodney character, played by Michael Zelniker.

Red Rodney had been famous enough in his time. He toured with one of Parker's quintets, the only white musician in the ensemble, where he went by the name Albino Red and where this kid from Philly—his first trumpet a Bar Mitzvah gift—got seriously strung out on junk. Decades later he landed in a pit band in Vegas, suffering the kind of medical problems which in America quickly translate to bankruptcy. At one point in the '60s, he was jailed for passing bad checks.

After seeing *Bird*, I assumed Red Rodney was Dead Rodney. Then I noticed that he was on the bill at the Jazz Showcase. I went imagining a shell of a man blowing hackneyed solos while a polite crowd downs drinks.

Nothing immediately displaced these expectations. At the mike stands a guy who could be the grandfather of anyone else onstage, except that he's white. He's also short and wide, and his head sports the reddest thatch of hair this side of Lucille Ball. In blazer and slacks, he looks like a Miami Beach retiree.

Red Rodney lifted his flugelhorn and blew a single, dirge-like

note, courtesy of Cole Porter, about 12 seconds long into the microphone:

*Every time we say goodbye,
I die a little.*

You may've heard dozens of versions of that song. His was one you would not forget. By the second set, the place is standing room only.

Yet, even with the ability to turn in a performance at that level, who, a few decades later, remembers Red Rodney, except for a handful of jazz aficionados?

So why go through all that?

Red Rodney, it seems to me, had attained the satisfaction of knowing that he could do something no one else could: play that well, in that way, before people who knew how good it was.

I am a fan and fandom is a whole made of parts, the parts being aesthetic enjoyment, intellectual curiosity, peer pressure, where you're at in your life, and the obsessive collector's need to have it all, own it all, be it all, inhabit it all. Oh, and did I forget bragging rights?

It was bragging rights, as much as anything, that got me to Janis's concert. Not only to have the experience but to say I'd had the experience. At the time, of course, I couldn't imagine I'd be talking about it 50 years later. Who could know her brief career would engrave a permanent place in cultural memory? An overnight sensation in the arts is often forgotten in just about the same amount of time. Al Jolson, for instance, was once known as The World's Greatest Entertainer—an actual title bestowed on this Russian-born tap dancer in blackface—but, unless you're a film historian, would you spend more than ten minutes watching his movies?

We live in an age when audio and video reproductions are readily created and transmitted, so that if you really want to know "what she was like" you can watch the famous clip from the late D.A. Pennebaker's *Monterey Pop*. The June 1967 performance recorded there so dazzled the San Francisco rock aristocracy that the image

of Mama Cass's stunned mug has become at least as iconic as what she's watching, namely Janis's performance of "Ball and Chain."

A half-dozen videos of Janis on stage may convince you that in the three or so years she held our attention, she essentially reprised Monterey Pop again and again. But watching or listening to documents that record an experience is not the same thing as having the experience, even if, at the time you had it, you couldn't imagine you'd remember it at all a month or a half century later.

Janis Joplin became that permanent place in cultural memory called Janis for a few reasons. One is that she happened to have, at the time of her accidental death, an album almost ready for release, and her death—mortality is the ultimate marketing bonanza—propelled it to huge sales. *Pearl* sold four million copies, compared with *Cheap Thrills*, which at 1 million copies was among the best-selling albums of 1968.

So there was a body of work. And there was, in addition, an image, a style, something emblematic—the bellbottoms, beads and boas—which more or less perfectly accorded with, and encoded for historical and media purposes, the brief Bohemian heyday in which her star was ascendant.

Death secured the legend, and the legend, naturally, spawned imitators, some subtle, some fervent. If you want to experience something approximating Janis at the microphone, you could take in an act called Mary Bridget Davis and the Joplinaires, who reprise her biggest hits on stage. Davis moves and inflects in the Joplin manner to a degree that feels creepy in the same way that watching Janis's final interview and TV performance on Dick Cavett's show feels creepy. It's impossible not to know the outcome.

In America, anything saleable sooner or later will be. One day long hair is a statement of social defiance, the next it's a Broadway musical and hit album.

And so, right around the time Janis checked out, rock and roll rolled into stadium-sized venues with louder and flashier performances for which audiences were charged twice or three times as much.

You paid, for instance, five bucks to get into the Aragon Ballroom on the north side of Chicago to hear three hours of music, including headliners such as Traffic or Jethro Tull. A year after Janis died, it costs twenty bucks to hear the same show in Philadelphia's Spectrum, capacity 20,000 (nicknamed by concert goers, The Rectum).

When I went to hear the great ladies of jazz, they were in the twilight of their careers. That brought urgency to the occasion. When I went to hear Sarah Vaughan at Philadelphia's Academy of Music, and most especially Ella Fitzgerald, at Radio City, in New York, there was the unspoken understanding that there might not (Sarah Vaughan) or definitely would not be (Ella) another opportunity to hear them again. In each case, I remember little about what happened before or after the performance, only the performance.

Sarah Vaughn, for instance, whose menacing energy sometimes approximates Krakatoa ready to blow, sipped daintily from a water glass on a stool between mopping away copious quantities of sweat with tissues from a Kleenex box. When she opened her mouth, every song became like the great aria you're waiting to hear in the middle of, say, a Verdi or a Donizetti opera, hoping that whoever has the role will not only animate it in the way you already know it can be, but show you something you haven't seen, felt or heard before.

No one in Radio City Music Hall knew quite what to expect when, in her final performance there, May 2, 1992, Ella Fitzgerald, having lost a leg to diabetes, appeared onstage, age 80, in a wheelchair. As things moved along, the evening's unspoken question was just how long the show could last, given these disabilities. She worked her way through two full sets and sounded pretty much "like" she sounds on *Ella in Berlin*.

Those great singers were old then, the end of life's timeline as visible to them and to us as the last stop on a subway map. They'd worked long enough and hard enough that the artist was inseparable from the person and, as a consequence, they could deliver nothing less than a satisfactory performance.

Janis at 27 had no map and a talent she was still sorting out, still looking for ways to manage. She'd climbed to that high place

with no idea that it might be hard getting back down.

What was she like? She was like the season's first snow, or a great lay, or seeing a bird you've never seen except in field guides, one you were sure you'd never see, appear on a branch ten feet away. There was something evanescent about her, something fleeting, that was discernable even then. Otherwise seeing her blown-up tabloid photo with the headline **JANIS JOPLIN DEAD** would've felt like a shock. It didn't.

Three years, even three years of stardom, is not a lot of time. She blew through it not so much as if she believed there'd always be more, but as if nothing but the moment mattered. That element of the Joplin persona was something she flaunted, her recklessness part of the attraction. But it wouldn't have mattered without the other part, which is harder to pin down. Pathos and yearning, all the desperation of the abandoned, were in her voice and on her face.

People love the singer they believe sings for them, about them, from knowledge of their pain, which reduces, finally, to an absence of love. You have to know that absence to sing about it with authority, to sing about it in a way that's not just believable but convincing. It's something Janis Joplin was able to pull off literally to the end, that is, to the last track on her last album, *Pearl*, in a song that, in the face of life's brevity, urges us to "gamble on a little sorrow," which states the case as simply and directly as it's possible to do and may as well have appeared on her tombstone: "Get It While You Can."

Bent Necessity

Marilyn Moriarty

Not that Margaret would even want to go to the circus. Children disgusted her, and since she had no gift for illusion, the spectacle bored her. It bored him too, but he might have gone for the color and noise if Margaret had shown some taste for the sport.

Picturing his wife through an ale-colored glass, Findan wondered what he had seen in her then, in those beginning days. What had he seen but a pale and wan English woman, stick thin, with muddy brown hair and blue eyes, her body straight as an arrow with no curves to speak of; but she had been hot and fast to make the beast with two backs, and the beast with two backs had been a voracious one, hungry with the wrath of tigers.

Oh, years ago.

Findan nodded to John Barry for another draft. John wiped the wet spot under his glass, mopped the counter.

“What’s wrong with you, Findan? Never a man without spit for your eye,” said John Barry, clapping the draft in front of Findan. Findan nodded once, hunched around his glass as if a cord had been drawn up tightly through his shoulders into his neck

“The nice thing about the circus,” Christy Dooley was saying two stools down, “is that they have those little girlies on the trapeze.”

“Even the old ones look like girlies,” said Joseph Bourke, the local postman, “when they put the sparklies on their tights.”

“I like to see the pretty girlies,” Christy laughed. “I tell them I have a gift for them.”

Findan sighed. Some things were more primeval than desire: Margaret’s Englishness. Only four years married when she reverted to the formalism of tea roses and elegant cursive handwriting on ivory stationery. More than one was the night he had come to his own bedroom door, his hand squeezing the brass knob tight, a bracer, before he pushed the door through to find her on the top of the bed, a lace night dress covering her head-to-knee, an empty bottle of

sherry on the writing table. The faint rose of her aureoles, the slight pink gash between the hem and her knee promised an untried sex.

Margaret, he would whisper, do you want me?

Nothing had happened to her, happened to him. It was not as if life didn't happen to others. Accidents, sick children, cows gone dry, milk gone off.

Wives gone off.

"You going, Findan?" John Barry interrupted his reverie.

Findan said, "No. I don't want to go to the circus."

"Come now," said John Barry.

Findan said that he wasn't and that he wouldn't and furthermore, he would not even believe that the circus was coming to Edenderry.

"Yes, but it is coming," said John Barry, sliding a red and white flyer down the bar to Findan. While he drew Findan another beer, Findan read it held up to his face. Finally he said, "What would a circus be doing here?"

"They've come for Christy Dooley's appendix," said Joseph across a draft from Findan. "Do you still have it in your medicine cabinet?" he asked, his laugh cracking his face into a filigree of burst veins.

"He has his own appendix at home," said Findan. "His wife came for it, snatched it straight off my desk, she did. And it was still warm."

Christy Dooley sifted his beer through the sides of his dentures. "There was no joy at home without it," he said, an old-man creak in his voice.

"Ay," said John Barry. "She thought the Doc cut off his winkle by mistake."

"She wanted his winkle proper at home," said Joseph Bourke.

"Me langer wouldn't fit in a jar," said Christy.

"Still works, does it?" asked Joseph Bourke.

"That's why the circus is coming to town," said John Barry.

"Well, I'd be happy to show it to them," said Christy, "since it doesn't get much use now but for pissing."

"I'm sure they'd be interested," said Findan wryly.

"It'll be pissing down rain soon," said John Barry matter-of-factly, with a nod toward the window. Outside, gray clouds thick enough to button collected in the space between the shops. The shadows from the clouds dulled the luster from the shop windows. They grayed everything except the cherry-red patina of Findan's bubble car.

"So we're to have a circus in the rain!" snorted Christy, and raised his glass to toast the rain.

"In the pissing rain," said Findan, thumbs down.

"Ay, the pissing rain," said Joseph.

"Pissing rain will piss down on your car," Christy said to Findan.

Findan twisted on his stool for a look. He had parked the bubble car directly out front so he could turn at intervals to check it. It was his wife's ovoid three-wheeler, a BMW Isetta. It opened at the front with a single door; a single wheel supported the smaller end of the "egg" at the rear. Inside, the steering wheel was fixed to the floor by a rod. The luggage rack at the rear was customized.

"Nothing will piss on my car," said Findan.

"Your car, now, is it?" Christy said. "A lady's car, if you ask me."

"Do you reckon?" said John Barry, "It's not the polish I'm worried about, Findan. It's the size. What's a doc doing driving such a baby car. Does the thing float? Will it bob about like a fisherman's cork? We'll have a proper flood with those clouds."

"You'll have to tether that little car, Findan," Joseph Bourke said.

"Ay," said John Barry. "The rain will wash it down to the Shannon."

"You got room in that car for an old man when the Deluge cracks?" asked Christy.

"Not a man with no winkle," said Joseph.

"An old man," said Christy, winking. "Maybe your wife can help me find me winkle."

"Old men float by themselves," said Findan. "Nothing but air left in them."

“When did you last take yours out the pickle jar?” asked Christy, clacking his palate with laughter and slapping the top of his thigh.

John Barry interrupted: “Last Sunday. It were a holy day of obligation.”

“Can’t a man drink in peace without listening to drivel?” Findan barked. “They’ll be no circus, if you ask me. It’s just another of one of those things that’s promised but never arrives.”

“Such a skeptic,” said Christy, exchanging a glance with Joseph Bourke over their beer mugs raised in time. Joseph turned to Christy with a wink, and they proceeded to count the spangles on the girlies’ tights and to speculate whether those spangles would be red or silver.

Findan watched the foam float to the top of his glass. He squeezed it to feel the ridges dig into his palm, staring through his ale into his wife’s room.

Now Margaret would be sitting at a small desk overlooking the garden where she grew tea roses. A bottle of sherry and a glass, cut crystal, would be to the right of her writing hand. She would be writing invitations, thank-you notes, or corresponding with an English lady who was part of the Jane Austen reading group. As Findan entered the scene, he imagined himself standing behind her, his shadow thrown over her stationery. Bending over, he would place one hand on her shoulder.

Margaret, do you want me? he might whisper over her shoulder into her ear.

Perhaps she would turn, drop her pen half-rising from her chair, her mouth a red oval. Then they would spill the bottle of ink, discover it only *after* by the streaks upon their skin.

“Come now, Findan, chap, you’re coming to the circus, truly?” John Barry asked again, tapping him out another pint. But before Findan could answer, Joseph Bourke and Christy Dooley had started out of their seats and stood peering through the window at the outside. For outside, the circus, indeed, was coming to town, and the lads shoved each other to get through the door first to watch it pass.

They stood under the awning that divided them from the road,

watching the street through a gauze curtain of drizzle. Across the grass median, the far lane had been left open, but in the near one the circus passed as if all the wagons moved in slow motion.

First came a white wagon like a gypsy wagon, a square clapboard set on three wooden wheels. One back wheel had been replaced by a rubber tire on a spoked, metal rim. At the reins sat the ringmaster with high leather boots and a waxed mustache. He clucked to a pair of draft horses, one brown and one black, which strained against the wagon yoke.

Findan watched from inside as the horses passed in front of him, passed in front of Joseph and Christy. Their backs were turned to him, broad triangular backs crossed by suspenders, heavy work shoes on their feet. Sturdy working men, not precisely keen on screwing their wives, not keen in the way they sought a good stinking argument, not keen in the way they taunted shop girls. They did the deed with the regularity of seeding fields, like the clouds that rained without will and without desire.

After the first wagon passed came the next, a red wagon with gingerbread cutouts in yellow at the borders, pulled by two bay horses. Inside this wagon were animal cages. A straggly lion reclined with its chin on two folded paws and stared out at the drizzle. Its mane was matted, and its black nose, dull, ran. Next to the lion's cage, two tigers curled up at the back of their bars. One licked its paw, scratched behind its ear like a tabby with fleas, paused, held the black pads up to its face to consider its claws, and then snapped at its mate with an irritated growl.

As the rain set in, the yellow wagon faded to dun, the bay horses turned brown in the mist, but the red body of the bubble car glowed, polished as with a fresh coat of lacquer.

Joseph Bourke leaned his hip on Findan's car. Findan said, "Shit," to himself, and then stepped through the door, the cold slapping him in the face.

Christy stepped out into the street, seeming to shrink in the rain. Joseph Bourke, still with a hip against the door of Findan's car, reached out for balance with one hand on the roof.

Findan shouted at him, "Get your ass off my car."

Joseph drunkenly said, "Piss on your car," and cursed him, but he moved forward, closer into the street, to see what was coming next.

Then came the elephant. It was only one elephant, the circus being small, and obviously not commercial enough to support four matching wheels on its wagon. It was a muddy brown elephant with scraggly hairs like wires coming out of its hide. It was a skinny elephant, with its body high over long legs. And now it was a wet, skinny elephant, gentle steam rising off its warm back. It was also a decorated elephant, a rope of scarlet braid twined over its head.

By the elephant's front leg walked a girl dressed like a majorette in a short white skirt that dropped from her hips. The pink plume of her white top hat stabbed the air when she twirled a baton. Her boots pranced through brown puddles as if the sun had been shining on an Easter Sunday morning.

John Barry came out then, a stained apron over his white shirt, his hands in his pockets under the apron.

John Barry stood next to Findan and gave him a sharp punch on the arm. "Should we call the elephant?" he asked Findan.

Findan said, "What, call the elephant? What for?"

The elephant's trunk swayed from side to side as it walked directly across from them on the wide paved street.

"Come 'ere, boy," John called the elephant.

"At's it, lad," said Joseph Bourke.

John Barry banged on the trunk of the blue car in front of him. It was parked next to Findan's car, and Findan gave him a look that said *Don't touch my car like that*.

John Barry said, "It's my car," but he stopped banging on the trunk.

"A man's car is his own car," said Findan and moved to stand in front of his car.

The other lads joined in calling the elephant, now Joseph hollering, "'Ere, boy. 'Ere boy."

The girl turned her head and canted her plume in their direction as if to say, "Fuck off, chaps."

John Barry reached into his pocket, pulled out a bag of peanuts, opened it noisily, and then crumpled the cellophane in his hand: “Ey, elephant.”

The lads jumped up and down on the slick pavement, waving their arms like madmen, their shirts sodden and matted on their backs, their faces shining, their hair clinging to their faces. They called the elephant. And when the elephant saw John Barry with his arm out, palm extended, standing between his car and Findan’s bubble car, the elephant slipped away from the girl, pausing to let her pass before it turned, lumbering gradually toward them, moving more quickly then, its massive shoulders ratcheting up and down, its trunk extended straight out like a divining rod fixed on John Barry.

John Barry stepped out into the street.

“Somebody get that elephant a beer,” said Christy Dooley.

“Right. A beer,” said Joseph Bourke, on his way to fetch one.

“Get me an umbrella,” said John Barry, who walked out in the rain to meet the elephant, his open hand extended palm-out to catch its trunk, but the elephant pivoted narrowly around him and it headed toward Findan’s car.

“Ey, elephant,” said John Barry, turning around to look where the creature had gone. Standing on the curbside out of the rain, Findan stared back at John Barry, the two of them framing the elephant in the crosshairs of their gaze.

“Mother of God,” Findan said.

At first it seemed the elephant would turn away from the cars, but after it turned, it stopped in its tracks and presented its haunches to Findan. Findan could see nothing past the twin pillars of the legs, the skinny tail beating a rhythm like a slow windshield wiper over the backside.

“Off you go, you filthy beast,” Findan shouted to the backside.

“E’s going to foul your car,” Christy warned.

The animal rocked oddly from side to side until it seemed to change gears to a back-and-forth motion. Surely it would move on again from this position. Didn’t animals always move in the direction they faced? The beast’s head aimed directly at the girl. But

instead of returning to the circus procession, the elephant backed slowly until it touched the car.

“If he lifts his tail ...” Christy warned.

“Get along, you,” Findan shouted at the elephant. “Where is the owner?” he screamed around its mass. Could he drive it off with blows without antagonizing the animal? Surely it would turn on him if he hit it, and he was no match for an unrestrained jungle creature.

“Girl! Fetch your elephant,” he shouted as she jumped in front of it, yelling something he couldn’t make out.

“There it goes,” Christy said.

Seeming to lean into it, the elephant gradually eased its haunches over the luggage rack and rested above it. Buckling metal groaned as glass splattered on the pavement. The rear wheel twisted, the axle warped before the tire burst with a pop. The elephant started with animal surprise as the roof buckled, but regained its balance sufficiently to raise its forelegs, tentatively pawing the air, its trunk snakily upraised in salute.

“Oh, no,” Findan whispered.

With wilted plume, the girl in the white hat jumped around as she shouted, “No. No. Down, Sheba. Down.” With her baton, she tapped at the elephant’s foot dangling in the air. Calling it down, she tapped its knees, so that finally the elephant gracelessly lowered its forelegs, coming to stand on all fours. The girl flicked its knees, rain coming down hard now and starting to stream off the elephant’s back, the ringmaster then screaming in circles around her, the wagons stopped in the center of the road, the horses pulling against the reins to nip at the grass in the median, the ringmaster’s black hat flung to the wet ground, the cars on either side stopping to watch while, now, the ringmaster flailed at the legs of the elephant with the whip reserved for the big cats, the ringmaster screaming, “Move, Sheba. Move!”

As the elephant stepped into the street, the girl cried out, “She’s got glass in her ass.”

John Barry answered her with “E’s a doctor.”

“E’ll not treat ‘im,” Christy shouted to John Barry.

Joseph Bourke came out the bar then with the two beers he'd pulled and asked, "Glass in 'ose ass?"

"No," groaned Findan.

"Here, Findan, take this," Joseph said, thrusting a mug at Findan. "Where's the ely-phant?"

The glass slipped through Findan's shaking hands, shattered, and joined the shards of window glass in the gutter. Findan reached into his pants pocket for the key, his hand shaking.

"It's not so bad," said Christy said about the wreckage in the road.

"Mind the glass," John Barry said as he led Findan off the street.

Blue sirens screaming, the Garda arrived at the scene and parked next to Findan's car.

"The animal has been restrained," one policeman said. A second one covered in a blue slicker spoke to the ringmaster. Findan's hands shook as he tried to write down the addresses and names of persons all around, the names smearing even as he wrote them until John Barry held an umbrella over him and thrust a dry biro into his hands, saying, "The names, Findan. You've got to be able to read the names for the insurance claim."

Was the car even insured against acts of God? It was not insured against war. Yet surely an elephant sitting on his car could not be construed in the usual categories of catastrophe and must, indeed, be very well an act of God. Earthquakes, floods, storms—surely a loose and rampant jungle animal counted as catastrophe. And the car, itself, being just post-War, was irreplaceable, even though Margaret had hated it when he brought it over from Germany for her.

"It's for you," he had said that morning when she awoke on her birthday.

"The door is in the front," she had said.

She would say that he had brought it down on himself, he had to take it to work that day.

If it hadn't been so bright ...

If it hadn't been so small ...

If it hadn't been so red ...

"It didn't start," one of the Garda said as he slapped the key on

the bar next to Findan.

“Another, John Barry,” Findan said, hunched over the bar ignoring the key.

“Give him another,” said Joseph Bourke, who clapped Findan on the back.

Christy squeezed his shoulder, saying, “It’s not so bad, lad.”

It was only after the fact, when every lad in the house had doused Findan with drink, actually pouring it down his throat with a slap on the shoulder as they would commiserate with a cuckolded husband, only after the fact that Findan realized the resemblance his car must have held for the elephant. For, surely from the elephant’s point of view, the round, red body of his bubble car looked very like the stand the elephant had been trained to sit upon. It was not peanuts, nor beer, nor the cheers of the crowd that drew it. No, it was not that. From the point of the view of the beast, that car had become the object of elephant interest, the conditioned goal of many years training that brought it applause under the big top, perhaps even an affectionate pat from the girl with the white skirt. It was in the satisfaction of that trained desire that the elephant had sat quite plumply upon Findan’s bubble car.

“The elephant has gone home now,” Joseph Bourke said, through the door and pulling a tweed cap over his ears. “She doesn’t need a doctor.”

“I’ll take you home,” John Barry said, as he started to turn off all the lights. “I’ll make sure you get home all right, a man should not have to walk home in this awful rain.”

John Barry slipped the key into Findan’s breast pocket before he got Findan into his car. As John Barry eased out of the lot, Findan looked down out the window at the single, crumpled tire.

“Besides,” John Barry continued, “the insurance company will take care of the car. Even though it’s not paid for yet, well, man, that is what insurance is for, part of the natural order of things.” He turned down the lane leading to Findan’s house, stopped before the house where the front wall was twined with roses, which, in the

drizzled dark, appeared as gray balls bunched together like clumps of old tissue.

So Findan should not worry after all, John Barry continued. “It is not so bad as it seems. The animal is fine, you won’t be sued. Ay, it is unfortunate that you were made such good sport of, but when the insurance comes through, everything will be fine. Every man in town will rue the day he had missed seeing the elephant. Man, you will be a legend in your own time, and all time from henceforth will be counted from the day that the elephant sat on your car. Why, did you see old Christy Dooley? He was so excited, he’ll go home and lay his wife. Joseph Bourke will say that in all of his career, the one day he went home sober enough to talk to his wife was the day that the elephant....”

Findan climbed out the car door and slammed it shut.

As John Barry trained his headlights on the door, Findan climbed over the gate, and the slick wood left a dark smear on the inside of his trouser leg. When he tried to brush the stain off, he only smeared it around. His head hurt, and the rain blurred his sight, so he lumbered, stumbling, through the tea roses till he got to the door. There he pulled his house keys out of his pocket, found the right one, placed it clumsily in the lock, held the knob to steady himself and stumbled face-forward inside, catching himself before he tumbled. John Barry honked good night.

Findan tore his coat off with a clumsy whirl of arms, hooked two fingers in his tie and slipped the knot out, pulled the tie off, flinging it behind him somewhere.

Leaving a trail of water behind him, he made his way in the dark to the kitchen, ran the tap for a glass of water, drank it, threw the glass in the sink.

He looked down at his shoes—black wing tips, sodden—they left small tracks behind him. They squished through every step as if he had been walking through mud. At the kitchen table, he sat down as soberly as he could, and one foot at a time, pulled out the loop of his laces, loosened one, slipped his shoe off with a hand cupped

gently behind the heel. He held his right shoe up to his face as if he were taking the measure of his ruin, sighed, and set it down on the floor directly in line with his foot. Then he unlaced the left shoe, and set it next to the right. His two shoes were there in front of him, neat, in place and orderly, as if they were ready, just like that, to be put on again, as if in the next moment, they could walk outside by themselves. He could not tell by looking at them in the dark that they were wet.

For a moment, a moan nearly slipped out of his mouth. What if he were wrong? What if the insurance would not cover it? But there must be some clause in the policy. He was sure the company was obliged to make good on its policy. Yes, one could count on procedure. A case could be made. A case might even be made now if his head did not hurt so much that he could not remember which drawer held the policy.

Still in the dark, Findan stumbled through the house as if it were not his own. Where were the light switches? They could not have moved off the wall. He sat down on the brick edge of the fireplace in the sitting room. One by one, slick buttons slipped through his fingers, and he twisted his shirt off, held it arm's length by the collar tab, and then flung it on the flowered arm of a French-backed chair. It landed square on the back, the arms extended.

He tried to stand up again, his head reeled, and his eyes made no good connection with his brain. Better to wait a bit longer. Directly across from him, the dark silhouette of his shirt offered the appeal of an embrace. Me shirt's calling me, he thought. The arms were open, the only friendly thing when he was drunk, wet, and lost in his own house. "Fucking shirt," he said. He fell into its arms when he tripped against the chair, and yelled at the cold cloth, "Get off me."

As he started in the hallway, he unbuckled his belt and dropped his trousers on the floor. Stepping out of them, he kicked the trousers behind him.

Before he staggered into his bedroom, he paused at the doorway to steady himself, and then groped his way through the dark. As he stood over his bed, his socks stupidly wet, his shorts draped off

his skinny thighs, he squinted to see the face of his wife, upturned upon the pillow. She had fallen asleep half undressed, the lace hem of her slip hiked up high on her thigh, one hand languidly crossed behind her head. With the faint ache of a sailor come to port, Findan searched the landscape for the known silhouette of a familiar roof. A faint scent of sherry hung in the room, and as Findan moved closer to his wife's bed, he caught a fallen glass under the ball of his foot; it rolled away without breaking. Findan cursed mildly under his breath, grateful and angry for the familiar.

She had been at it again. At it again. But then look at him, no prize himself either, and the common fool of God and man. He kicked the glass under the bed with the stockinged ball of his foot.

If it had been only the car. If it had been only his wife. If it had not been an elephant, a stupid creature with no dignity. The only tragedy was that his situation was not tragic. No mighty adversary, no contest between forces of good and evil. No, it was terribly bad comedy at his expense. It might have been better had she taken a lover, left him, done something, gone somewhere. It might have been better if their alienation had taken a specific form, the form perhaps of a black-bearded sheepshearer whose face Findan could split with a good cracking fist. But no. No object. No tangible thing. Only a baggy, sideshow atrocity, its back outlined by gray rain.

"Fucking Sheba," Findan cursed that shadow.

At the sound in the room, his wife stirred, a dark shadow moving around on the sheets. Her hand shifted in sleep, perhaps only a reflex. She rolled to her side, and then—what sound that?—soft as a moan from her parted lips, his wife's voice called out in her sleep.

"Margaret," Findan whispered, "do you want me?"

In the illusion that she had called out his name, Findan answered her, pulling down his shorts, flinging himself up on top of her and burying her body under his cold wet skin. Making the beast with two backs, he thrust again and again at the hem of her empty invitation, with the urgent belief that the fulfillment of form might complete his desire, with the vague hope that an act of man might counter an act of God.

A Carrot for Dennis

*A writer's walk of
reclamation*

Colin Fleming

I was a collector of outside places with inside meaning. “Place” as a concept is funny. Those that we like say much about us. How we respond to them at different points in our lives conveys much meaning, too. And place, to my thinking, has its most meaning when it is internalized, existing at once outside of us as a place we venture to, cherish, love, and existing inside of us as a spot we visit for purposes other than leisure.

One of the great things about Boston and New England is that the attractions of the Northeast are sufficiently tightly bunched that you can have day trips galore. And at the same time, those attractions can be worlds apart from each other. A car ride of forty-five minutes can take you from the Public Garden, in the center of Boston, to a town on a rocky coast where there are pine forests ideal for hiking, birding, with ponds for fishing in summer, skating in winter, such that within five seconds of your arrival it becomes almost inconceivable that skyscrapers featured in your year at all, let alone the earlier portion of your day. I loved the trips I used to take when I had means of a car, before I was besieged with what I’ll call life stuff. Sometimes, with my wife at the time, we could go to the same spot, given that there was so much to luxuriate in, four, five weekends in a row.

When my marriage ended, I felt emotionally gored. The concept of place changed so much for me. Even in Boston where I had lived long before I met my wife, my spots had become *our* spots. Maybe it’s better, if you’re the type of person who remembers everything—down to what foot your weight was on when someone made some random remark to you about their favorite salad—to get gored in, say, Houston, where everything is more spread out. Maybe the reminders of what was are less frequent. But walk an hour in Boston, and you can go from the North End, where I live (half a football field from Paul Revere’s house) to the Museum of Fine Arts, which is past the South End. In other words, you’ve covered the bulk of what a lot of people—and all tourists—think of as the city proper: Faneuil

Hall, Government Center, Freedom Trail, Common, Public Garden, Newbury Street, Fenway. Every tree I used to see, in that earlier context, became a tree I now saw a new way. The willows in the Public Garden, by the Swan Boats, became green-fingered banshees with ropey hands having at me.

It was as if place, as a prior concept, had been a series of vibrant Singer Sargent watercolors, and now all those paintings had been blackened, coated with something that made them filmy, oppressive, eye-jarring. But there was nothing else to look at, no alternative to the eyesore that was also a reminder of what the image used to be.

There is this dude in Dante's *Inferno*—I forget his name—who creeps out Dante with his defiance, even in his suffering. Dante says that God himself could come down and put his will against this guy, show him that there was no way a given something could work out, and could then get all the angels of heaven and every learned being who ever existed to back him, and this guy would still try to overcome his situation. Now, you might think that guy is an idiot. Maybe he was, I don't care. I respected him as someone for whom place as a concept, his internal version of a place, couldn't be altered by anyone. It was his.

Mine was mine too, and I needed a way to at least try and get it back. Without a car, that effort was going to come by walking.

In my mind, I made a list of places I would try to get back.

There was Concord, where I had previously walked around Walden Pond, and also visited the Old Manse, the home on the Concord River where Hawthorne had lived. The famed battle of the Revolutionary War was fought about thirty yards away, and the spot has remained virtually unchanged. Most of my spots, though, were on the North Shore—like a farm in Ipswich called Russell Orchards. Animals wander around, you can go apple-picking, and the cider donuts are local legends of deliciousness.

I took the commuter train to the Ipswich station, believing, in truth, that I would not be able to get to Russell Orchards on foot. Driving there, the changes in the terrain makes you cognizant of the

road's length. First there were rows of houses, with chicken coops and lobster traps in the yards, then the expanse of a farm, followed by protected forest land, a marsh then meadows, forest again, and, finally, Russell Orchards. Past Russell Orchards, and probably twice as far as that first bit of road, was Crane Beach where a mansion straight out of *Downton Abby* stood on a hill overlooking the rolling dunes.

A form of salt-encrusted peat was on both sides of the road, with tidal sinkholes waiting to claim your foot and the bottom half of your calf. Almost everything, even roadside traffic signs, was skirted with a layer of barnacles. Razor clams jutted out of the mud, hermit crabs scampered for cover under marsh grass, the occasional fiddler crab—a species that never used to frequent the area—made a dash for it across a clay bank as a circling gull pondered his next meal. You wouldn't think this road, which began with suburban homes, was the same one now that it had become the stuff of a nature documentary.

I figured if the fiddler crabs, tempted by global warming, could get to the end of this road—albeit by working their way up the shoreline—I would at least give it a try.

The last time I'd been at Russell Orchards, my wife had gone into this 200-year old converted barn that now served as a store, all drafty and smelling of pine and oak, such that you're reticent to use a word like "store" in describing it. "Shoppe," maybe. A place where you expect to hear a blacksmith's hammer ringing out in the back.

It was past Halloween then, and the farm would be closing for the season. Even if everything in our joint lives went on as usual, hunky dory, that was our final visit for the year. While she got the donuts and scones, I visited with two little pigs in a pen jutting off the barn set back deeper on the grounds.

These pigs were not long for the world. I knelt down beside them. The sun was very low in the sky. I could see my breath, their breath. One of them munched a carrot. He was charcoal-colored, the other pinkish. My wife had named them, despite my warmings not to get attached to these guys. A warning she ignored every year, suggesting later, when we returned in the spring and the pigs were gone, that

maybe they had been adopted. Yes, I thought but didn't say, adopted by Stop and Shop. I'd just smile and make my best "well, maybe" face.

Dennis was the carrot-chomper. He eyed me peacefully as he crunched away at his treat. "Enjoy it, my friend," I said, scratching the top of his head, thinking, "ah, you're lucky you don't know what's coming for you."

It was some months later, after Dennis had been dispatched presumably, when it occurred to me that he could have conveyed much the same sentiment to me and been even more in the right.

After you get past those first few homes, there are no sidewalks on Arugula Road in Ipswich. I decided to walk with the cars at my back. That's the way you're supposed to, legally, I think, but I also wasn't against getting dispatched myself, especially if I didn't see it coming, like Dennis. The cars whip past you, a whirl of sound that makes your shirt billow with every vehicle. I made it to the marsh and was decently pleased with myself because I didn't expect to see this beautiful eyeful of nature again. A moral victory.

Fitz Henry Lane, the wonderful nineteenth-century seascape master, my favorite painter, would have set up his easel here and, I imagined, do for these reeds and rushes and winding saltwater rivulets what Monet had done for water lilies and pond water, but with more possibilities. There was simply more to see here. The horizon running to impossible distances seemed to bolster that fact and made it into something else, the symbiotic scope of water underfoot and clouds sloping away, past the field of vision, turning mere fact into endless truth.

One of the speeding cars pulled up beside me, and I was asked if I needed a ride because no one walked here. The first of what would be a fairly regular occurrence during my reclamation efforts. Women stopped more than men. Three to one ratio, easily. I'd think about all the film noirs I'd seen that started this way, but film noirs never happen in the sun-spangled setting of a coastal spring, though I worried that I was some anti-hero with an unavoidable bad end awaiting, regardless of my intentions.

Each time I would thank the person who had shown me some

concern, adding that I was good, and really, thanks again. And on I walked.

Garter snakes rustled in the vegetation on the road's right hand side, but it was the brown snakes slithering onto the pavement for warmth that took their chances. I'd seen a number of them squashed by cars on the first mile or so, so when I encountered any still living, I'd pick it up and carry it twenty yards into the forest, leaving it on a rock in a spot where the sun broke through the density of the oak canopy.

This felt good, even as I started dreading Russell Orchards, now that it seemed like a possibility I'd see it again. The past would rear up like a horse you couldn't break, kicking at anyone who sought to gain some command over it. I worried I might vomit. True, a farm was probably a decent spot to do so if you had to pick one. Dennis, surely, wouldn't be there, but I had another Dennis on my mind.

I'd read about a St. Dennis, or St. Denis, this guy in third-century France who'd had his head chopped off. Now, getting your head lopped off wasn't that uncommon, once upon a time. Suffer this form of slicing, and you might become known as a cephalophore, which basically means, "dude without a head who gets painted holding said head." Entire sub-genre of painting. Gist was you were shown with your head to indicate that particular form of death, often as a martyrdom.

I liked the display of resiliency as some sort of symbolic gesture about keeping your head. But the legend of St. Dennis went several steps further. Quite literally. Having been dispossessed, bodily, of his head, he picked it up, and like that guy in Dante, refused to accept his fate. Carrying his head, he was said to have walked six miles. That's commitment to what he wanted and believed in. They buried him at the place he reached and built the wonderful church of St. Denis on that spot.

I thought of Dennis the saint and Dennis the pig, and how the latter chomped at his carrot, me dangling a carrot of sorts in front of my head, my still attached head, even if it felt like my heart, and parts of my mind, had flown the barn.

I was pretty sure that being back at Russell Orchards was going to be awful, but I knew I had to go back, then go back again, and again. Because each time it would be a little less awful, and, if I ever had a life again, a place like this, because of all of this, would mean more than a place, in its mere place-ness, so to speak, otherwise could. Because the place wouldn't just be this awesome farm in this spot I loved so much.

No. It would be an extension of who I was, a patch of me from which I could reflect, learn, grow.

When you walk on the sides of roads most people do not walk on, to get to a place you must get to—because of who you are, what you have been through, what you are fighting for and to be—you learn what place really means, better than any master vacationer, visitor, or even lifelong resident, ever could. The place isn't really a place when it matters most, when it has its highest quotient of place-ness.

Nope.

The place is you.

When I saw the sign for Russell Orchards, I felt proud that you could, if you wanted it enough, walk there. I also felt queasy. My first return visit was a quick one. I bought some unpasteurized cider from the Shoppe and guzzled it down out back after confirming that Dennis had, indeed, vacated the premises.

But life teemed. There were goats, and geese, and rabbits, a 1,200 pound pig who wasn't going to be eaten by anyone, two outdoor cats—one of whom had a portion of a bird's feather in his whiskers—mallards, and this strange make of fowl, standing off on his own, who kind of kept pace with me wherever I walked and stared at me. Everyone else there was with someone else. I was the only person on my own. This strange creature was on his own, too. I found him interesting.

I didn't turn back left, towards town, when I came out of the parking lot, but went right. I was going to try and make Crane Beach. Again the forms of nature shifted. Leafy woods with huge boulders

and houses more like shacks and cabins were on either side of me now, and the occasional gully and ravine.

I encountered hills with steep inclines, the last of which, a long time later, sloped down to the sea. I heard a crunch underfoot—tiny periwinkles blown from the nearby marshes. I fretted if I'd be able to get back to the commuter rail in time to catch a train back into Boston, not being familiar with the schedule, but now that I was here, I was going to that *Downton Abbey* mansion, Crane Estate.

There is an attendant at the gate to take your money for the entrance fee. No other way into the place. So I walked up and got right into line with the cars.

When it was my turn, I asked the man how much it was to go in. He had one of those “what the fuck is this?” looks on his face, but the kind, amused version.

“How'd you get here?”

“I walked from town.”

“Then it's free. You earned it.”

The mansion is one thing, but what is behind it is another: a series of massive lawns, cleared entirely of trees down the center, that flow down the back of this enormous hill, ending in the sea three hundred yards below. I had never seen anything like this. I never went here when I was married. To Crane Beach, yes, but not the estate. Here was newness, new experience, and I was having it.

You have to pay to get into Crane Beach, too, but at the end of the lawn, with the sea crashing about, I detected the vague outline of what may have once been a path through the trees on the right. I pushed through some brambles, saw the sand dispersed by the wind from the beach flecking clumps of moss. Soon there were dunes, just past the reach of a last triumvirate of cedars standing like friendly sentinels. I flew past them, having decided to run. No idea why. But my momentum took me in the direction of the tallest dune, and I kept chugging up it, tripping at the highest point before I could get my bearings, then rolling down the other side like I was the coastal version of Charlie Brown or Oliver Hardy.

When I had stopped and brushed the sand from my eyes, I saw

that I was among beachgoers, having arrived at Crane Beach. Thirty seconds later, my shoes were off, and I was knee deep in the cold water, thinking, yes, how many people would have done that?

I was also thinking it would be a long, long-ass walk back into town.

At least, that's what I used to think of as a long walk. My definitions, though, would be rapidly evolving in such matters.

As would I.

A carrot for a pig, a carrot for Dennis, a carrot for Colin, I thought, as I bit into the clam roll I had acquired.

After walking to Russell Orchards and Crane Beach, Concord was, as they say, a piece of piss.

I took the commuter rail again, then started walking in the direction of Walden Pond. Thoreau had done it, and I knew that the common idea of Thoreau way out in the woods was mostly bullshit, and that he walked back into town for groceries.

People love Walden Pond, but it's always been too hippy-dippy for me. Groups smoking pot on the banks with a guitar, a naked swimmer or two becoming one with nature. I wanted to see snakes and snapping turtles and watch harriers do harrier things. Find a plant I'd never seen before. Encounter a salamander. Use my Swiss Army knife to tap open a crumbling geode, catch the glint of mica in the sun. I never associated those interests with Walden Pond, maybe because it was too communal. But I wanted to get back there, and I did.

Later, after I had what I thought were problems with my heart, indicative of my endless stress rather than physical debilitations—after all, I was walking everywhere—I returned to Concord, thinking maybe the meditative space of the pond would do me good.

I encountered a woman whose car had broken down on one of those roads where nobody walks. No one was stopping to help, either, as they whizzed by. She didn't seem at all surprised to see me, oddly, and asked if I'd help her push the car the thirty or so yards to a hollow, where her daughter was going to pick her up.

She wanted both of us to push, which wouldn't have worked, so

I told her to steer and brake, and I pushed that sucker, which made me feel all zesty. I wanted to bound and explore, to go to new places, screw the pond and the pot and the “All You Need is Love” atmosphere. She thanked me and I took a hard left into the woods, woods I’d never been in, in this place I was reclaiming but also now first-claiming—new spots, new places, new memories.

I sat on the forest floor, deep in those woods, my back against some marker that, for all I knew, Thoreau himself had placed there, and I literally watched the leaves fall. Some got stuck in my hair, and I left them there, and others I tried to catch, unsuccessfully, as a woodpecker paused in his pecking to eye me, and I eyed him.

Next up was Gloucester, further north than Ipswich. There is an allegedly haunted forest there, called Dogtown. For this one, I’d have to book it, as we used to say as kids, across a highway. My best friend John, who lives in D.C. but spent many a day exploring these bucolic parts, had some advice.

“They get on you fast. Just be aware.”

“What gets on you fast?”

“Cars. You think they’re way off, and then they’re right on top of you.”

“And you’re such an expert on this because?”

“Remember that farmer’s daughter I was dating in Ohio back when I was rambling? Her father chased me down the road with a shotgun when he caught me with her.”

“Ah. Don’t worry—I’ll run hard until I’m across.”

Dogtown is a strange place. It was settled centuries ago, a village far enough back from the sea that the pirates wouldn’t get it, pirates probably a way worse problem than Subaru. When the men died at sea, some of the women turned to witchery, but most left, leaving behind the dogs that had served as their protection. The dogs became feral, their wolf-like cries echoing through the nights, a real *Hound of the Baskervilles* kind of thing right there in Olde New England.

The settlement was consumed by the forest, but the foundation holes remain, so you can be walking along and trip on what had once been the bottom portion of a house. Eldritch rock formations are

everywhere, with boulders from the glacier that striated this most rocky of coasts looming twelve feet over your head.

The blueberries here are excellent, and it is said the ghost-spotting is, too. As I wandered the great expanse of the Dogtown woods, notching trees with my knife so that I would not get more lost than I knew I inevitably would, I looked around bends for ghosts, and saw but ravens instead, those brilliant birds who, in that particular environment, always seem to know more than you do. There were places where the photos I took on my camera would not come out. Always a blur of vapors, like the ghosts were telling me they'd only communicate through modern technology.

In Concord I liked to sit behind the Old Manse, which is in the opposite direction from Walden Pond, reading Hawthorne and being amazed that on that spot, where the Battle of Concord had been fought, skulls had been exploded by musket balls. And yet it was so peaceful, as if the ghosts were reading alongside you. You never feel alone there, you feel *them*, but you feel at ease.

Dogtown now felt the same way to me as that spot behind the Old Manse. Maybe because Concord had been a battle for freedom, and now I was involved in a battle for my own freedom, in a way. A freedom from my past.

My love for Boston's North Shore—specifically, the Cape Ann area—began many years ago when that friend who learned lessons about traffic while running from a famer's gun took me to a spot called Manchester-by-the-Sea. It's all woods, coves, cliffs, a village green, small churches tucked into glens, beaver dams, cider stands. You know what your version of heaven looks like, right? You have some idea of what you'd like to see? This is pretty close to what I'd want.

My wife and I would drive around town, park, explore, drive again, stop at this makeshift parking lot at the edge of this huge forest, wander into the woods for a couple hours, see foxes, hope to see the ever-elusive beaver, whose handiwork—this guy was a master of the teardown, in terms of forest real estate—was visible everywhere

in the form of fallen birches and happily gnawed stumps, his engineer-in-absentia calling cards.

After that we would drive for quite a while before coming to a town called Essex, where the salt marsh began, with clam shacks and antique stores perched at the edge of it. A bend followed, and you went past a church with a bell that had been cast by Paul Revere, across the street from an eighteenth-century graveyard, complete with a “Hearse House” for that cheery wagon of yore. Then the trees retreated back from the roadside and huge meadows opened up, with horses and cows and barns the size of hockey rinks. This went on for miles. Green trees had given over to yellowy patches of grass, with the occasional ice cream stand tempting you to stop.

After a few more miles, where the green came back in full, we’d turn off the road and park. A footpath wound up a hill and we’d ascend, and that’s what I did the first time I attempted this walk of reclamation, knowing that once I had gotten to a certain point, I’d be all in. Out there in the middle of nowhere, no train stop, no cabs passing by, no buses. Me in the deep sticks with no way home save I got all the way to the end of my journey, where I could find transport.

Here the hawks circled over the fields, looking for mice or a pheasant who had become careless. I’d watch for those explosions of feathers when a hawk collided in mid-air with some quail who hadn’t quite mastered how these avian matters worked, impressed that about half the time it managed to get away. The hawks never seemed to care, returning to their perches in the trees to scan the fields anew. This was simply how it all went down. You never get to bat 1.000, be you a bird, be you a human.

Walk on the sides of roads no one walks on, you will come to pull for both the hawk and the quail, because if you have occasion to walk on those roads, you’ve probably been the quail often enough, and you are fighting to become a hawk. A hawk unto yourself, maybe. I don’t mean you want to eviscerate other living things. I mean that you want to be able to return to your perch, after you didn’t get what you want, and know that, hey, your time is coming, but only if you hang in.

As I went all in on what was to be a walk across the whole of three towns, Gloucester to Rockport to Manchester-by-the-sea, I got to that point, past where the hawks and the quails were, where the path beckons upward. I made a detour on my epic walk and mounted that hill. In the distance—and I mean far in the distance—were dunes, shimmering, the open ocean seeming to come up to them ever so gently, a coloristic kiss of light brown and deep blue.

I wasn't sure I could get to where I wanted to get. But then I recognized a particular ice cream stand, and I knew to turn right. I'd been walking for over twenty miles. I figured I had five or six left to go.

When I finally arrived back in Ipswich, at Russell Orchards, having come this roundabout way, not the simple, much shorter way I had on that first trip back, when I set out to make sure I would not lose the places I loved, should I ever have a life again and get to return to them in a standard fashion—which wouldn't involve nearly crippling myself—I didn't feel like throwing up this time.

I obliterated a jug of unpasteurized cider and had a frozen strawberry pop before walking back towards the barn, where that odd duck was.

He was alone again. I approached him and he just stood there, until I started walking again, which prompted him to walk, stopping when I stopped, resuming when I resumed. He does it every time I go now. Sometimes I film it because people can be incredulous when you tell them that this duck walks around with you. For a while I had a couple clips up on YouTube.

Inside that converted storage barn, where the cider donuts are sold, you can get magnets with photos of the barnyard animals of Russell Orchards on them, with their names. That's right, they have names. There is Galley the cat, for example—the one who likes to eat the birds—and the 1200 pound pig is Big Daryl.

Have a guess what the weird duck's name is. Yep. He's Dennis the duck. I don't feed him carrots, of course. I feed him jellybeans, which you're really not supposed to do, but he loves them, and then he walks with even more celerity.

Chicken Time

Hal Y. Zhang

08:54:03, Mountain Standard Time

The feds burst in and tell us we are being replaced by chickens. Chickens? Chickens. We try to show them our superior clocks, but they destroy them instead. The ones on our wrists and walls and the giant atomic clock in our laboratory, our life's work, the one accurate to a millisecond over the age of the universe that is the backbone of the country's timestream. All crushed under steel jaws.

Why? We scream and cry. No reason is given. It's chicken time.

Rooster crow #1

The first crow is heard as I walk out to the parking lot. A giant black rooster screams atop its perch of the empty flag pole. The end is nigh.

Rooster crow #237

I arrive home. En route were twenty-seven roosters, stuffed into cages erected at every street corner by anonymous men, and their crows I counted in dizzying rage.

I turn on my personal computer. The clock is gone, replaced with a chicken silhouette. Of course. I turn on my personal television. A pleasant bobbing human head is explaining the virtues of chicken time. The chickens allow everyone to organically arrive at destinations without stress. The chickens facilitate getting in touch with nature. The chickens will increase our lifespans by 5%. The chickens will cause me to hurl the remote through the screen, but it continues to function with a black hole where the chicken head should be.

Rooster crow #314

I call Callie before they realize all our devices have embedded clocks and snatch them away too.

“Meet at the Bean?”

“I hear all payment systems are down.” She sounds dubious.

“All the better.”

“It’s the last day of work. I’m going to maximize my stay in civilization. How about at chicken sunrise?”

“All right.”

Rooster crow #379

Wait, I can use the 60 Hertz power line frequency as a clock. Duh. It will be terribly inaccurate, but, I mean, chickens.

Rooster crow #441

“Breaking news,” the television chirps as I am deep in a sea of dismantled electronics. “It has come to our attention that people are using the power grid as an illegal alternative to chicken time. The grid will be powered down until further notice. Disable your devices in the next five minutes to prevent damage. That includes you, Rosie, worker 9E72BA.”

My only regret is not being fast enough to be the troublemaker. And that I don’t have my own backup generator, but there is only so much you can do in the suburbs. I stare down every headless chicken on television until the surge rocks us in our pre-chicken cradles.

So this is how the world ends: snap, crackle, and pop.

Rooster crow #590

I contemplate making organic coq au vin for dinner, but it is now a felony to tamper with time chickens. From under the melted microwave I extricate a sooty coupon for ONE (1) free delivery from Drone-2-U, surely unconsciously saved for this avian apocalypse. I call the auto-order line with the 2% dregs of my remaining tether to humanity.

“All of your item A-2 inventory, please.”

“Affirmative. This is the last delivery before we cease to exist,” the pleasant machine voice replies. Perfect.

Rooster crow #738

An apocalyptic buzz saw sound, then the cheerful “Drone-2-U! Is! Here! 4! U!” jingle pierces through all solid surfaces. A pastel yellow box lands on my roof with a soggy thump, balancing precariously as it decides when and how to roll off.

I head outside just in time to see the drone power down with dignity on the sidewalk and is immediately crushed by its own payload, fifty bags of frozen chicken nuggets exploding forth like alien innards.

“Let this be a warning to you,” I smile casually at the wide-eyed pre-nuggets in their cages as I gather the icy lumps to my chest.

Rooster crow #841

I savor each cold homogeneous bite of chicken-esque cardboard with grim satisfaction. Perhaps I’ll mix the slowly defrosting slurry into tile grout. I hear they make good building insulation too. The possibilities are endless.

It’s totally dark outside, but there is an enthusiastic postmodern symphonic competition between chickens and dogs to see who breaks ears and psyches first. Aren’t they only supposed to crow in the morning?

Rooster crow uncountably many

Apparently they crow *more* as the sun approaches. How did people live like this? Instead of sleeping, I count down the chicken crows that remain in my life. Blessed be creatures without the self-awareness for existential crises.

At the first hint of light I head for the Atomic Bean with a secret up my sleeve, the kind of thing you only remember after a night of insomnia. I incline my head gravely at each chicken I see. Soon, their tyranny will end.

The air smells like death guano. Perhaps it’s panic, but it’s most likely just chickens, screaming away as powerless drones continue falling from the sky and institutions continue collapsing around us.

The roads are full of discarded cars that have been remotely disabled because some genius decided cars needed to have clocks to begin with. The people are walking like dazed automata. There is no better time than now to make your case that the universe is someone's ill-designed game, left to a godless evolution for far too long.

All unit cubes of capitalism I walk past are in random states of either complete emptiness or panic. The coffee shop is the latter, a giant crowd half spilling out the red doors into the small square. Someone's decided to tear down the flyers on every lamppost, probably due to invocations to illegal non-chicken time on the infinite yard sale advertisements. Shreds of neon are dancing a sad polka to the wind.

Everything is on fire in the Bean. Metaphorically. There is no money and no coffee and no employees, only people attempting to exchange shoelaces for expired nut milk. I squeeze and squeeze until I find Callie in the back corner, reading a newspaper from the last century in a sea of shouting because other people are shouting too loudly so one must shout louder. She looks up as if nothing unusual is happening, head bedecked by fuzzy cat earmuffs.

It is so loud I can hear neither chickens nor the sound of my own thinking, which is almost relaxing. *We need to reinstate absolute time*, I tell Callie with arms and fingers that won many a charade championship.

She tilts her head and swipes her forefinger, which may be *How?* or *We have a system of writing, you know.*

I slide my hideous jumper down my wrist just for a moment (half a chicken minute, give or take infinity) to reveal a watch. Her eyes widen. That's right. The authentic pink Mickey Mouse watch she got me for my 35th birthday that I stuffed in my sock drawer and forgot until last night.

By distributing an underground time source run on Mickey's terrifying hands, I sign. I am well aware that sales or distribution of non-chicken time is also a felony. But how long do you serve time for, anyways, now that there is no time? It is too stupid to ponder.

She holds her hand up to her ear and makes a rotational motion,

which is either *Does that need winding? I found it on the street five minutes before your birthday party so I have no idea.* or *Why does Mickey have a third red appendage that wiggles every second in addition to the eternally gloved two?* or *That's nice, but I need to go on my morning run.*

It's powered by a heart of greed wrapped in corporate copyright. Which, as we all know, lasts forever. *And I'd skip that run if I were you. We'll make so very much chicken profit.* I rub thumbs against fingers. Who wouldn't pay for real time in this lawless land? At the very least, we'll start a revolution.

Callie makes a face, swipes her hand downwards, and folds herself into the crowd. Her loss.

I go outside and wait until my shadow disappears beneath me, then peel back my jumper carefully to tune the Mickey fists up to high noon. Good enough. The red appendage can be ignored. What do seconds even mean in this sad, imprecise world?

12:02 PM, Mickey Standard Time

In times of uncertainty I opt for strategy zero: doing the first thing that pops into my head, which in this case is writing Mickey Time on the chicken cages.

The cubes are raised on formless pedestals to be exactly ear-level, perfect for my purposes. I begin carving time into a black strut of the nearest chicken cube with my now-useless lab key. No doubt sensing my hostile intentions, the three roosters try to bite me, wattles and bits bobbing, and get mouthfuls of government standard mesh instead.

"Can you say twelve-oh-two?" I croon.

The people who brainwash children into thinking chickens go *bawk bawk* have clearly never heard a chicken. This one, for example, lets rip a death metal scream lasting a full chicken hour, the kind of poetic soul-rending howl that obliterates happiness within a five-block radius.

I blink back the tears in my eyes. "Yes, that's exactly how I feel."

12:11 PM, Mickey Standard Time

By the time I write 12:02, it is already woefully inaccurate. My savior arrives in a bobbing athletic shape that reveals itself to be Callie, ever-so-steady like she is running on a treadmill that is the doomed world. She hands me two spray cans, a raised eyebrow, and leaves without a word.

1:17 PM, Mickey Standard Time

“What do you think you’re doing, ma’am?”

Some lackey decked in the same absence of color as his soul accosts me on my tenth trip around the block as I spray Generic Black over the 2 in 1:12. One of those new time officers, enlisted from the young angry population that finds wielding a mediocre amount of power extremely attractive.

“Public art.” To bolster my case, I spray a beautiful Metallic Gold 7 with serifs and curlicues while maintaining full eye contact.

“This isn’t art, you’re trying to distribute time.” He reaches for something in his pockets until he realizes he’s not a real cop and has no weapon, covering it up by fiddling with his belt. Real smooth. “Hand over the time device.”

“What are you talking about? There’s no time any more.” A rooster crows in agreement. Good chicken. “I’m just spraying random numbers.” He doesn’t know what time it is either, so can he really punish me?

He grabs me without warning and shoves both jumper sleeves up my arm, revealing only my brown hairy arms. I smile guilelessly.

“I’m on my period,” I announce as he moves downward and he recoils like a beet-red compression spring.

A small crowd has gathered to watch our performance art. “One seventeen!” I shout.

“You can’t spray paint on the cages. Graffiti is illegal and you’re turning the roosters black and gold. Hand them over, ma’am.”

I hold up my hands in a shrug and he snatches the paint cans

away.

“This is your last warning. Don’t cause any more trouble.”

Oh, I’m sure I won’t. A smattering of applause can be heard as I give his receding form the bird. I am flocked by questions. One question.

“How do you know the time?”

“The free trial has expired. If you want further updates, bring something for me next time. Tell your friends.”

2:02 PM, Mickey Standard Time

“Psst, I hear you know some numbers.” A stranger walks up as an actually-on-fire trolley crashes into a deserted dessert store across the street. She doesn’t even blink.

“What you’ll give me for them?”

The stranger is well-prepared. She fishes out three beads of dubious metallicity and a coupon of even more dubious utility from her purse. I peer at the fine print. A free fluffernutter sandwich that expires tomorrow at midnight. “This coupon is an enemy of the state now.”

“Perfect for you, then.”

“Touché.” I pocket my illicit gains and discreetly peer at good ol’ Mickey, sitting in a secured hollow of my bra. “Two oh-three, but bring something better next time.”

“Thanks,” she leaves just as Callie laps me again.

“I just saw four chickens eat another one,” she whispers, disturbed.

“Circle of life.”

“It’s more like a single arrow, chicken to chicken,” she shudders. “I get it now.”

“Get what?”

“This is what we evolved from. That’s why the world is full of chaos and suffering. As long as we don’t descend into cannibalism, it could always be worse.”

“I give it two more days.”

“How’s your get rich quick scheme going?”

I jingle my pockets for a veritable symphony played by illicit goods. “I think it’s time I settle down. Open shop.”

2:29 PM, Mickey Standard Time

Callie and I try every handle in the square until one swings open, which only took three attempts. The timed digilock on the door is of course fried, and everything inside is gone. Dust patterns on empty shelves divine recent history: curvy soda bottles, snatched in blazing trails. Dime romance folios, hesitantly taken.

I dump the contents of my pockets on the countertop.

“I’m hungry,” says Callie as she reaches for a pack of desiccated gum, but I snatch it from her hands.

“This is our emergency reserves. We’ll eat the bawk bawks first.”

“They smell disgusting and I’m afraid of blood. And cannibals.”

“I’m afraid you won’t last long in the apocalypse, then. But Pickles will.” Her maine coon with his wickedly sharp claws and preternatural taste for avian flesh will surely outlive us all.

She mock pouts. I find a marker in the drawer and scrawl COME IN FOR A GOOD TIME on the window.

2:34 PM, Mickey Standard Time

Three people with bona fide thick lenses on their faces walk through the door. The leader, a half-stranger I’ve seen in passing on many a hallway trip, holds two lumps of rustic deconstructed electronics. “You also work for the—”

“The National Institute of Things That Don’t Exist Any More, yes.” Ah, my quaint past life of standards and technology and looking everywhere for the screws I’ve *just* put down. “What’s this?”

“We tried to distribute clock messages on the grid by chaining all the circuit breakers in our block and pulsing them, but they caught us. Working on a radio transmitter now.”

“They fucked up the power because of *you!*” I high-five them. I

have found my people.

She passes a jumble of banana plugs and foil and the last batteries in the world into my hands. Impressive, under these circumstances. “It works on this block, but we haven’t been receiving anything from the outside. What do you think? Maybe the antenna gain isn’t up to spec, or—”

I look up from tracing the connections with the heartburning feeling of swallowing a gray egg in one dry gulp. “The radio’s fine. Communications must be jammed.”

“How?”

How is not the question. The feds have unlimited resources, dickishness, and lunacy. Primitive brains mounted on advanced killing machines, that’s all they are. I wouldn’t put it past them to park all of their drones in a dome around us in a Faraday cage. The point is, there will be no messages in or out of our prison.

“Why don’t we just walk a few blocks over?”

Callie shakes her head. “There are armed officers everywhere on the block boundaries. Saw them on my run.”

I clear my throat for a rousing speech against tyranny, but a loud bang interrupts my thoughts. Ten tipsy revelers pour in and the circuit is gone from my hand, a mysterious bottle in its place. “A good time, you say?” Someone giggles.

The dusty intoxicant burns of tasty futility all the way down.

Time Is An Illusion

We’re the new Atomic Bean. Twenty or three thousand people are here and I’ve lost count of my assets but apparently I can juggle computer mice, so everything is fine. Free love, that’s what it’s all about. Can you get carbon dioxide poisoning from too many people? Since when is carbon dioxide purple? Who needs to breathe anyways?

7:15 PM, Mickey Standard Time

The crowd disappears in a sudden swoosh like someone stuck a

giant vacuum at the door. My head spins as I shoot a glance down to Mickey.

“You again.” The chickenshit lackey reappears amidst the purple smoke—half garbage can fire, half unsanctioned dope—like a bad magician. My jovial mood vanishes.

“I could say the same.”

“This is another illegal enterprise. You don’t have the rights to rent here.”

“I sure do,” I dig through the drawer and hold up the first piece of paper I find.

He stares at it for an embarrassingly long chicken time per word. “This is a request for de-po-si-tion for Abraham Saarinen.”

“Hmm, are you sure?”

He twitches. “Vacate the premises, ma’am, or I’ll have to call in the feds.”

Callie looks at me with furrowed brows. Surely it’s gone too far, now. We have no idea what’s happening in the world beyond our two blocks. If I perish, no one will know, either. How stupidly brave do I want to be?

“You don’t really mean that, sir,” Callie plasters on her most appeasing face. “It’s just for fun.”

That’s because Callie thinks everything will be fine. It will go back to normal in another week, or even if it doesn’t, people are resilient and will learn to adapt. They already are.

So, how about this fucking chicken time, huh? The new de facto greeting is a faux complaint.

So dumb, the other person shakes his head. *Did you hear about the farmshare that’s giving out ostrich eggs?*

No way, where? And so the crisis is forgotten.

They come in my store not to ask for the time but to waste all of it, meet new people, find fuck buddies. Some think chicken time might even be *nice*, the people who have never starved or fled oppression or looked for a hint of sun from the bottom of a well. Why

don't we give it a few weeks and see how it goes? No alarm clocks because no work—isn't that great, waking with nature? No electronics, we were too dependent on them anyways. No currency, isn't that what we always wanted? No food, I was going to go on a diet anyways! Down with capitalism! Bawk bawk!

I can't help but think about my parents. They came to the States with nothing save a young lifetime of scars just so I could grow up in this sterile grid of suburbia with a generic flower name. They would want me to shrink into my shell. Keep my head down. Survive.

"Thank you," I say to him, and I mean it, for ending my temporary lunacy. He tilts his head in confusion, eerily like a chicken.

I dig in my chest and he backs off a little. Yes, I'm hiding a bomb in my average-sized bosom. I fling the pink watch in front of his face. Everyone gasps.

"This is the last real clock on this continent. Mickey standard time. Take it. Or don't, it doesn't matter. You've won. No one wants to know the time any more."

I drop it to the ground and stomp right on Mickey's giant nose. His hands twist and cease their mechanical shuffle. And that's that.

"Long live chicken time!" I vomit maniacal laughter.

The lackey's in over his head, so he does exactly as expected: he grabs us by our collars and tosses us outside. Thank chicken he doesn't have a weapon.

"Sit down and shut up!" He gives us a good kick before shuffling off to harass other people.

What else is there to do?

Rooster crow #1

People are lying on the sidewalks, weeping at the beauty of the sunset in their galline bliss. Some are hugging the cages and communing with fowl. Maybe chicken time is good after all.

"He's an idiot," Callie ties the broken watch on my wrist. She always has her head on right. "We can fix Mickey, right?"

Of course. The quartz crystal is fine. The circuitry is probably fine. But I don't feel fine. The revolution is no more, but it never was. This block is only missing one thing.

I walk up to the chicken huggers. "How can we keep our saviors in cages? We must free the chickens."

"Yes! Free the chickens! FREE THE CHICKENS!"

The crowd amplifies my seed message a thousandfold. A massive crowbar magically appears and time is unleashed into the world. The roosters tear a path through the crowd with their gyroscopically stabilized beaks and needle talons. We run away from the screaming madness, hand in hand. This is a scene for Pickles, not soft lazy human flesh.

"You did that on purpose!" Callie yells.

"Me?" I clap my other hand over my heart in mock piety. "I sure did. That was hilarious."

We pass Callie's house. Pickles scrabbles at the window, eyeing chickens outside with ravenous appetite, the poor thing. We pass the post office, even more useless than before. The square and the Bean, utterly abandoned.

"You do this every day?" My heart is beating so fast it's just one continuous drill in my chest, which can't be good.

"Uh huh! Twenty times, at least!" She looks like she's viewing a particularly boring business presentation.

"Oh no. No no, no." I stop abruptly in front of the bank with all of its glass panels missing, an apt metaphor for how my eyes and legs and body have decided to shut down.

A tug from very far away. "That's no good. You have to keep walking."

"I twisted my ankle on a drone blade back there."

Callie clucks in exasperation. "Come on. Let's finish one lap and check up on the free chickens."

She half hefts me on her shoulders, then we walk as fast as it's humanly possible to walk but only to go round and round, so what's the point? At the corner I eye the unmoving array of officers in the distance, their armored masks unresponsive to my dirty looks. We

turn onto the short side of the block and begin squeaking with every step. Someone's spilled thousands of grinning rubber ducks here, which might as well have happened. Turn again. My house, still standing.

"Isn't this fun?"

"No. I'm ready to lie down now." And never get up again.

"Oh no, we're going to go see what the chicken scene is like. You'll have a laugh, you always do. One foot in front of the other now."

As I stagger onward people join us, one by one out of nowhere, going progressively faster and faster until I start running just to not embarrass myself. Callie laughs at the random show of solidarity, but I only feel uneasy cramps in every fiber of my being.

We turn again and the entire street is now a massive bon-fire. The people around us rush toward the blaze in raucous cheer, directed by smiling volunteer traffic controllers waving human-size sprigs of thyme. Chickens are being roasted on spits while hundreds of people are prostrate in front of the flame in fervent prayer. Someone is spreading new gospel in the form of slam poetry that somehow pierces through the crowd straight into your eardrums. "Cluck. Cluck. The chicken is love. Cluck. The chicken is life."

What. The fuck. Callie waves her profane fists with bewildered vehemence.

I drop to the ground and laugh into the soundless void until I feel only pain. It's true what they say: chicken love conquers all.

07:00:00, Mountain Standard Time

My alarm goes off. I am in my scratchy sheets. Cold morning air blasts through the window. My rows of insulation are gone. All the devices beep their usual functionalities. My last memory is of some sort of ritual dance, but the details are vanishing faster than rooster legs. I scrawl snatches down in my dream diary:

- *everything was on fire*
- *something something no power, nuggets, adventures in micro-*

barter-transactions

- *chickens in black cages on pedestals*
- *chickens?? chicken time...or mickey time?*
- *this goon made me break my watch and _____*

I go outside. Zero chickens. The air smells like good-ol' suburban mulch. The sidewalk free of mangled drones. I walk to work. The clocks are back, every single one. Even the lasers and steel of the atomic clock we saw crumpled beneath the jaw, the ultra-low-pressure vacuum restored. We scream and hug, but we do not know why.

The clock is not nearly as good as it was—it's now merely accurate to a second over the age of the universe. Our supervisor tells us there were high amounts of hallucinogens in the city air yesterday due to a malfunction at the rubber duck factory, which may have led to delusions of grandeur. I check page 57 of my lab notebook for the accuracy data I measured two days ago. Page 57 is blank. I start in the hallway when I see familiar faces from a hazy banana plug revolution, and we mutually avert our gazes.

I arrive home. The television says adverse effects from duck smoke also include mass hysteria, seeing animals that don't exist, and setting your house on fire. Each citizen will now be informed of their activities as monitored by the friendly tracker drones so they know whom to apologize to.

"You, Rosie, worker 9E72BA," the television quacks. "You were a model citizen. You came home from work and slept fitfully throughout the night. No apologies are necessary."

Was it all a fever dream?

17:41:19, Mountain Standard Time

I don't get fevers. I stare at my computer. I send pings from my main personal account to the side one I'm not supposed to have.

time for a test.

time for a test.

so, how about this fucking
chicken time, huh?

you chicken fucking censors

you chicken fucking censors

i sure like to cook chickens for
a long time

place the ch*cken in the oven
for 45 minutes, or until juices
run clear

ok did you filter out chickens
timez too

most impressive

most impressive

ickenchay imetay

chix clox

chix clox

18:28:22, Mountain Standard Time

“I’m guessing you didn’t get my heirloom chicken tikka recipes,” I say to Callie by way of greeting in the Atomic Bean.

“What?”

“Never mind.”

“It didn’t happen, right?” She pecks her lower lip. “That would be too crazy.”

If I’ve lost Callie, then I’ve lost suburban America. “Come on. You remember the cannibal chickens? The killjoy?”

“Yes, but...they don’t feel real. You’re saying they put us all back in our beds and cleaned up the whole city? Occam’s razor says—”

“Bawk bawk.” I slide down my sleeve. Mickey, glasgow smile behind broken glass, pointing his hands at 7:16 PM Mickey Standard Time.

“Oh no.” Callie flinches backwards. Not what I was expecting. “No. No no no. You’re going to make this a thing. Can’t we just be happy the world is normal again?”

“A *thing*? You don’t want to know what the fuck happened?”

“Yes, the gall of me to want life to be normal. I have my job back. I have food again. Pickles has food again. Don’t take this away from me.”

“Don’t make this about your cat. He had plenty of chickens to eat.”

“Enough, Ro. The rest of us have lives. You want to take on the feds with a broken watch, that’s nice, except you’d screw me and your co-workers and your fancy clock over too. Don’t you dare.”

“But you saved the watch...”

Her pupils dilate with something suspiciously like pity, one of my top-five least favorite emotions.

“Because it was my present to you,” she says, as slowly and deliberately as one would roast a bird. I misread the signs so hard I may as well be on another continent.

You know what, my beef is not with the chickens. It’s with the people. People disappoint you in all the worst ways, and just when you think they’re done stomping on your heart, they skewer it and grill it over the flames some more.

“Okay. I won’t.”

“Really.”

“You’re right,” I shrug. “I have no power. If no one else wants to revolt, I won’t either. That’s how these things die, right?”

She smiles, empty as the vacuum chamber. “Good.”

18:59:06, Mountain Standard Time

“I’d like to order all of your item A-4 inventory, please.”

“Affirmative.”

18:59:09, Mountain Standard Time

chix clox? are you in?

fuck yeah

18:59:33, Mountain Standard Time

The sun is bright in the square. Yard sale flyers are flapping in the wind. A very familiar kid in a decidedly collegiate backpack starts when he sees me, but I give him my most winning smile. That’s right. Keep walking. It was all a dream.

I put up my own flyer.

CHIX CLOX, it says in nice alternating red and black letters.

CLOX FOR YOUR CHIX.

I turn around. His eyes narrow after five slow seconds. His fists scrunch up by his sides in a sad Pavlovian reflex, but his mind doesn’t know why so he relaxes in helpless confusion. I give him the two-finger salute.

I know who you are now, sophomore at Generic U. I know you dragged us into our beds and hauled my nuggets away. I know the feds are so cowardly that they’d rather gaslight all of us than admit to fucking up.

Want to know what I’m going to do when I get home? I’m going

to raise 57 Drone-2-U chickens with love and plenty of outside time. I'm going to peruse all neighborhood cameras to see what interesting footage they have of last night. I have the keys to the national clock, and you bet I'm going to modulate the universal time signal with CHIX CLOX with the help of some strategically placed not-new friends. There are many, many ways to skin a bird.

Cock-a-doodle-do, motherfuckers.

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Talal Alyan is a Palestinian American writer based in New York. He is the author of *Babeldom*, his debut collection of poetry.

R.S. Benedict studied linguistics at Yale and spent a few years teaching English in China before returning to upstate New York to become a bureaucrat. Like many aimless millennials, she has a podcast. It's called Rite Gud.

Jim Cory is the author of *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 *Api-ary*, *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.

Colin Fleming's articles and short stories have appeared in numerous publications. His books include *Dark March: Stories for When the Rest of the World is Asleep*, *Between Cloud and Horizon: A Relationship Casebook in Stories*, and *The Anglerfish Comedy Troupe: Stories from the Abyss*.

Marilyn Moriarty is a professor of English and creative writing at Hollins University in Roanoke, VA. She is the author of a textbook on scientific writing, *Writing Science through Critical Thinking*, and *Moses Unchained*, which won the A.W.P. prize in creative nonfiction. Her fiction has been published in *Faultline*, *Mondo Greco*, *Nimrod*, *Quarterly West*, *Peregrine*, and *SurrealSouth '11*. Her nonfiction has been published in *The Antioch Review*, *Creative Nonfiction* (a 2015 "Notable"), *The Kenyon Review*, *River Teeth* and other literary magazines. Her essay won the 2014 Faulkner-Wisdom Writing Contest gold medal in that genre. She is working on a memoir.

L.D. Nguyen lives inside of comic books but frequently emerges from this 2-D universe to write short fiction and creative nonfiction. Her work has appeared in *Broken Pencil*, *Curve*, *Vine Leaves*, and others. She lives in the Bay Area, California with her cat.

C.C. Reid is the recipient of two Artist Fellowships from the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities. Her work has won the Mary C. Mohr Award, F(r)iction's Poetry Award, and the Larry Neal Writers' Award.

E.S. Tervo is a writer in the Pacific Northwest and a Presbytera, or wife of a Greek Orthodox priest. She was one of the first American exchange students in the then-Soviet republic of Georgia during the time of glasnost, and her memoir *The Sun Does Not Shine Without You* is forthcoming in Georgian translation. Her poetry is forthcoming in *St. Katherine's Review* and the *Basilian Journal for Orthodox Thought and Culture*.

Wes Trexler is a writer and filmmaker based out of New York City. Stories have appeared in the *Wisconsin Review*, *Willow Springs*, and *Story|Houston*. Several others have appeared in the *Rag Literary Review*, including one which was awarded their fiction prize in 2015.

Hal Y. Zhang splits her time between the East Coast and the Internet, where she writes fiction, science, and science fiction in no particular order. Her chapbook *Hard Mother*, *Spider Mother*, *Soft Mother* was published by Radix Media.

