Photograph by Ingrid Taylar

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EDITORS' PAGE

Amid the myriad ways we can create community, connection, and companionship—from the virtual landscape of social media to the analog experience of cross-country family visits—we often find ourselves profoundly lonely. Some of us desire relationships yet, heartbreakingly, can't negotiate the push and pull of proximity and distance.

In this issue's fiction, characters experience the paradox of needing to connect with one another yet finding comfort in isolation. While working to foster relationships among her animal charges, a zoo employee struggles to forge a relationship herself with a coworker in Joseph Horton's "Shoot the Tiger." Mary Lynn Reed's "The Icefield" brings us a mathematician deeply disconnected from her profession who finds solace instead in art and the natural world. In "Glad You're Here," by Susan Jackson Rodgers, a woman recovering from alcoholism works through the trauma of an accident with the help of her close friend, also in recovery. And in Polly Rosenwaike's "Welcome to Your Family," two sides of a family gather together for the holidays to celebrate the birth of their newest member, though each of them is profoundly detached from the others: "Each person is divided into parts they allow others to see and parts they try to hide."

In nonfiction, Sonya Bilocerkowycz attempts to better understand her students, her father, and her extended family through books, literature, and language in "Samizdat: A Private Collection." Peter Selgin shares his memories of his friendship, initially forged through a mutual love of swimming, with Oliver Sacks in "Swimming with Oliver." And in "Rideau," Suzannah Showler writes about connecting with her Canadian culture as she recalls commuting to school by ice skating along the Rideau Canal in Ottawa.

Whether you're reading this issue alone or in a crowd, electronically or in paper form, I hope you'll discover a story, essay, or poem that speaks to you and makes you feel part of something simultaneously intimate and infinite.

—STEPHANIE G'SCHWIND

Every springtime is a radical, often troubling, reassessment of every prior spring. As Bonnie Arning writes in "Black Acres":

> There was a time we thought
> we never left the garden, that our problem
> was simple . . .

Thus always is joy, the garden state, increasingly burdened with memory, even the best of memories. Every new beginning carries the weight of our botched beginnings and best, now awkwardly undressed, loving intentions. And yet every springtime manages to break free and to enjoy its radical moment. Exactly how this happens to happen is well avowed by Jeff Whitney:

> Sometimes the only thing you can do is wake up
> in another person' s story . . .

It is the absolute, momentary Otherness of spring that sets us free. Please enjoy the freedom of these poems, right now, and as wildly as you can.

—DONALD REVELL

JOSEPH HORTON

SHOOT THE TIGER

When they ask, we are told to say all animals are wild. By now some people have forgotten Tatiana, when she got out and killed that kid, but the ones who remember really remember—the zoo regulars, cable news junkies, Googlehead tourists, the animal righters. The local affiliate's reenactment showing how she climbed up one boy's body to get out of the enclosure is still out there, and not a week goes by without a little crowd straining over the rail at the corner, triangulating the particulars of her ascent. We've raised the grotto walls, of course, and put up more signs. We got a new tiger, a sedate and guileless girl suitably from a zoo in Nebraska, but there are still plenty of folks who want to know more. *How much blood was there? Was there really a trail of it leading to the Terrace Café that Tatiana followed?* They think animals get domesticated in zoos, that after a while they learn to live with what's given to them. If I let slip that I know a keeper who was there on the shoot team when it happened, who was bitten by Tatiana the year before, they really lose it. *How many times did they shoot her? Did she cry? How stoned was that asshole kid who climbed in?* This is San Francisco; there is little sympathy for the boys. *Can you imagine how afraid she was when it happened? Can you imagine what it's like to be taunted day in and day out, pacing around that tiny pen?* I know they are all asking the same two questions: how did she get out, and how did she die? They never ask how you kill what you love, and this, I've learned too late, is everything.

Did they ever find any of that weed the brothers left?

There's a third question. This is San Francisco.

I live in the city. I've got plenty of options. I'm not ugly, I'm not desperate. I've got my own place, near SF State in the sprawl of Parkmerced. My loans are paid off. I give money to homeless folks if they've got cute pets or funny signs. My mom leaves voicemails asking if I've married Ellen yet so she can retire to

the studio audience, and my dad sends fuzzy pictures of his rainbow Hillary 2016 bumper sticker. I don't take selfies in public, I've only dropped two phones in the toilet, and every other week I sit up the hill from Yoga in the Park and try to follow along, blaming gravity, the hill, and the sun when I don't. I'm twenty-eight, so by any estimate I've got at least a decade left before I hate everything. I'm a catch. And even if I weren't, working with animals reminds me we're all a lot less lonely than we think. Every species is basically the same. We eat, we sleep, we have sex. We fight only when we think we're not getting enough. Violence always comes from comparison. It is the truest, most ferocious biological rule—nobody wants to be alone, and most of the time we settle for what we can get. Usually, we're bored as hell.

I sit with Dana three times at lunch, and we never have to talk about being single or interested. This is pheromones, maybe, or body language, the channels of our gay telepathy. I let myself think we have evolved beyond words. Dana is beautiful in every way I am not. She is a pocket of low gravity; everything rises, bounces, floats; her Target wardrobe looks painted on. She has thin, little muscles in places I'd thought were reserved for storage. I am a scientist and I know bodies and there has never been anyone like Dana.

Soon, lunch isn't enough. On a break, I go down to the Family Farm to ask questions about the Barbados sheep and the new Nigerian dwarf goats in the petting zoo. I say it's for my niece who wants to bring friends who have allergies. I tell myself I'm ready for something new. I'm ready, at least, to lie about my niece and her thousand allergies and no friends because I'm curious. *What does a tiger bite feel like?*

I ask Dana if she has gloves the kids can wear.

"What's the point of that?" Dana carries a goat like a football, its tiny legs windmilling on either side of her arm. "Why would she want to touch something she can't feel?"

I'm not a virgin and I'm not a prude, even graded on the harsh curve of the city. But three years of blurry walks in the Mission, three attempts at Bay to Breakers, three years of turning the wrong way on strange beds and coming home to an empty fridge and a phone full of numbers—names with question marks at the end, names spelled with Muppet accuracy or autocorrected beyond repair—was plenty. I came out when I

lived with my parents in New Mexico, but there's out and then there's *out*. When you grow up guilty, living afraid and aware every day of that delicate, dangerous path to happiness, the sudden plenty can become its own pressure. The fear evolves, the worry adapts.

I ask her, "Do you want to get a drink sometime?"

Dana drops the goat in the dirt, and it runs confidently into the Family Farm fence, where it sits stunned, blinking, reassessing the world. Dana wipes her hands and talks into her sleeve. "Yeah, maybe. Maybe sometime."

Our first date is during intros. New animal introductions are never easy. There is no way to know which animals will get along in a zoo and which will fight to the death. It is unpredictable; it is feel, luck, chance. Most just need a taste of violence, a little biting and clawing, before they'll settle. I use a small cleaning hose to splash my boys if they get rowdy. To break up fights with the big cats, the lions and tigers and panthers, you need a fire extinguisher. Polar bears won't stop for anything less than a fire hose, and even then, half the time all you're doing is pressure-spraying off the blood. For big-ticket animals like the polars, intros are secret. The public gets word—*Please welcome our new friends, Icicle and Snowstorm!*—only once we're sure the new arrivals will make nice. If they don't, they're not only gone—dead or shipped back—we never had them. They were never here. Of course Dana waits until intros.

I've got twenty new squirrel monkeys who've come in from a lab down the peninsula, and there's no question these boys have lived their whole lives in cages. They've never seen the sky or walked on dirt. Labs are obsessed with controls: no outside influences, no sustained human contact, no socialization in groups larger than two. You think you're the only you in the world, or maybe there are only two of you, fated to live out your days together, and then it all changes. Monkeys, because they're smart, crack up easier than most, and zoos won't take in obviously sick or tested animals, so labs have gotten good at dumping them right before they show signs.

I have Romo and Tiny Tim alone in the enclosure. Dana walks in as Tim falls on his ass on the ground. Balancing on branches is new, and he is struggling. She says, "You got some drunk-ass monkeys."

I tell her they're from a lab, which she already knows. Only a few, Romo among them, seem unaffected by the testing. He is big for a squirrel monkey, muscular, bright-eyed, watchful, an alpha if I've ever seen one.

"What're they testing down there—beer?" She points at Tim. "Or weight-loss shit?"

The name started as night keeper Eddie's bad joke, but I like it. Tiny Tim is thinner than the rest, and the skin on his face is drawn and pale, like a plastic mask set down on his fur. Sometimes he shivers and twitches. Obviously, he is my favorite.

"Lili," Dana asks, "you put them all in yet?"

I know the question has little to do with the boys. In zoos, there are two kinds of keepers. Dana is a cowboy and I am a scientist. She, like most cowboys, thinks scientists go too slow. She thinks we are nervous and afraid and stuck in our heads. She isn't wrong. We like observables; we trust what we see.

"Tomorrow," I say. "Right now I'm giving them a feel for the place."

Tim falls off the third branch.

"How's that going?"

"They'll all be better tonight. I'll bring them all together tonight."

"Well, that's too bad."

"Why too bad?"

"I was gonna get a drink at the Riptide." She bites her lip and shakes her head, in that order, so the movement doesn't shake out a smile by accident. "And you'll be here all night breaking up the fights."

Despite the fall, Tiny Tim is looking stronger. He's giving the tree a death hug, accordioning his way up the trunk like a caterpillar. Romo is picking at and tasting his ass. I tell Dana I'll see her at the Rip.

She packs her disbelief into the first syllable. "Real-ly." Cowboys throw their animals together and hope for the best. They come from lives as park rangers and animal trainers and farm ranchers. Dana thinks I don't have the guts to let nature sort itself out.

"Really," I say. "I'm putting them together now."

There have been a few scuffles so far, and Romo will be a problem; I do not need to see him picking at his butt to know

he is an asshole, but this is nothing the hose and I can't handle. I ask Dana when she's headed over.

"I want to know, Lili," Dana says, "why you got into monkeys."

Jerry and Karl and Snake Dennis laugh. They have probably guessed at my answers already. They are four beers in and four from the end, because this is a night out with the shoot team; this is their night and not ours. The shoot team at most zoos is a joke, a half-assed collection of volunteers eyeing the overtime pay, single people with time to spare. Our squad is serious. Even before Tatiana, anytime the zoo hosted an event after close, the rental hire included a shooter. Think about that the next time your kid has a birthday by the penguins: someone, maybe Dana, is watching everyone eat cake through a scope. Our squad does drills every month, and for weeks after, the rest of us have to hear about high-ground tactical positions, terminal assault plans, and which species should be reclassified. Every potential escapee is color coded for danger: the nonthreatening animals are Greens, Yellows are threatening, Reds are dangerous. The squad likes Reds. Snake Dennis, who works with big birds, says there's no telling when an emu or ostrich might snap. There is no such thing as total safety.

Think about that the next time your kid has a birthday by the penguins: someone, maybe Dana, is watching everyone eat cake through a scope.

Dana has changed from her uniform into one of the underground Tatiana T-shirts that circulated after the attack. Most keepers have one, and Dana's is my favorite, a mutated version of the classic zoo logo, an outlined tree with a tiger, giraffe, antelope, and gorilla standing underneath, with the tiger now leaping forward, paws stretching out on the contours of Dana's breasts, above the words FRISCO ZOO AIN'T NOTHING TO FUCK WITH.

"So tell me about monkeys." Karl nods to my general area. "What do you like about monkeys?" For fifty weeks a year, Karl stitches up animals in the vet hospital, feeds newborns, and painstakingly cuts pills into eighths for the old and sick.

Twice tonight he's said he really wants to kill a Red this year. "You still like them when they're jacking off and throwing their shit everywhere? When they bite you with some goddamn African killer virus?"

"You know they don't have diseases," I say. "You know we check them." Dana makes a face, so I add, "I still like them, but they are dirtier than I thought."

Jerry snorts. Jerry is the primary keeper in reptiles. He wants to petition the zoo for "crowd-control measures" in case the public ever gets too rowdy during the feedings. I think he wants to tranquilize a teenager. "That should be the motto of keepers everywhere. *I still like animals, but yeah, they are hella fucking dirtier than I thought*."

Karl: "*Or, I like animals, but I hate mine*."

Snake Dennis: "Wait. Dana's got it." He points to her shirt. "*Only* I *can fuck with my animals*."

Dana laughs, and her chest heaves and falls, the T-shirt Tatiana back on the rampage, clawing at me. The obligatory cursing of the boys follows. *Goddamn those little shits, those drunk trespassing assholes*. Snake Dennis asks again if they can all get matching tattoos of Tatiana's face. Dana shakes her head no. She's riled them up, and now she sits back and lets them tire out. The dead boy, the saved boy, and the dead tiger have made Dana the star of her team, who can invite me to join the squad for drinks, no questions asked, no matter how awkward and foolish the science of my desire. Dana, the alpha, can take me home to my place without a word.

In the morning, I watch Dana sleep tightly, the bitten arm beneath her. I still haven't seen it, not in the light, but I've felt it. Against my body her skin felt like a doll's plastic, a casing shaped and worked back to life, less real for all the effort at realness. I'm sure the doctors told her it was *reconstruction* rather than *repair*. A repaired arm would have felt my touch and given it back.

I find a small trail of blood in the boys' enclosure. It's my instinct to be alarmed, but I know a night without some kind of bodily fluid is the real cause for concern, and a quick count tells me everyone is fine. I clean the enclosure, fix breakfasts, and the guilt drains. I let myself think that I will get lucky, that they are starting over. During the feeding, when he is last to eat, I see

Tim has a small cut on his leg. A simple clean and bind. Even with the cut—and it is almost unnoticeable, probably accidental—he looks healthier. He eats and moves well.

Dana answers on the second ring. "Family Farm."

"I want to know if you want to go out, for real. Without the guys. Dinner maybe."

A pause. A child screams in her background. She says, "What about *your* guys?"

I let it pass. She doesn't appreciate the difference. She has guys, I have boys. "They're fine. All of them doing well."

"That's good." Now her voice is muffled. She's at the phone in the playpen, where she can be seen, where she has to pretend to care. "A girl just fell in the water trough."

"Is she all right?"

"You know. That half-cry where they look around first? Where they're not hurt until someone sees that they're hurt?"

"Do you need to go?"

A pause. "The kids shouldn't be part of the job."

Later, I will understand the particulars of this torture. How after the shooting, after the surviving brother sued the zoo, Admin insisted on her reassignment from big cats. She'd asked for anywhere but the Farm. They told her it wasn't a punishment, but if she wanted to stay on the squad, she had to spend time with people too. Balance, they said. We don't want you becoming some kind of nut.

I try again. "So . . ."

"What?"

"Dinner?"

"Your place," she says, as the girl's crying, finally finding an audience, swells and settles on a pitch. "You can cook for me. We can get that out of the way."

I've made a salad, and I bought some lamb. I plan a joke about my cooking up the Farm sheep, hoping this is humor silly enough, cruel enough, for her to find funny. But when she shows up an hour late, we fuck first. Her word. It's not desperate or romantic. "I spent all day on my ass," she says, and I know I am her exercise for the day.

Dana is a cowboy except during sex. She is careful, strategic, scientific. She is patient, she plans for her pleasure. She wants to know why what works works: the angling of kisses on my ear

and neck, how many fingers up my thigh until I shiver, the ratio of tongue pressure and movement to warmth and wetness. I do not think I am crying out, but I am; she tells me to be quieter but not to stop; she wants to control what I cannot. She measures my pitch and soon she is playing it. There is artistry here, and care, and it is easy to think Dana generous until she expects more in return. *Have you taken good notes,* she is saying as she rolls over and stares at me. *Are you prepared?* But now I only feel my sweat, and she is catching and keeping all the light from the window; this is what it means to glow, and when I push against her, interlacing her fingers in mine and making a fist, I look to see if any of me has rubbed off on her, if in our liquid states we can mix and balance; I have always thought this selfless, but I am wrong, and soon she is silent and fading away, and I wish over and over that we were on the roof on the good side with all of the light from the city—she so loud so that I can be loud, so I can ask what she wants and still know this is fucking and not sex and thank god for this evidence that they are not the same. But then it is dark and something in the kitchen is burning and beeping, she goes to shower, and I know what I have offered is not enough.

I do not think I am crying out, but I am; she tells me to be quieter but not to stop; she wants to control what I cannot. She measures my pitch and soon she is playing it.

We have dinner. Dana finishes the lamb and says she is a vegetarian except for red meat and fish. She makes martinis while saying she only drinks beer. For years, she says, she wasn't a lesbian, she just had sex with women. Dana doesn't say much except when she does.

"Before grad school"—at BYU in zoology—"before my mom died"—cancer—"and before I came out and my dad threw me out, we worked summers and weekends together at the Utah State Pen. Dad had gotten himself on the execution detail. He was on it for forty years, and he got to shoot two guys, but to hear him tell it, two was fifty. And he told me more than anybody. I mean it's all that bonding shit, isn't it? Old story. Dad wanted a son and got a daughter. I don't know. I don't believe in any of that. Or maybe I do. I'm just saying how it was. I'm

not talking for anybody but me. This whole town's full of fuckers talking for everybody else, telling everyone else how to live. I only came here cause SFPD offered me a job training their dogs." I don't believe her until the next day, when she shows me the picture: she is running, midstride, a German shepherd clamped on her padded arm while a line of cops watch in the distance. "Eventually, the zoo hired me to keep the big cats because I knew how to handle the aggression. I told them I knew how to live with the boys—well, the boys and the girls—that want to bite you."

I ask to see her arm, and she rolls up her sleeve. The outline of Tatiana's jaw is clear, a big horseshoe turned sideways. Some of it has healed, but the deeper, pinker shadows from the canines will be permanent. I know she will not let the squad get a tattoo because she already has one. I wonder what it means that I have seen the scar before I know the story.

"Here," I say, showing her the twin pricks on my thumb. "Here's where a macaque got me once."

"You are fucking hardcore."

I put my hand on her arm, and it is almost enough to cover Tatiana. Dana lets me keep it there.

"Of all the execution shit my dad told me, what I remember most is the blanks. In a five-man prison team, one guy always drew a blank. It was supposed to give everybody a chance at a clean conscience, you know. But no matter how they tried it, that dummy felt a little different. You always knew. My dad always said if you wanted a clean conscience, there was no blank for that. You just weren't the right man for the squad."

We start eating lunch together every day. I wait for her after work. We leave together, and she stays over. We are a thing, but only the squad knows. They are not pleased.

"D's treating you right?" Snake Dennis asks. "She treating you like a lady?"

Jerry next: "Or maybe *you* treat *her* like the lady?"

Everyone laughs. Dana too. They are sure of the answer. "I've got to get back," I say.

Karl: "Course you do."

Jerry: "You gotta get back and make sure all your boys are tucked in safe and sound."

"Shut up," Dana says, and they do, though mostly out of

habit. There are rumors Jerry wants the squad, that he's mentioned it to Admin. "Just because she loves her boys doesn't mean she isn't tough. She can be tough." They laugh, *oooh*. Later, when we are alone, I will thank her for saving me from the firing line. It will take longer to realize the weight of the blank is always different.

Tiny Tim has a new cut on his cheek, and he limps on the leg we didn't fix. He is clearly apart from the rest of the boys; he stays pressed up to the glass, staring out, tracking me as I come and go. This is sad but not unexpected. Most intro groups will form social bonds by ganging up on the weak—nothing builds trust faster than shared distrust—but four weeks in, Tim should be out of the danger zone. At this point, the studies say, any social positioning will be mild and generally inclusive. I hand-feed Tim his dinner and watch him as I serve the rest of the boys. I'm elbow-deep in a pail full of banana quarters when Dana comes up behind me, reaches in, and pretends to deep-throat one of the uncut shafts. This is Romo's banana, and he howls and jerks himself with particular menace, his style to keep his hand steady on his penis while his whole body moves back and forth like he's riding a little horse. The rest of the boys are chattering, vibrating, watching him to see if he gets what he wants. There's rage in his eyes, his anger feeds his pleasure in a way that says this banana is his and also every banana and everyone who peels them. Dana, bored, stops before he's finished and drops the banana in the bucket, dropping him on his little horse from a gallop to nothing, leaving only me satisfied as she apologizes for her guys and says she's free tonight and up for anything.

The Exploratorium is my suggestion, and only for its name, for the joke Dana doesn't get. We are exploring each other, I want to say. We are together now and we are exploring our edges.

I buy the tickets, but she says she likes my shirt, so we're even. We are the oldest people in the museum by two presidential administrations. We play with the marble maze and pretend to watch a video about plankton. We send dirty whispers down the giant ear canal tube until we realize the kids along its length can hear us. In the fun-house mirrors we invert ourselves, and I walk back and forth so my head bounces between her legs; this is how a scientist flirts or, at least, how I show I have been

taking notes. But it's too soon for that, or maybe too late, and whether as punishment, Dana sensing my reach, or because she has something to prove, she leads me to the Tactile Dome. I have already said no—the signs warn about claustrophobia, small spaces, and total darkness, an Alternative Sensory Adventure. I say no and hell no, but her hand in mine migrates to my ass and now punishment and proof are the same.

We crawl in the tunnel entrance, and I hold Dana's foot as the light disappears and we slant upward, into the pitch, shuffling our way past foam noodles on the ceiling and what feels like a waterbed on the floor. There are too many people inside. This is bad crowd management, and the hot-breath strangers waft by on nervous laughter and disowned farts. I call out to Dana and she responds, gruffly, and I come to know her ankle better than any part of my own body. Finally, we stop and sit, alone enough, lost enough, to hear only our breathing. I smell our sweat. I cup her hands, then I put mine in hers.

"You have my heart," I whisper, unsure of the distance. "Be careful."

It is silly. I feel silly. I am floating. But in the dark I am safe. I see myself only as I hope Dana sees me, and this, I have been told, is love. I have sent a probe out into deep space and will wait a lifetime for its transmissions home.

"It's heavy," she says. I hear her arms moving up and down, weighing the air.

"I should have told you earlier," I say. "I can see in the dark. No big deal, but I'm watching you."

She laughs. "What, you're a monochromat now?"

She remembers me explaining the night monkeys we had a couple years back, donated by a lab testing malaria vaccines. Somewhere along the line, all the *Aotus* gave up color to better see shapes and movement at night. The evolutionary gamble to simplify and survive, keep only what you need.

I whisper, "Tell me about Tatiana?"

We understand what this means. I am asking about the moment, the heavy center we orbit. We have talked before and after, laughed about the T-shirts and the squad, cursed the investigation, and caressed the bite, but we have not talked about the shot.

She sighs. Not anger—impatience. It's taken me too long to ask. "Why do you want to know? I thought you hated all that."

"Don't smile. I know you are smiling." I tell her I want to understand.

Later, when I have catalogued all our encounters and accounted for our variables, when I fall back on what I know to explain everything I don't, I will confirm Dana has never said this phrase to me. She's never wanted to understand.

"The first boy was dead when I got there. You can just tell when a body is empty. So I dropped the tranq, picked up the gun. The squad was behind those benches near the café, and I'll tell you, they were thrilled when I got there. These guys, they think they're tough, but a big animal, that's scary. You feel it deep down. That's an old fear sewn into all of us. I see Tatiana's got the other boy pinned down, but he's alive, he's breathing, crying. Maybe if he could've gotten away, I wouldn't have had to kill her, but the whole time, he's crying, calling out."

The story is fully formed. She has told it before, and I wonder how often. At first all I hear is the anger in her voice, the contempt for weakness, but then I hear the pride, and I know she needs it. The boy is weak, the squad is weak, so she is strong. She needs their weakness to hide the word she's swallowed: I wouldn't have *gotten* to kill her.

"Later, you know, we tried to figure out if one of them had been dangling his legs over the wall, teasing her, fucking around, wanting a taste of something dangerous and wild. I suppose I can understand that. But all I could think is, there she is, wanting out of her place all day every day, and here come some assholes trying to get in. You know, when she got out, she went right past the warthogs, the capybaras, right past the south exit? She didn't need food and she wasn't trying to escape. She went only for the boys. Think about that."

I do. I think about wanting. I think about need. I let myself think about why I've never been to Dana's place. "So she wanted revenge."

I hear the disappointment. "No. Not that. When she saw us, when I got close and she took a step forward, the shot was clean. Safety off. I know it sounds like bullshit, but she was staring right at me. After that it was easy. Not because she bit me or anything. Not revenge. I knew she was doing what she was built to do, and I was too. I don't mean instinct. I mean purpose. That all your little instincts are right, and together they mean something more. I'm talking about knowing you are here for a

reason and that reason is right and has its place and you belong. I watched the shot all the way home, knew just where she was going to be. No pain. The guys shot her too, but she was already dead. No pain." Dana sighs. "She was beautiful."

I want to be loved by anyone as much as Dana loved Tatiana when she shot her.

"Goddamn," Dana says, rubbing her hands on her jeans, the sound telling me she is no longer holding my heart. "Sometimes you're right where you should be."

The long exit tunnel is a safety feature, the sign at the end says, because you can so quickly become accustomed to the world inside. *Just ten minutes can convince your eyes they are no longer needed.* "Welcome back," a docent says, offering us a hand. "Give yourselves a moment to adjust."

Tiny Tim is laid out flat like an offering on a stone. It does not cross my mind that he is dying. Sleeping, maybe, finally comfortable with the space, or dazed after a short fall from the low branches, even knocked out after a fight to rejoin the group. But he does not move as I herd the rest into the holding room, and then I see the mash of his face and neck when he lets me pick him up without complaint. The other boys scream as the blood pooling beneath him runs down the stone to the water basin.

And I am running. Only his head is above my shirt, and even as I am running and gasping and shouting for help I can feel his breath. The shallower the breath the more I can feel it. I should be looking for help, but I only see his bones and his fur and the soft flesh of his hand on my breast; he is a shape but not a weight, his body moving because of mine, and I know if I stop he will die.

I should be looking for help, but I only see his bones and his fur and the soft flesh of his hand on my breast; he is a shape but not a weight.

He's been attacked by the others, I want to say in the operating room, but at a sprint Karl is there with two other vets, and all I see are the bite marks on Tim's arms, the bloody little bruises the tattoos of my failure. "Lili," Karl says. "One of your boys? A fight or a fall?" I manage a nod as they take Tim from

me, thinking how much easier it is to believe he arrived here one of two ways, to accept that in the zoo our hands are seen only in unnaturally long and happy lives. This is keeping, we tell ourselves, and everything else is life. "We'll do what we can," Karl says. I can almost see his frown through the surgical mask. It does not take long to know there is nothing left to try. In twenty minutes Tim is gone, his body taken away to be tested for disease.

I call Dana at the Farm and ask her to come up. She says she'll be free in an hour. When she arrives, she's changed her clothes. She took the time to change.

"I killed him," I say before she sits down.

"No, you didn't."

I laugh. A fight or a fall. A fight—Romo and his kind inescapable—or a fall from an ambitious branch. Either way, not my fault. My head swims into a hole and I breathe through a straw. To know it is not my fault is to admit I cannot control everything, which is to wonder whether I have control over anything, which is to cry and tell Dana nothing.

"You know how this goes," she tries again. "The weak ones . . ."

I know how it goes.

"I mean, you know, it happens."

I know it happens.

"And, really," she says, pressing on, though she must feel me tense up in her arms, "it'll be better for all of them in the long run."

"How?"

"He wasn't ever gonna make it. You know that. This way it brings the rest of them together. I bet you don't have any other trouble now. As intros go, that's not bad. It's a numbers game. It's tough, but that's life."

I am tired of hearing how tough life is. I am tired of numbers. I am tired of accepting that surviving and living are the same. Most of all, I am tired of Dana telling me what I know. I keep crying.

She hugs me harder. "That's enough."

The tests take most of the week—*contusions, trauma, collapse; heart and lungs healthy,* the official diagnosis of an excess of vitamins and lack of friends. After we incinerate him, I ask Dana

to come home with me, but she says there are four field trips scheduled and she can't get away. She has never cared so much about the Farm.

I am in the shower, still smelling Tiny Tim's hair and blood on my chest, when I hear the door. I think maybe she will join me under the water, but she doesn't. Instead, she's on the couch with her eyes closed. "There's a drought, you know." I sit at the table. I ask her if I will always smell like this, but my real question is whether I will always feel like this. She shrugs, says the scent will fade within the week. I do not want her scientific opinion. I want her to tell me a beautiful lie so I will remember that I'll have other boys. I want to have one moment in my life when I'm sure I'll live forever. For all of this wanting I am proud of myself until I realize the drips on the table are not from my hair and that I do not own enough tissues.

Dana is watching me. For the first time I see that this frown, this judgment and effortless disdain, is the natural mold of her face.

I ask if we're having lunch tomorrow. Suddenly lunch is very important. She says she's not sure. I ask if she still wants to go up the coast this weekend. She says she's tired. I ask her if she needs space. She hesitates. In the final accounting, what will hurt most is knowing there is no one else. That she did not choose anyone over me. Her silence becomes the answer. I ask why.

She steeples her hands on the table. The movement is so delicate, so considered and careful, that I stare and keep staring. I wonder what else I have missed, what I will miss. She says, "You can't let anything break you."

After a month, my boys are ready for the public, and Romo is an instant celebrity. He does tricks. He vocalizes. He runs circuits around the enclosure and stops—no, *poses*—for photographs. When he masturbates, on his little horse at a gallop, or pees or shits, he does it in the back where nobody can see, where I am the only one who sees. He has a profile in the *Chronicle,* a real underdog story: "from lab subject to zoo star." In staff meetings we are told to give him special attention; we need all the good publicity we can get these days. During feedings we take turns answering patron questions.

"What's his favorite food?"

"Is he the daddy of all the monkeys?"

"Is he your favorite?"

I have not been told that Romo must be my favorite.

"Were you here when that tiger got shot?"

A rumor goes around that Dana was tipped five hundred dollars for security at a birthday party. Snake Dennis says she dropped her gun and saved a kid from drowning. I say this does not sound like her. The word is she's moving back to big cats. At lunch, the squad laughs at her jokes like they used to. Apparently she has plenty of new material.

I send Dana only one text, after editing through the silly, *We're keepers, we're not supposed to let go,* the angry, *I'll prove how fucking tough I am,* and the desperate, *I need you*. I choose the truest, the sharpest definition of her absence. The one, at least, that makes my heart climb highest in my throat. *We are good for each other.*

After three days, she writes back: *That's why we don't work*.

I am cleaning the indoor enclosure. The boys are in the holding room next door. I am room service, and they are happy. I press my thumb into the spray from the hose. Patrons think the glass on the inside is tinted to protect the animals, but it isn't. The boys watch everything, and I can see myself reflected faintly on a family with a stroller. I don't mind the cleaning, especially now when I spray Tiny Tim's spot twice, letting the water run the same course as his blood, but I hate being on display. This family is expecting monkeys, and I am a terrible disappointment.

I get on my knees to scrape at the food that's been ground into the concrete base of the tree. Only from here can I see that the door to the holding room is unlocked. The door is shut, but the latch hasn't fallen into the clasp. An easy push will swing it open. Romo, of course, is sitting behind it. Instantly, I know how it goes. I know what will happen.

He will push on the door, or he will stick his arm through, demanding a treat as he always does, and the door will open and he will run. The back door of the enclosure is cracked open by the hose, and the hall door is also open because we are bringing in new bookcases on dollies. Romo is always lucky. Once he is outside, at a sprint toward the African Savanna or Children's Zoo, I will call the squad. Small primates are Green, a

nuisance, but Romo will be caught eventually and tranquilized. If it is Dana who catches him, she will get a quote or two in the paper. She will make a bad joke about the difference between a monkey and a tiger. A year from now, she'll get a promotion. A year from now she will have forgotten all about us.

Or he will push on the door and run past me in the enclosure and out into the hall and out into the zoo and I will keep cleaning. I will say nothing. Maybe he'll be found by chance in the trees near the giraffe lodge, or maybe he'll get out of the zoo and someone will find him in the Presidio. Maybe he will end up like famous Banana Sam and be found in a backpack in Stern Grove. There will be an inquiry, and I will say it was a night keeper's fault and everyone will believe me. Dana will sit on her ass all day and all week and all year, and eventually she will get tired of waiting and will go back to Utah. She will like being tougher in the wild. I will stay in the city and I will accept my options.

Or he will push on the door and try to run past me and I will hit him with the hose. The spray will press him up against the wall and he will know what it feels like to be weak and afraid. I will kick closed the door to the hallway. The families watching will not be disappointed. I will get a commendation and they will ask me if I've ever thought of joining the squad. I will call Dana and she will say she is proud of me and I will pause just long enough for her to feel the weight of her blank.

This is what happens: Romo pushes on the door. It glides open. He stares at me, blinks, scratches his chest. He looks at the hallway and the rest of the world. He knows what I know. We will live forever. He walks back into the holding room, grabs himself, and rides his little horse.

THE ICEFIELD

The first speaker wrote his tiny symbols and Greek letters on the chalkboard, each stroke heavy with precision. I'd read all of his papers, yet never imagined the mathematician behind those ideas occupying a body at all, much less the soft, stooping, round one at the front of the room, holding the crowd in capture.

I tapped my toe on the concrete floor and scanned the hall, counting the other women. Five, in addition to me.

I gnawed at my cuticles.

Three weeks in the Canadian Rockies. The brochure for the International Conference on Algebraic Groups featured white-capped mountains, promising a tour up the Icefields Parkway and a chance to mingle with the world's most famous algebraic geometers. I had no interest in mingling. But I'd never seen a glacier.

The old guy next to me looked down at my foot. My tapping shook the seat row.

"Sorry," I said, but the tapping kept on.

"Inspiration awaits you in Banff," my thesis advisor had said. "No distractions."

Finish the proof, he meant.

Two thousand miles from Ann Arbor, I would breathe the mountain air, photograph the glaciers, and forget about Sylvia Cortez. She didn't exist. Her husband didn't either. The restraining order against me was immaterial.

I opened my notebook and turned the page, where my unfinished proof lay in ruins. I tuned out the speaker and his tiny, heavy hand, and began to work.

At check-in the night before, a pale guy wearing a tangerine headband recited a list of rules. The Banff Centre was part conference facility, part artists' colony. Artists were "residents"; conference attendees, visitors. Visitor privileges were limited.

Heed all posted signs.
Don't disturb residents at work.
Don't trespass where trespassing isn't allowed.
Beware of the elk, plentiful and aggressive if threatened.
Enjoy your stay.

After the morning session, I went back to my room and grabbed my camera. My eye could barely keep up. Steep mountain ridges, massive and grand. Distance impossible to judge under such a big sky. Blood-rich crimson flowers flooded the foreground. I pushed beyond the conference facility, toward the colony where artists slipped ghostlike in and out of huts and halls.

Mozart spilled out of the music building, followed by a deep French-accented voice. I snuck inside, wondering whether I could blend among the artists. The source of the music was a young woman around my age, straight black hair to her waist. Her hands arced briskly on piano keys. I concealed myself behind the studio door. The teacher clapped once and the woman stopped playing. My sneakers squeaked.

"Artists only!" the man with the deep voice yelled.

There was no time to concoct a convincing lie, so I ran. When I looked back, the woman stood at the studio threshold, smirking.

I met Sylvia Cortez my first year at Ann Arbor. She was a philosopher, a grad student like me. She wasn't brilliant or beautiful, but she could talk for hours about epistemology and existentialism. None of it made sense to me, but I listened; I got as close to her as I could. Her husband was a chemist, full professor, twenty-five years older. I never understand what young women see in old men. Not that love, or why it inflicts itself on us when it does, can ever be understood.

Sylvia called me exotic, passionate, a genius. Said she'd never met a woman as fascinating as me. I bristled at "woman." Recoiled from the label "girlfriend." I lived in my head, inside an abstract world void of gender and physical sensation. Or at least that's what I told myself.

Until Sylvia said she loved me.

At dinner, I picked at my new potatoes and string beans, trying to ignore the conference chitchat. Name-dropping of theorems

and collaborators, boasting of journal publications and colloquia invitations. A woman graduate student from Oregon sat down next to me, tried to make conversation about the academic job market. I smiled, rose, escaped.

Soon I found myself browsing magazines at the market shop. Wrought iron chairs scraped the concrete; voices grew closer. A man and a woman, her clothes mostly black, his shirt paint-stained a glowing chartreuse. I nodded at them and Neon Shirt said, "Join us?"

"No, thanks," I said.

"What's your name?"

I put down my magazine. "Lane," I said.

He turned to the woman. "Didn't you date a chick named Street once?"

"Yes," she replied, curling her upper lip.

I looked at her and she scanned me: up, down.

"Come on, sit with us," the man said, pulling out a chair.

"I'm a conference guest. A mathematician. Not an artist."

The woman tapped the chair with her fingernail.

They quizzed me on logical paradoxes and special relativity, two things I knew embarrassingly little about. Neon Shirt was Vince, a thirty-year-old painter who looked nineteen. The woman was Olga. A poet. She used freakishly rare words, and when she thought hard about something, she clucked her tongue against the roof of her gigantic mouth.

Vince said he wanted to paint me, called my boyish features "striking," my sleepy brown eyes seductive. I laughed and tried not to look at Olga.

When the market shop closed, Vince took me aside, said he needed to know: him or Olga, which did I prefer?

"Is that a general question or a specific one?"

He smiled. "I dig the androgyny," he said. "Just so you know."

Over his shoulder, I saw the pianist approach, marching like a soldier.

"You know *her?*" I asked.

"Ah—Glacier Girl."

She walked past, never looking up.

"I heard her play," I said.

"She's brilliant. But she doesn't speak to mortals."

I searched the horizon but she was gone.

"So, not Olga, not me. But Glacier Girl—"

I dug my fists into my back pockets, rocked myself, and said, "I came here for the glaciers."

The speaker the next morning was one of the female mathematicians, a full professor from New Delhi in a purple print sari. The rhythmic highs and lows of her accent pushed me into a Zen-like space. I worked on my proof, slipping in and out of calculations like caves, deep tunnels of concentration.

I skipped lunch, eager for my first photographic sojourn off campus. Banff bustled with high-season cacophony: bus engines rumbling, couples arguing, tour guides competing for attention. I made my way through town, crossed the Bow River, and found a winding trail near a light covering of brush. Standing at the river's edge, I shot the curve of water flowing, the snow-capped mountains beyond. Tried not to think about Sylvia. What she was doing. What she was feeling.

Up the riverside trail was a slight incline, a grassy lawn. As I rounded a bank of towering evergreens, two elk appeared, one large and antlered, one smaller, female. I waited. The antlered one lifted his head. I raised my camera and focused. The female darted off, while the male stood there and posed for me.

It was late when I finally wandered back into town and found a coffee shop at the edge of the hotel strip. As I searched for a menu, a small voice behind me said, "Hello."

Startled, I bumped the counter. Grabbed the stack of menus before they fell on the pianist's head.

"Didn't mean to scare you," she said.

I clutched my camera bag.

"You a photographer?"

I opened my mouth but no words emerged.

She shrugged, went back to her coffee.

"Have you eaten?" This I blurted out, like an ill-mannered child.

She squinted behind a large mug, her eyes lined dark with mascara.

I extended my hand, "I'm Lane."

She didn't respond.

"I was on the trail by the river. The elk come right up to you. The males, at least. They're desperate to be caught on film. Not

the females. Very skittish. I missed dinner at the Centre. I'm a mathematician. I hate mathematicians."

Finally, she smiled.

"I'm Taylor." She put her coffee cup down. "I hate musicians and artists. It appears we're two of a kind."

I felt my face flush.

She knew of a diner, so we went there. She wouldn't talk about music. I wouldn't talk about math. That was the deal.

"Why do you come to the Centre if you hate other artists?" I asked.

She leaned forward. "Have you seen the glaciers?"

"Not yet."

Her eyes were light green and enormous. She squeezed her fingers together as she spoke. "You expect pure whiteness, right? But they're blue. Blue ice hanging off a mountain. And the lakes look radioactive. The minerals make everything glow: turquoise, chartreuse. It's other-worldly. I come here every summer I can. For the glaciers more than the colony. Seeing them once in a lifetime is *not* enough."

"I come here every summer I can. For the glaciers more than the colony. Seeing them once in a lifetime is not enough."

She tapped my camera bag. "Be sure to look with your eyes though, not just your lens. Tourists miss everything trying to grab the perfect photo." She took a deep breath. "You have to hold the beauty inside. Let it fill you up. It won't fit in a picture."

I took a bite of my burger and studied her face.

"I know what they call me," she said. "They think I'm obsessed with the Icefield. Or maybe they think I'm a bitch. Ha! I don't care. They're boring. And so full of themselves. I really can't stand artists."

I nodded, sorry for the enormous amount of food I'd just forced into my mouth. I covered my face with my napkin and chewed faster.

"Vince try to fuck you yet?" she asked.

I choked, tried to swallow without gagging.

"Sorry—I forget how to talk to people," she said.

I cleared my throat, took a long sip of water. "He said you didn't speak."

She laughed. "Not to him."

We walked back to the Centre. When we approached the artists' colony, Taylor slowed. I felt her tension reemerge as we neared the residence.

"I'm giving a recital," she said. "You could come if you want."

"Yeah—great!"

"You don't have to."

"What day? Time?"

"Look for the signs," she said, then disappeared behind an evergreen.

When I got back to the dorm, two mathematicians sat in the outer lobby, arguing about the higher cohomology of sheaves.

"That's it! It vanishes!" the younger one said, gesticulating.

The older man leaned in, enthralled. They spoke so intensely, they looked like lovers.

Thoughts of Sylvia rushed through me for the first time in hours.

I went to my room and turned out the light. It was late but the sky was still aglow and hazy. Prolonged northern dusk. I craned my head out the window, heard soft footsteps, twigs breaking. From behind a bank of trees came an elk, no antlers. A few feet from my window, her gaze locked with mine. I eased back, tried not to scare her. Listened to her breathe.

I slept in and skipped the morning session. At lunch, two guys in the cafeteria were shouting in Russian. The woman from Oregon stepped in line behind me with a plastic tray.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"Thorbeau and Krauss discovered a new cohomology theory last night. The Russians were working on something similar, so they've been scooped. Isn't it awesome to be here?"

I grunted acknowledgment, then ordered macaroni and cheese. Took a seat by the window and opened my notebook. The grad student from Oregon fell in with the others.

Math buzzed through the room in a half-dozen languages, creating a brilliant white noise against which I ate my mac and cheese, thought about the glaciers and Taylor's green eyes.

I put my tray on the conveyor belt and went to the market shop. Olga and Vince were there, lurking by the magazines.

I felt a strange craving for the cigarettes behind the counter, though I didn't smoke.

"Look at her," Olga said. "Soulful. Seductive."

Vince tugged at my sleeve. "I must paint you soon."

Why are you here, I wanted to ask them. *Why are you talking to me?*

Over Vince's shoulder, I saw Taylor again. Her gait was sharp and determined, like a conductor stabbing the beat forward.

I moved toward her and said, "You disappeared last night."

Vince whispered something to Olga. Taylor watched them.

"I have to practice," she said, pushing past me.

I ran after, grabbed her arm. She looked at my hand, and her expression sent a shiver through me. She pointed toward the music building. "Don't lurk outside my studio today."

"I'm not a stalker."

"Who said I cared if you were? Just not today. I need to focus."

I thought she was going to leave, but she sat down on a bench and folded her arms across her chest.

"Were you looking for me just now?" I asked.

She shrugged. "Are you any good at math?"

"Of course. I wouldn't be here if I wasn't." I sat down next to her. "Can't do much else, actually."

"You like it then. It gives you pleasure."

"It bores me. I loved it once—I must have. But when I try to focus now, sometimes I just can't. It's like I've gone too far, but also, not far enough. I'm stuck."

Her shoulders dropped and I leaned in. For a second, I thought I could do anything. I thought I could reach out and hold her hand, or touch the side of her face. But I sat still and waited. Her green eyes glistened in the sun. She stood and said, "Recital's tomorrow night at seven."

As she moved past me, her fingertips brushed my shoulder. She paused at the music building door and waved.

I made love to Sylvia once in the dark woods behind her house, on an old army blanket I'd bought at Ranger Surplus. It was a scratchy brown wool that made my knees raw. After she came, she left me there alone, sweat-cold and shaking under falling autumn leaves. I watched her window for hours. Shadows mov-

ing behind the curtains. She wasn't alone, but I was. With dead leaves burrowed in my clothes and the smell of her on my skin, I sat there, unable to make myself go.

I spent the afternoon on a bench at the far edge of the Centre's campus, retracing my steps through my unfinished proof. Absorbing every line, verifying the purity of its truth. Digging for flaws and new insight. When I looked up, three female elk stood across the lawn, grazing. Then a fourth appeared. I sat still and they didn't seem to notice me.

I reached into my camera bag.

"Hey!" A gruff male voice approached.

The elk disappeared.

Vince slapped me on the back and sat down.

"They were very close," I said. "It would have been a great shot."

"They're like rodents around here, you know." He picked up my notepad. "You don't seem like the freaky math genius to me. Who are you, really?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. Who the hell are you?"

He laughed. "I've got some time now. I'll show you who I am, if you're ready to pose." He threw a few fake boxing jabs at my face. "So serious," he said. "Come on."

Light spilled through high windows into Vince's studio. He pulled a stool out, asked if I wanted a beer. His paintings were neatly stacked against the wall.

"I'm not getting naked for you," I said.

He snapped his fingers, one, two, three times. "Close your eyes," he said.

He began to whistle. I felt his hand touch my foot. "Keep 'em closed," he said.

He spun me around on the stool.

Bold crimson background, pale-skin subject. Taylor, naked on a glowing bed of green. A chaise lounge. Her eyes painted the same hue, radioactive chartreuse. Vince's neon shirt.

He smiled and said, "There's more."

He lifted up the next one. Taylor and Vince, their bare limbs entwined under a zebra-print throw. The two of them crouched atop the chaise lounge, flowing down a river of rapids, glacier-ice blue.

"She was a wild time," he said. "Brief. But wild and hot, that Glacier Girl. Until she's through with you."

I stood up, grabbed my bag, and left.

When I was eleven I ran away from home, certain things would be better "out there." I was impatient: I wanted everything to go faster, to see everything sooner. I drank math and science like water, but they were too easy for me. I preferred literature, art, sports. Things I had so little talent for, it was pointless to try. But those were the things I wanted.

If I could just get away, I thought. *Be anywhere except inside my own skin. As a child. As a grown-up. "Out there," things will be better. Out there I will create something, capture something, be something.*

And someone will see it. Someone will know.

The next day the conference transformed. The original schedule was suspended, and Thorbeau and Krauss took the floor, laying out their new theory, highlighting open research questions.

The graduate student from Oregon sat down next to me.

"What an opportunity," she said. "To be here, right now."

Dizzy from lack of sleep, I forced myself to copy down Thorbeau's list of problems like a scribe, a mathematical monk. I looked at the woman: braided blonde hair, sleeveless print dress, Birkenstocks.

"I'm Judy Rinaldi," she said. "We haven't really met."

I looked away.

"The inner alcove question is fascinating," she said. "All that intricate geometry, removed from the algebraic formalism. Are you into that?"

I capped my pen, shut my notebook, escaped from the lecture hall.

At the market store I gave in to the pack of cigarettes I'd been coveting, and a sketchpad too. In my room, I smoked and scribbled, studied the brochure for the Icefield tour.

Just before seven, I splashed water on my face, then sprinted to the music hall. I took a seat in the back and tried to catch my breath.

Vince gripped my shoulder. "There's an empty in the front row."

I got up and took the seat in the front. When Taylor walked

onto the stage, she saw me, and everything turned crimson. I blinked into the blood-red spotlight and she was naked, wrapped around Vince's torso. I shook my head, tried to fight the image off.

She began to play.

I focused on her hands, her fingers. The way they flowed on and off the keys, over and under each other. The first Mozart sonata moved through me like a narcotic: thick and hot and inescapable. The mood shifted in the second piece. A reticence. Taylor's expression turned calculating. Then Beethoven, piercing and clean.

When she left the stage, she kept her head down, oblivious to the applause. I went outside, paced, smoked, watched the crowd disperse. Olga stood across the lawn, watching me. Back inside, I found the hall empty and quiet.

Taylor appeared in the shadows. "The Beethoven was no good."

I fumbled with the cigarettes, not knowing what to say. She grabbed the pack from me and tossed it on the floor.

"I said, the Beethoven was no good."

I couldn't say that it was; she wouldn't accept praise from me, in the same way I wouldn't accept anything she claimed to know about math. I had no idea what to say to her.

"Vince showed me his paintings."

She sighed. "He shows everyone. They're pretty good, actually."

She leaned toward me. Her eyes glowed.

Then, from nowhere, she kissed me.

Crimson red, glacier-ice blue. Free-falling, I wrapped my arms around her, pulled her closer. She pushed back, pushed away.

"I have to go," she said.

We struggled. My fingers tightened their grip.

"Why?" I said. "Why'd you do that? Why does this happen to me?"

She fought but I held her. I tried to kiss her, softly, but she dug her fingernails into my forearms and yelled, "Stop!"

I let her go.

And she was gone.

I tucked my thesis away at the bottom of my suitcase. My proof, unfinished. I bought more film at the market store. More sketch-

pads. More cigarettes. I didn't see any of the mathematicians again until the day of the bus tour up the Icefields Parkway, the conference-sponsored glacier trip.

I told the organizer my name and he searched his list. He didn't recognize me, but he let me board the bus, reluctantly. The others clumped together in groups. The woman from Oregon sat with Thorbeau and Krauss; she carried a bag full of pre-prints, talked briskly of schemes, sheaves, alcoves.

I pressed my forehead against the cold bus window, focused on the tour guide's narration. The vistas stretched out so wide they dwarfed everything.

Bow Lake and Crowfoot Glacier.

Valley of the Ten Peaks.

Extraordinary. Beyond anything I had imagined they would be.

At Lake Louise, a group of mathematicians stayed on the bus. They'd been working the entire time. I tried to ignore them, wished I didn't understand what they were saying, but I did. The new mathematical structure they were navigating was fragile. Intricate. But they were threading it together. They were making it whole.

I walked down to the lake. Cloudless blue sky above, mountain ridge and evergreen forest beyond. The rolling rhythm of the bus and the nonstop cackle of the mathematicians working had disoriented me. I felt queasy and my chest ached.

When I returned to the bus, the tour guide was silent. His narration of roadside wildlife and centuries of natural history had ceased. I looked around, confused. The organizer was thanking him.

"I know it's an unusual request," he said. "But there's a group in the back working on a remarkable theorem. The silence will really help their concentration."

The tour guide waved him off, said, "No problem."

I gripped the seat in front of me. "What did you say?"

"They're working," the organizer said.

"So you stopped the guided tour?"

He nodded.

The bus driver watched me through the rearview mirror.

"Why did we come here?" I yelled. "Why come to one of the most beautiful places in the world, if not to experience it? We only have one day!"

I stood up, looked around at the rest of them. "What kind

of people are you? Do you not see what's out your window? It's right there. How can you ignore it?"

Seventy-five mathematicians turned and glared at me, as if I were the crazy one.

"Mathematics is beautiful, too," the organizer said calmly. "It waits inside of us. In our collective mind. We are responsible for breathing its beauty into the world. How can you call yourself a mathematician and not see that?"

The bus stopped and the tour guide called out: "Peyto Lake."

I steadied myself, got off the bus. At the look-out vista, I was alone. I gripped my camera. The lake glimmered phosphorescent turquoise. Like nothing I'd ever seen. I snapped a picture. Then another.

Then, through the tiny frame of my viewfinder, Sylvia appeared. Stretched out on blue satin sheets. Her husband on top of her. He was old, flabby, balding, but she clung to him. Pressed herself hard against him. She loved him. That's what she was doing. That's what she was feeling. She loved him.

And I was at their bedroom window.

Unable to look away.

I snapped another picture.

The organizer was waiting outside the bus to tell me they were cutting the tour short.

"You're right," he said, glancing around. "The glaciers are magnificent. But we'll have to see them another time. Krauss and Rinaldi have just proved a new theorem. If we turn back now, there's still time for one more lecture tonight. They can clean up the loose ends before everyone leaves tomorrow. Everyone agrees it's the right way to end such an extraordinary event."

I looked north up the lonely highway. The Columbia Icefield was still fifty miles away.

"I want to see the Icefield," I said.

"Sorry," he said. "We're going back to Banff."

Back in my seat, I gritted my teeth and closed my eyes. What is beauty? There is no definition. No absolute.

I tried to conjure a pure moment of Taylor playing Mozart. Tried to remember the last time I was in an art museum. But soon I was lost in a phantom memory from first-year abstract algebra.

Galois theory.

Such seductive mathematics from such simple beginnings: a basic desire to understand polygons and polynomials. From that, intricate abstraction and discovery: connections between apparently disparate structures. The result: dissonant forms woven together, forever, in rich lattice arrangements.

Like ice crystals of truth.

I checked out of the Banff Centre as soon as we returned and cancelled my flight to Ann Arbor.

"When should I book your new return?" the airline operator asked.

"Cancel it," I said. "No return."

I checked into a small motel near the diner where Taylor and I had eaten burgers and first talked about the glaciers. I called the tour bus company from my room, reserved a single ticket for the next glacier tour. And the one after that.

"Every day," I said. "I want a seat on the glacier tour every day until the end of the season."

"Might make more sense for you to drive the bus yourself, don't you think?" the man said, then laughed.

It was two years later. Maybe three. The diner was full of locals. They sat in pairs and small groups, poker-faced. There was a girl, about fifteen, sitting with her parents in a booth near the back. She had red hair and freckles. Her hand rested on a well-worn paperback novel. She caressed it. Her mother was gray-headed, wore a denim jacket, deep ridges framed her face. Her father sat with his back to me, a cowboy hat atop his head. He was scolding the girl about the book, telling her to put it away while they ate.

I couldn't stop staring at the family. I felt the pressure of the girl's fingertips on the book. She was desperate to open it—I could feel her anticipation, desire—to lose herself in a world unlike her own. As she gripped the book, she bottled her yearning, folded herself in. I could see her getting smaller.

What did the girl know—right then—about herself, about everything that mattered to her, that in ten years' time might be lost? Warped. Her purity blackened and twisted until there was nothing inside her but irrepressible hunger and need, and for what, she might never be certain.

I stood and raised my camera. Zoomed in on her face. Before anyone could react, she showed me everything. Her fear, dread, hatred, hope, love: all of it.

And I took it. Snapped and captured it. I moved closer, my shutter firing like an automatic weapon.

Her mother yelled, but I didn't hear what. I kept snapping, moving closer, until I was just a foot from the girl's face. I eased the camera down; my naked eye met hers. By then, she was lit from the inside. She understood. I'm sure she did. That remarkable first moment when someone has seen you, all the way to the core. It doesn't matter how long it lasts. It doesn't matter what happens next.

Then her father's hands fell on my shoulders. Lifting, gripping, carrying. He pushed me out of the diner, and I hit the concrete hard. Pain ricocheted through muscle and bone. I protected my camera as he hovered above me, his boot toe inches from my face.

"What are you, some kind of pervert? That's my daughter. Get the hell out of here!"

He spat on the ground, then went back inside, slamming the door behind him.

As I stood up, I felt the pain, the ache in my hip that would settle and stay. For years, as I drove that tour bus up and down the Icefields Parkway, thinking about algebraic geometry, scribbling in little notebooks in diners and coffee shops. An old, singular woman with a camera. For years, I would feel that ache in my hip and remember. The young girl sitting up so straight. Squaring her shoulders, clutching her paperback to her chest.

She beamed and she posed for me that day. And forever, I would hold the beauty inside.

GLAD YOU'RE HERE

Walk into the rooms, and you can imagine every single person with a drink in hand. Kathleen used to make a game of it: the woman in the Lululemon yoga pants—Chardonnay, and Oxy when she could get it. Colt 45s for him, obviously. That one was Bombay gin; the one next to her, Wild Turkey straight from the bottle. That one—anything he could get his hands on. Some were disciplined about their drinking, systematic. "It was almost like going to a job, at the end," Cheryl said. "Sometimes the wine made me gag, but I drank it anyway, like I'd punched a time card." Others drank around the clock. There was never a moment they weren't drinking or passed out. Kathleen couldn't have imagined ever getting that bad, but the end result was the same for everyone, arriving at a place you couldn't have imagined.

People relapsed. It happened. You went out, you came back in. You told your story, and the old-timers nodded. The newcomers' eyes got big. It was true what they said: it never went well if you went out. Still, people went out, no matter what anyone said. *Go ahead, try that controlled drinking, see where it gets you.* You thought you could handle it, you weren't *really* an alcoholic, you'd never had a drink before noon or gotten a DUI—whatever your particular unchecked box was. It was easy enough to move the lines you thought you'd never cross. Nudge them with your pointed toe. See? I'm still over here, behind this new and improved line. There was always a reason, always a rationalization. *Squirrels in a cage,* people said, tapping their heads. That was the problem. Round and round. But eventually you checked off something or you wouldn't have walked through that door in the first place.

No reservations meant you don't pick up, no matter what. You don't drink even if your dog dies, or you break up with your boyfriend, or you get laid off. All of those things had happened to Kathleen, but she didn't drink until this thing.

The day of the accident, Kathleen went to the nooner at All Saints to pick up her seven-year chip. Hugs and cheers. Everyone passed the coin around to put their mojo on it. People with less than a year held the coin with reverence, rubbing it between thumb and fingers before passing it to the next person, although a sullen kid who was there to get his court slip signed handed it off without looking at it. But that was okay. Kathleen sent a compassionate thought to the kid. Maybe he'd hear something to bring him back after the order was lifted. Maybe not.

She knew everyone in the room, except for one girl. People perked up whenever someone new came in. "My name is Jacqueline," the girl said. "I'm an alcoholic and an addict." Jacqueline just finished a fifteen-month prison sentence. She said she was grateful to the cops who arrested her. She needed to be in that cell. She went to two meetings a week in prison—that's all they had. After prison, Jacqueline spent a month at the treatment center. "I learned I'm a survivor. And I learned about boundaries. You know about those?" Everyone laughed, shook their heads. "Boundaries," she said again, marveling. "Now *that's* some hard-core shit."

What shocks you when you first go into the rooms is the party atmosphere. Everyone telling stories and laughing. Then someone spills their guts, recounts their sins, weeps. "We tell on ourselves," Paul liked to say, "and everyone listens." These people—they knew life inside and out. They had seen it all. Prisons, hospitals, mental wards. Even the well-heeled had attempted suicide or stolen from their mothers.

"There are only two possibilities," Mae always said. "End up in an institution or end up dead."

Kathleen had never been institutionalized or dead or even arrested, but there were countless ways to fuck up your life. Her big mistake, her irrevocable act? Walking out on Rick and Stephanie, her husband and stepdaughter. Ex-husband, former stepdaughter. Or perhaps the tie to the stepchild remained even if you never saw each other again. You didn't divorce the child. But you did lose her. Rick had given her an ultimatum: him and Steph, or alcohol. Kathleen said she just needed some time to figure some things out, but when she moved into her own apartment she felt—relieved. Now there'd be no recriminations, no

nagging, no carpool duty ("Buzzed driving is drunk driving," the billboard proclaimed, and Kathleen thought, *Really? Is that true? That can't be true.* Also knowing it was true.) Still, compared to the real horror stories, Kathleen was a high-bottom drunk. Mae was low-bottom. Her last drunk, she stuck her arm through a window. No one knew why, and she didn't either because she was in a blackout. She woke up in the hospital. Later she got a tattoo of a peacock feather to cover the scars, but you could still see the long, silver one that ran from wrist to elbow and formed the feather's shaft. When they watched TV, Kathleen took Mae's forearm in her lap and traced the feather with her fingertips. Sometimes she ran her lips along the puckered skin. Mae purred.

Kathleen was on her way home, still smiling about Jacqueline and the *boundaries* as *some hard-core shit.* Crisp fall air, blue skies, it felt as if the day were holding still. Then she came upon the street with the leaves. In this town, you raked your leaves into a pile and pushed them along the side of the street so the yard waste trucks could scoop them up. Sometimes you had to drive through the piles because there wasn't enough room for two cars to pass. In this case, though, no car had been coming.

The older brother was supposed to have been keeping an eye on his sister, who was supposed to stay out of the street. But perhaps she didn't consider it the street—the big pile of autumn leaves. She was hiding from him. She was cold. He was a good kid; he'd gone inside to get her a sweatshirt. It wasn't his fault. It wasn't the girl's fault. It wasn't Kathleen's fault. Kathleen just wanted to drive over the pile, the adult equivalent of jumping into the pile, of what the girl herself had been doing. A perfect hiding place: her brother would come out and wonder where she'd gone. *Hello? Hello?* That thrill of people looking for you, and though you can hear them looking, you stay quiet, that rushing of blood through your body, that high you get from surprising someone. The sun was shining and the big leaf pile was there and Kathleen wanted to run through it and smell it and fall into it. She

She wouldn't even have known what she'd done if the boy hadn't come running from the house. Even then, it took several moments for her to understand.

wouldn't even have known what she'd done if the boy hadn't come running from the house. Even then, it took several moments for her to understand. She thought she'd run over a bag of garbage or something. A bag of leaves underneath the leaves.

After the police report, after the hospital, after calling Mae and her lawyer and her boss, Kathleen headed to Suzy's Tavern, six blocks from her house. She didn't tell Mae that part. Mae would've come over and locked the door and wrapped her in her arms, but what Kathleen wanted was oblivion, not safekeeping, not love. And anyway, Mae was leaving town for a few days to visit her son. "You sure you don't want me to come over?" she'd said. "I'm sure," Kathleen replied. "I'm fine. Really."

"Everything is *fucked up,* and I want to get *fucked up,*" Danny once said. The last time she saw Danny he was drinking a beer on a bench outside the public library. He was talking to himself. He looked homeless; he probably was. She approached him—she wanted to tell him that she was worried about him—but he saw her and ducked his head and stumbled toward the park. And now she hadn't seen him in months. You worried about people. They disappeared for long stretches, or forever, and you worried about them. If they showed up in a meeting everyone said, Glad you're back.

No judgment. That was the best part.

But on that day, Kathleen wanted to go where the other hopeless ones had gone. She walked to Suzy's and found a corner booth. The waitress took her order. Vodka and lime. Two ice cubes.

That first sip? No lie: fucking beautiful.

Kathleen didn't know anyone at Suzy's. She hadn't lived in this neighborhood during her drinking days. She picked out the obvious regulars at the bar, one of whom had probably occupied his stool since noon. At first she worried she'd see people from the program, and then she hoped she would, but no one turned up. She ordered another vodka, and another. It was true what they said: the program ruins your drinking. You can't get that shit out of your head. Still, she persevered. *Oh yes,* she thought, after the third drink. *Yes yes yes. There it is.*

And another.

She took a little velvet pouch from her purse. The pouch itself had once held jewelry but she couldn't remember what. Maybe

her sister's necklace with the heart locket, or the bracelet Rick had given her for their fifth (and last) anniversary. She remembered the feel of it on her wrist, the heavy silver cuff, the turquoise stones. That bracelet was long gone. All the jewelry was. She removed the brightly colored coins from the pouch and one by one tucked them into a rip in the booth cushion. All except her very first 24 hour coin—it was bad luck to lose that one.

"There!" she said, when the last coin disappeared into the stuffing. The guy in the booth next to hers turned around. She smiled and he smiled back and Kathleen thought how lovely the world was with all the smiling and smiling back, how nice people were. At the same time she could feel the blackness creeping toward her. The seat had a lumpy spot now, some hard edges that hadn't been there before. She needed to get home. She paid her tab and left a twenty-dollar bill for the waitress because she had been a waitress when she was young and knew what that work was. She would've left a fifty if she'd had it. In the old days, after Rick divorced her, she would've gone home with someone, that smiling guy for instance, although it was possible he'd been sitting across from a blonde girl who had possibly rolled her eyes, Kathleen couldn't recall. But anyway the days of sleeping with strangers (boys, girls, didn't matter), those were the old days, the old Kathleen. She wasn't returning to that place; she was just visiting. She was on a day pass.

A seven-day pass, as it turned out.

At the end of a week, she called Mae. "Come get me," she said, before Mae could ask where she'd been, why she hadn't answered her texts—she was just about to come over there and make sure she hadn't fallen down. "I've fallen and I can't get up!" they often said, mocking the commercial's trademarked cry. Mae could tell right away, of course, that Kathleen had gone down that old rabbit hole. Mae picked her up at Suzy's and got her through that night, the vomiting and the rest of it. She called Grace Lane Treatment Center and arranged a spin dry. "Overkill," Kathleen complained. "Better safe than sorry," Mae said. Grace Lane was where they'd met all those years ago, Mae with her arm bandaged from wrist to shoulder and a steely determination that even the burned-out intake specialist had respected. Kathleen often recalled her first group therapy session, how twitchy and restless she felt, her face blotchy and eyes bloodshot and rimmed with dark circles, her hair hanging dull

and limp. Mae had looked at her with fierce brown eyes until Kathleen couldn't stand it anymore and snapped, "What the hell are you staring at?" Mae smiled. "I'm staring at you, lovely girl."

On Kathleen's first night home, Mae brought over lasagna and a lemon cheesecake, and her overnight bag.

"You don't have to stay, Mae."

Mae looked at her, and that was that. She would sleep on the pullout couch, and she'd sleep there the next night, too. Soon Kathleen would be back in her routine. She was lucky; her job had excellent benefits, and she was on leave with pay. She'd go back on Monday. She couldn't imagine it, filing the paperwork, updating the website, answering the phone, joking with her coworkers. Would they still joke, or would they act weird around her now? Maybe they preferred the temp. Kathleen decided to make her famous chocolate chip muffins. She would win everybody back with those muffins. She'd clean the break room, add toner to the printers, fix the copier jams. She'd make herself indispensable so they would love her again.

She shook her head. There went the squirrels in the cage again, round and round.

Kathleen had that scrubbed, restless, post-rehab feeling. She walked around the house picking things up and putting them down again. After dinner she got out a deck of playing cards. "Walter taught me how to play gin rummy," she said.

"Walter was there? Walter who blacked out and woke up naked on a beach in Baja?"

"That's the one."

"I'm surprised he's still alive."

They nodded, meaning: "I'm surprised any of us is still alive."

Card games were like jokes; Kathleen could never remember how they went. So while it was still fresh in her mind, she explained gin rummy to Mae, who remembered everything. Every punch line, every recipe, every aphorism, and also many baseball statistics that Kathleen forbade her from reciting, unless she was trying to fall asleep.

"Derrick is planning to build one of those tiny houses."

Derrick was Mae's son. He was twenty-three. Kathleen remembered when Derrick was seventeen and gangly. He used to break-dance on street corners; crowds would gather and throw

money into the shoebox that he'd lined with velvet. He'd filled out since then. He was huge. He probably weighed two hundred and fifty pounds.

"Derrick is too big for two hundred square feet. You're tiny, and *you're* too big for a tiny house."

"Gin," Mae said, laying out her cards with a flourish. Kathleen stuck out her tongue. Mae smiled. "He wants to get rid of his material goods. He says it's a spiritual thing."

"Ah, youth."

"Says the forty-two-year-old." Mae was fifty-six. "Okay, enough cards. Time for some bad TV. There's a Lifetime movie on"—she waggled her eyebrows—"and I'm going to make popcorn with way too much butter."

Mae moved around the kitchen. She knew where everything was. She poured oil and kernels into the big soup pot and loaded plates into the dishwasher. The kitchen looked strange to Kathleen after her time away. The clock wasn't the right clock; she was used to the big blue clock that hung in the lounge where right now the night supervisor—it was Thursday, Beth's shift—would turn on the TV until lights out. Beth had thirty-two years and called everyone Sweetheart. Ashley would be on the couch, waiting for *Cops* to start. Who would be sitting next to her, in Kathleen's spot? Poor Ashley, sucking on cold washcloths because in addition to being an alcoholic she was anorexic and her gums often bled. The next day would begin with med call, duty assignments, breakfast, meditation, and then the morning lecture and group therapy and break and lunch and homework and fitness and dinner and a 12-step meeting and TV in the lounge till lights out.

The schedule holds the day, Kathleen thought. The day holds the moments. This moment holds this kitchen, where the breadbox holds the bread, and the cabinet holds the plates, and the canister holds the coffee, and the vase holds the flowers. And the friend holds me.

The tiny house holds the big man.

The rooms hold the secrets.

The leaf pile holds the girl.

"Containers," she said, when Mae asked what she was thinking about. "What are those Russian nesting dolls called?"

"*Matryoshka!*" Mae shouted, like *Bingo!* Crossword puzzles were one of the things she'd started doing when she first had all

that free time on her hands. The record, she said, was fifty-one dolls. Fifty dolls inside dolls inside dolls inside one BIG doll. Can you imagine?

"Yes," Kathleen said. Selves within selves.

Mae filled a big bowl with popcorn. She set it on the table. "You doing okay, honey? You want to talk about any of it?"

So much talking. So much sitting. So much thinking.

"'Would I lie to you,'" Kathleen said.

Mae smiled. "You got it." She found the song on her iPod and hooked it up to the speaker. After the Eurythmics, they danced to Tina Turner's "Better Be Good to Me" twice and Blondie's "One Way or Another." They did their moves from Zumba class at the Y.

"It's a super harvest moon tonight," Mae said. She'd been reading about it. "Super bright and super round. Closest to the equinox." They went outside so they could look at the big, fat moon, and they slow-danced to Neil Young's "Harvest Moon," then "Long May You Run," and they sang, Kathleen right on key and Mae nowhere near it, *Long may you run, long may you run, although these changes have come*.

"You know what I learned in rehab?" Kathleen asked. "That song is about Neil's first hearse. He bought it when he was twenty. He used it to carry equipment to his gigs." Mae smiled and lifted her arms and waved them slowly, the peacock feather luminous, the scars shining like silver rivers.

It had taken a long time for Kathleen to learn to dance sober. Dancing and sex had both been difficult. People talked about that, about all the things they didn't know how to do. Balance checkbooks, buy groceries—the basics, for a lot of people. Kathleen wondered how they had managed. She had managed fine, until she hadn't. For Kathleen, it had been a warm sunny trail that led gradually into dark woods, where she'd curled up inside the hollow of a dead log, breathing in the smell of damp decay and never wanting to get up. Still she'd gone to work every day, priding herself on never

She had managed fine, until she hadn't. For Kathleen, it had been a warm sunny trail that led gradually into dark woods.

calling in sick no matter how sick she was. She paid her bills on time and cleaned her apartment once a week. She cruised along in low gear on her high bottom. Then one morning, she stood in line at Starbucks waiting to order her triple-shot iced latte, head pounding, promising herself as she did every morning that she wouldn't drink that night, she'd take a break, she could go without a drink for one night—of course she could—maybe two nights, but she'd start with one, and this time she'd really do it, she really really really would, and then she overheard the woman behind her say to her friend in a laid-low voice, "I'm just so sick and tired of being sick and tired," and that's when Kathleen stepped out of line and went to get help.

The little girl lived. Her name was Fleur. She was eight. She would be in her own rehab center for a while yet. But she was a fighter, her mother said. Her mother didn't blame Kathleen, she blamed herself. Everyone in the scenario blamed themselves. Each person had a different story that was also the same story.

Bad shit happens even when you're sober, Paul liked to say. Getting sober doesn't solve everything. There's still sorrow and fear and anxiety, only now you have to really feel it. Now Kathleen had to feel it. Relive it. Replay that moment over and over in her head, forever. She knew how it would go, how eventually it would become a familiar, almost comfortable presence, the way you get used to a recurring nightmare and say to yourself while you're in the nightmare, it's okay, you're just dreaming, you'll wake up soon. So now there would always be that crisp day, laughing about *boundaries* as *some hard-core shit,* velvet pouch on the passenger seat, blue skies, pile of leaves. She couldn't have known that Fleur was there, curled up in her dark place, covering her mouth to stop the giggles. *Quiet, quiet, or he'll hear you.* And the strange bump under Kathleen's tires, and the boy running from the house, screaming, and Kathleen thinking he was mad at her for wrecking his pile. And then he plunged into the leaves. And then he lifted up the girl. Kathleen couldn't understand at first what was happening, what it was he was carrying in his arms. He yelled at her to call 911 and the yelling, though loud, came from far away. No, she thought, I don't want to, I shouldn't have to, I can't. She fought the desire to drive away. You are going to have to see this one through,

she told herself. She fumbled for her phone. She pressed the numbers. She tried to ignore the terrible but somehow familiar thought that had risen in her.

Oh good. I've killed a child. Now I can drink.

That she could think such a thing. That she felt almost—glad.

There was Fleur, inert in her brother's arms. And there was Steph, holding Rick's hand. Crying, begging Kathleen not to leave her. But she did leave. She wanted to and she did. Rick and Stephanie moved back east, where his parents lived. He was right to never let Kathleen see or talk to his daughter again. When she got out of rehab that first time, she wrote him a letter. He didn't respond. She was doing her ninth step so she wrote another. He returned the letter, unopened. "You don't get to decide, now that you're better, that it's time for us to forgive you," he'd scrawled on the back of the envelope.

Steph would be almost eighteen now. She had spent more years with Kathleen than with her own mother. But she had also spent more years without Kathleen than with her. People talked about their AA family because a lot of them had lost the other kind.

Tomorrow she and Mae would go to the seven a.m. Eye Opener at the Presbyterian Church. They'd arrive early, make the coffee, set up the chairs. She'd share first because people would be wondering. Sometimes you dropped pronouns, verbs, and just said, "Kathleen, alcoholic." And the chorus of voices: *Hi, Kathleen*. Everyone would clap just because she'd brought her damaged self into the room and rejoined the circle. She didn't have to do anything but show up. Who else would forgive the unforgiveable except her fellow sinners? The regulars would be there, Paul and William and Cheryl, and maybe even Danny. Maybe he'd returned while she was away. She hoped so. Welcome back, Danny, she'd say. I'm glad you're here.

WELCOME TO YOUR FAMILY

Christmas music at the mall, plastic reindeer in the neighborhood. Cards crowd the mantle with pictures of everyone's merry children, sending tidings of joy and minor sports triumphs. At the airport, the holiday travelers funnel through—the excited, the weary, the primed-for-disappointment. Dora, the baby, travels from room to room in her portable bassinet, in her six-week-old world of light and movement, her parents' faces looming large and important, like in an Ingmar Bergman film. Someone has sent her a red-and-green knit hat with a bell. Someone else has sent her a board book called *Baby's First Hanukkah.*

Four years ago, Jack Keeling left his software-development job, and his estranged wife, and began teaching math at a progressive private high school. Tracy Goldman, five-year-veteran English teacher, coached him through. They went out for beers on Friday afternoons, spent the weekends grading together, shoving stacks of student essays and trig tests aside to have sex on Tracy's couch. Two summers later they married at the courthouse, with the assistant principal and her husband serving as witnesses. Jack didn't want to suffer through a second wedding. Tracy had never wanted one to begin with.

So now, in this winter-break stretch spanning Christmas and New Year's, their families are coming together to meet the baby, and also to meet each other for the first time. There's Jack's brother, Peter; his wife, Michelle; and kids, Christina and Luke. A blond, big-boned, toothy clan: the adults outfitted with it's-all-good smiles, the kids on the verge of adolescent blowout. They squeeze into Jack and Tracy's bungalow: the pull-out futon in the upstairs office for Peter and Michelle, sleeping bags on the floor of the basement family room for Christina and Luke.

A few doors down, at the house of some neighbors away for the holidays, Tracy's mother, Ruth, who carries her widowhood like a hernia, is staying along with Tracy's sister, Jessica; her husband, David; and six-year-old Ari. They're a slight, brood-

ing, olive-skinned trio, as dedicated to sulking as the Keelings are to aggressive cheer.

And finally, staying at a hotel—a nice one, with fluffy robes and chocolates on the pillows—Jack's parents, Adele and Nicholas. They are pasty-skinned, in Brooks Brothers clothes. They have money they don't mind spending on their own comfort.

"It's supposed to be a vacation," Jack had said to Tracy before the Christmas plans were set, when they were counting their daughter's life in days. "I'm not sure we should have everyone at once."

"Who do you want to say no to?"

"How about all of them. Just to be fair."

"Don't worry, she's our alibi." Tracy stroked the baby's cone head. "We'll hand her over and then go hole up in the bedroom. Let everyone get to know each other, or kill each other, or whatever."

"Did you hear that, Dora?" Jack cupped his hands into a megaphone. "We're sending you out as our envoy. Just call if you need a wire transfer. Or military assistance."

Dora started in with her frantic head-banger moves, which meant it was time for Tracy to unlatch the giant nursing bra. She steeled herself for the pain the lactation consultant told her she shouldn't have if the baby was feeding correctly. Jack sat back against the couch pillows and watched Tracy wince. He restrained himself from further commentary on the proposed familial onslaught.

"Remember, she's the boss," the OB had said to him at one of Tracy's prenatal visits when they were discussing the birth plan. How was he supposed to respond to that? *Yes, Ma'am. If she changes her mind and demands an epidural, I'll bring it in on a tray with a cup of coffee and a vase of fresh flowers.* A month later he sat uselessly in the hospital room for hours, patting Tracy's back while she sucked wild-eyed on popsicles and screamed her labor screams. He'd wanted to seize power, demand a stop to this archaic-seeming ordeal. What was wrong with a nice, efficient C-section? He couldn't help feeling that his wife, the CEO, was dying, and he was just an incompetent, low-level employee, watching it happen.

They overwhelm the small living room—the Keelings and the Goldmans—three generations of eyes and mouths, hair and

noses, skin tones and face shapes. The baby has been scrutinized for inherited traits and deemed a mongrel by Nicholas, her paternal grandfather. In her Christmasy hat, she perches on Tracy's mother's lap, an air of aloofness in her rainwater eyes. Ruth removes the hat, smoothes Dora's brown fuzz. It upsets her, the tree in the corner, delicately adorned and unassuming as it is (tiny white lights, a laughing Buddha instead of an angel on top). She still can't accept that such a thing stands in her daughter's house. The fact that Jack was raised Unitarian and thinks Jesus was nothing more than a do-gooder type who came to an unfortunate end makes it only a little bit better for Ruth.

The fact that Jack was raised Unitarian and thinks Jesus was nothing more than a do-gooder type who came to an unfortunate end makes it only a little bit better for Ruth.

"You're Jewish," she'll whisper later to the baby, when they can be alone. "Dorit. Which means *generation*. Of this era." When she'd asked, Tracy had said vaguely that Dorit was Dora's Hebrew name. But Ruth knew there'd been no naming ceremony, no rabbi's blessing. The child was adrift in this world.

"My turn," Peter says, sticking his arms out. "Hand her over." Ruth reluctantly relinquishes her granddaughter to this louder, burlier version of her son-in-law.

"What do you think, hon?" Peter addresses Michelle. "Should we make another one?"

Michelle smiles with her preternaturally white teeth. "I always wanted three."

"Oh my god," Christina says.

"Aren't you too old?" Luke says, which makes Peter laugh and Michelle's smile waver.

Luke and Christina, eleven and thirteen, are used to spending winter break at their other grandparents' house, in Florida, at the beach. A new infant cousin doesn't make up for being stuck in a small Oregon town instead, in a house that doesn't even have a TV. They have three cousins already, on their mother's side, close to them in age, and with the benefits of a ping-pong table, the latest generation Xbox, a cupboard full of non-organic snack food, and parents too preoccupied with their own affairs to worry about what the kids are doing.

The little boy, Ari, technically not their cousin, hangs shyly around Luke, hoping for attention from this boy almost twice his age and height, who carries around his own phone and has a dog back at home. Ari would like to have a brother, an older brother, if such a thing were possible, through some form of time travel perhaps. He isn't sure exactly how babies are made, but he knows it has something to do with the mother and father being close to each other, loving each other. His own don't sleep in the same bed anymore. When the cleaning lady comes over, they take the sheets off the couch in the family room so she won't suspect that his dad has been sleeping there.

"So what does everybody want for Christmas?" Nicholas says in his booming, Santa-Claus-for-hire voice.

"Not everybody's Christian," Christina says.

"He meant Christmas in the secular, materialistic sense," Jack says. "Right, Dad?"

"Everyone's so sensitive these days." Nicholas looks at Luke, as if his grandson will back him up on this assessment. "No one's opposed to presents, right? Everyone's getting presents?"

"They'd better be," Luke says. "And not cheap, educational crap either."

"Good health," Ruth mumbles, from her corner of the couch. "That's all we should wish for." It's been nearly two years since her husband died from the cancer that invaded his brain. If he were here, he would lie next to her in bed later that night, eloquently bemoaning the shallowness of these people. *Oh, Ruthie,* he would sigh. *When the Israelites came out from Egypt, they had nothing at all.*

By ten o'clock on Christmas morning, the living room is a wreck of wrapping paper and ribbons, cards and gift tags tossed aside in the rush to get to the goods, which pile up in colorful, half-forgotten heaps. Midway through the rampage, Dora starts crying, which gives Tracy an excuse to leave the room and go nurse her: a dubious privilege. Though she's finally toughened up a bit to the job required (now she understands the origin of the expression *tough titties*), it still feels more unpleasant than plucking her eyebrows. What is this breastfeeding bliss she's heard tell about?

Five minutes in, her sister knocks on the bedroom door. Jessica is skinny as ever in her eighties-style denim jacket and jeans, a look that used to be cool but that now screams suburban

Jewish mom who's trying too hard. They haven't talked, just the two of them, since Jessica arrived. And it's been years since they've been close. They used to sit on each other's bed while Jessica, three years older, would warn about all of the boys she should steer clear of in a way that made Tracy ache to feel their depraved hands on her skin. Jessica was bold and forthcoming then—not so nice to Tracy as a general rule, but her freely dispensed worldly wisdom made up for it. Tracy was the one who loved to read, but it was Jessica who could tell stories. And then she left home, went to college and business school, got married, and became tightlipped and parochial.

"She seems to be nursing well," Jessica says, leaning over Tracy and Dora in the glider. "So sweet. I miss it."

"Really? I can't wait to go back to keeping my boobs to myself."

"It'll get better," Jessica says vaguely. What everyone says.

"Do you think you'll have another one?" Tracy asks. Also, she knows, what everyone says to the mother of one child.

"I doubt it," Jessica says.

"You don't want to? Or David doesn't?"

"I don't know what he wants anymore."

Tracy looks at the trembling corner of Jessica's mouth with a sliver of hope. Maybe she can finally get something raw and real out of her sister again.

"It's a little weird, having Christmas," Jessica says finally. "You don't mind?"

"It's nothing: a bunch of presents, some chocolate Santa Clauses."

"Tell that to Mom."

"She has to learn to accept it. I didn't marry Michael Rosenberg. I'm with Jack, the atheist, who thinks having a tree in your living room once a year is kind of nice."

"Since Dad died, I'm the one who listens to her all the time. All her grievances."

"I know," Tracy says, trying to be patient.

"You could call her more often." Jessica sweeps her springy curls away from her face and crams them into the scrunchy she keeps ready on her wrist. It's an action so old, so *her,* that Tracy suddenly sees it as a mark of character: her sister trying to control a force that can't possibly be controlled.

"I call her once a week. Usually."

"She's our mother. We should be grateful for everything she's done for us."

"Jesus, what happened to you?" This is about as long as Tracy's patience lasts these days. "You used to be a slut, not a priss."

"Don't be mean to me, please." Jessica's face crumples, her heavily lined eyes welling up.

"I was joking, Jess. I'm sorry."

"Everything's falling apart."

"You mean with David?"

"We're barely even speaking to each other."

"What happened?"

"I don't want to discuss the details right now."

But the details are everything, as Tracy's constantly reminding the high school students in her English classes. The details are what count. Without details, you can't expect people to care about anything you have to say.

"Well, how's Ari doing? It must be hard, dealing with relationship stuff with a kid."

"We don't discuss it with him. Obviously."

"No, but kids pick up on things. Look, I'm asking for my own future reference. What do you say to a kid when you're fighting with his dad?"

"You don't say anything. You keep things as normal as possible."

During their father's illness and his dying, Jessica managed most things with a professional competence that Tracy was thankful for, but sometimes she'd wished her sister would want to talk about existential angst instead of estate planning, would just admit that the well-meaning hospice nurse was incredibly dumb.

"Don't look at me like that," Jessica says.

"Like what?"

"Like you'll be such an open and honest parent all the time." Jessica points an accusatory finger at Dora. "You'll lie to her too. Don't think you won't."

The hall closet overflows with coats, scarves, boots, hats, unmatched gloves, and makeshift sleds. The refrigerator amasses an unsavory collection of leftovers. Only Adele, mother of Jack and Peter, seems to feel the responsibility to keep things orderly,

including herself. Every morning in the hotel room, she applies her full complement of makeup while Nicholas flips through channels before settling on some golf game or WWII documentary. Adele believes people, especially women, should maintain themselves, preserve their dignity. Christina and Luke don't call her Grandma, or any of the other silly old-lady names, but by her own given name. When Dora can talk, she will do the same. Adele finds it embarrassing and, frankly, disappointing the way Ruth babies her grandson, Ari, and the way she sulks. It must be terribly difficult to lose one's husband, but Adele knows plenty of women who have, and after a time they've increased their volunteer work, planned trips with friends, signed up for extension classes at the nearby university. One need not leave one's hair untended and scowl from a corner of the couch.

At Jack and Tracy's, where the floor is always cluttered with toys and the coffee is never hot enough, Adele does what she can. She putters around, straightening books on the bookshelves, returning the perpetually left-out milk carton to the fridge. Being the mother of two boys, she should have become inured to messes long ago, but she could never quite get used to the chaos, the constant interruption and upheaval. Her life for years now has been calm, tastefully unhappy. She and Nicholas don't fight the way they used to, when the boys were still at home—mixing drinks at the bar in the basement late at night, and then laying into each other. It was a kind of sport; it made her furious and strong. When she bathed afterward, by candlelight, in the beautiful master bathroom, with its marble floor and river-stone walls, she imagined leaving everyone behind and going to live in an old farmhouse in the country: just a sturdy kitchen table, and a well-made bed, and a stone fireplace, like her grandparents had. She scrubbed herself clean; she blazed with the desire to uproot everything. But now she and Nicholas are older than her grandparents were when they died, and he's had several heart surgeries, and their calendar is full: charity events, and season tickets to the symphony and theater, and travel to the nice places one should see before one dies. After all these years, instead of arguing, Nicholas turns on the TV and Adele goes to bed early. She spreads the lavender satin eye pillow over her eyes, listens to the way the silence in the room isn't really silence. The most soundproof place in the world is actually right there in Minneapolis, in the city she lives in, a chamber built

into a laboratory, where you can hear the loud thump of your own heartbeat. You have to stay seated in that room, she read in the newspaper. Otherwise you'll get dizzy and lose your balance in the absence of exterior sound cues, in the utterly disorienting chamber of your own body.

For a year now, Adele has had a secret. A childhood friend of hers named Raymond, whom she hasn't seen since high school, got in touch with her last Christmas, and they began emailing, then talking on the phone: long, warm, flirty conversations about everything and nothing. Since his wife died five years ago, Raymond lives alone in the south of France, and he wants her to come visit. "Or you could just move in," he said last week, just before she left for Oregon. "There's plenty of room. And a view of the sea. Water blue as your eyes. I remember how blue they are." He knows, of course, that she's married, that his proposal is absurd. Still, as if there's some understanding between them, he says *Je t'aime* at the end of their conversations, and she laughs that such foolish romance, such clandestine lightness, can exist in the world. It gives her something to think about at times when she feels utterly outside of life, standing here for instance, in her younger son's ramshackle house, holding her infant granddaughter with one hand, and with the other wiping the dining room table that everyone has scattered with donut crumbs.

It's always been Ruth's way to introduce sensitive topics in public, as if she's specifically stored them up for a time when a retreat to one's private bedroom is impossible.

They're running out of food, and Tracy had planned on going to the grocery store herself. What was once a chore has become, since Dora's birth, a snatched hour of solitude. But Ruth insisted on coming along, and now, as they fill the cart to capacity (the sole benefit of this accompanied shopping trip is that her mother will pay), Ruth grills Tracy. How is she feeling, physically and mentally? Is she drinking enough fluids? Is she experiencing postpartum depression?

It's always been Ruth's way to introduce sensitive topics in public, as if she's specifically stored them up for a time when a

retreat to one's private bedroom is impossible. In department store fitting rooms, customer-service lines, and waiting rooms at doctors' offices, Tracy has endured questions about her love life, her diet, her personal relationship with Judaism, her opinions about abortion and euthanasia.

"How's Jack adjusting to fatherhood?" Ruth asks, while they're waiting for sliced cheese at the deli counter. "Is he giving you the support you need?"

Tracy hesitates. It's her policy never to criticize Jack in front of her mother or to suggest any argument between the two of them. With his non-Jewishness already a strike against him, she doesn't want to provide anything further for Ruth to file away under some banal category: *shortcomings of my second son-in-law.* And yet, these days, Tracy is feeling frustrated. She has some sympathy for Jack, certainly, having to drag himself to school every weekday morning and impersonate a smart, patient, quick-on-his-feet teacher, instead of a dazed new dad. On occasional nights he's up at whatever hour, feeding Dora from the precious stash of pumped milk, tending to her diaper. Most nights he moans like a man from whom the world is asking too much, pulls the covers over his head, and leaves Tracy to it. In any case, he hasn't retreated to sleep in a different room, like other new fathers they know, though whether that's out of loyalty to Tracy and Dora or devotion to the memory-foam mattress is up for debate. The truth is, she feels like she's doing everything. And though she won't always be the child's sole source of nourishment, she's afraid this might continue forever: the lion's share of domestic tasks falling to her, the way they do to so many women, even in the twenty-first century.

Tracy grabs a plastic deli container and begins packing it with olives. "He's really sweet with Dora," she says. "But I don't think he gets how much work it all is."

"Ach, isn't it?" Ruth gives her an encouraging smile, and Tracy softens for a moment. When she and Jessica were kids, her mother had a full-time job as a paralegal and a husband who acted like those orthodox Jewish men who believe their lives should be devoted to Talmudic study while the womenfolk take care of earthly matters. How did she handle it all?

"Make up a chart of tasks," Ruth says. "Show him in black and white how much is actually involved and ask him what he wants to do. Then pencil his name in. He's a quantitative guy. He should get that."

What he'd get, Tracy knows, is that she'd be trying to control him in the way he most hates: telling him what to do under pretense of letting him choose. What Jack loves about math is not its methodical logic but all the complex steps it takes to arrive at the solution to a problem over which he is the master.

The deli clerk hands them their cheese, and they wheel the cart over to the bakery aisle. Tracy wants it all. She wants all of the rich baked goods a breastfeeding woman deserves. She grabs an apple pie and a loaf of chocolate banana bread. Ruth, who has a history of needling her about her weight, will not say anything today, when they're shopping for a houseful of people.

"Do you think Jessica and David are okay?" Tracy asks, not wanting to violate whatever code of sisterly confidentiality she and Jessica might have left, but curious about what information she might get out of her mother.

Ruth waves away a dismissive hand that comes back up with a box of molasses cookies. "They adore Ari too much to do anything about it."

They pass the time in various familial configurations of walks around the neighborhood, sledding in the park, board games, kitchen duty, and sitting around. There's talk of snow, snow tires, summer vacation plans, cell phone plans, things you can do with kale, the next presidential election, congressional gridlock, cats, dogs, magic tricks, the tricks behind magic tricks, the opinion that there's nothing to do here, and the opinion that children who say there's nothing to do must be dull people to think that. There's checkers, Monopoly, Pictionary, Boggle. There's looking at phones and YouTube videos and broken things in the house that Peter attempts to fix and Dora's sweet, oblivious face. Each day is divided into periods of eating and not eating. Each person is divided into parts they allow others to see and parts they try to hide.

"Who's made New Year's resolutions?" Nicholas wants to know. "Who's ready to become a better person in 2012?"

"I'm gonna start lifting weights," Luke says. "Get strong enough to kick some Iranian butt."

"We're all joining the gym," Peter says. "Family membership. Right, Chris?"

Christina scowls. Her dad knows she hates exercise, sports, anything that calls attention to her body. Her weight-loss plan involves making herself throw up like her friend Amelia does.

She hasn't worked up the nerve yet, but in the new year she's resolved to do it.

"Who else?" Nicholas says. "Jessica? David?"

Jessica and Ari are doing a puzzle on the dining room table: the solar system in two hundred pieces, which she agreed to work on with him after Luke said no. It pains Jessica to see her son keep hanging on Luke, begging for attention from this awful boy, who responds in a gruff way that Ari is old enough to understand as a rebuff, though he's not old enough yet to quit trying.

"I want to do more for others," she says. "Volunteer at the soup kitchen, like I've been meaning to do."

Sitting behind a newspaper at the other end of the table, David flinches at her piety. If she wants to do more for others, she could start with her own family, consider letting his increasingly frail mother move in with them, instead of blowing up whenever he mentions it.

"I'm going to get things in order," he says, because something is clearly expected of him now. "Clear out all the clutter."

"Noble pursuits," Nicholas says. "Now how will you all stick to them? Every year my wife resolves to bring me breakfast in bed, but does she do it?"

"Don't listen to him," Adele says.

I'm not, Ruth thinks. She's had enough of his bluster, his obnoxious jokes. "What about you?" She looks up at Nicholas, into the face that must have been handsome once and that still shines with arrogance. "How do you plan to improve yourself?"

"Do I need improving? I see you think I do," he laughs. "What would you suggest?"

"If you don't know, I can't tell you."

Nicholas laughs again, the kind of booming laugh deployed as a ready shield to deflect any arrow of criticism. He turns to Peter and strikes up a conversation about fantasy baseball.

Adele hasn't been asked what her real New Year's resolutions are, and in that moment she makes one. Somehow, she will see Raymond this year. Fly to France, sit down across a table from him, look into his eyes, and listen to the voice inside herself that will say she is crazy for going there, or crazy to go back home.

Colorful foil horns and take-out Chinese food. Pale ale and Pepto-Bismol. The indignity of not having a TV in the house on

New Year's Eve has been remedied by David, who's unplugged the neighbors' nineteen-inch Panasonic and carried it over to Jack and Tracy's, set it up in a place of honor in the living room. Now everyone can watch that stupid ball descend into Times Square, people screaming for no reason, for the one-digit change in the Gregorian calendar. Jack wants to object—*leave Alan and Betty's TV alone!*—but he feels a little sorry for David, whom no one in the assembled company seems to take much interest in. So let him have his one triumph. Let everyone do what everyone does on New Year's Eve: same old, same old.

Now everyone can watch that stupid ball descend into Times Square, people screaming for no reason, for the one-digit change in the Gregorian calendar.

Peter and Michelle sit shoulder to shoulder on the couch, cozying into conversation about the celebrities at the on-screen bash. On the floor, Christina and Luke text furiously. Ari rests against Jessica, determined to stay up until midnight. And Dora is awake again, with her late-night burst of cranky energy. Jack carries her into the kitchen, where Adele is putting silverware away. "Mom, you don't have to do that," he says.

"Who will do it then?" she protests. She touches Dora's cheek, the shocking softness. "Do you ever talk to Claire?" she asks.

Jack's surprised at the question. They haven't mentioned his ex-wife since he'd started seeing Tracy, before the divorce was finalized.

"No. It was a pretty clean break. What made you think of her?"

"I was just thinking that it took courage to start over again like you did," Adele says. "New job. New wife."

Jack laughs. "When you put it that way, it sounds callous. I don't know that I'm brave. It might be that I just didn't try hard enough." Dora squawks, and he shuttles into motion. "She wants me to keep moving." He begins swinging her, toward Adele, then toward the refrigerator; Adele-bound, then fridge-bound again.

When Dora was born, he did think of Claire. During their last real fight, before they settled into the cold, final certainty of separation, she'd screamed about wanting to have a baby

with him, how she might never have one now. He hoped that wouldn't turn out to be true.

"It's time!" Michelle calls from the living room. "Adele. Jack." And they're drawn to the TV, to the countdown, like everyone else. "Ten-nine-eight-seven-six-five-four-three-two-one." As if the new year is a space shuttle about to blast them into a different zone of being. Only for Dora, Jack thinks. Only she will change that much in one year.

"Let's toast," Peter says, pouring champagne into assorted glasses, Martinelli's cider for the kids. "To the newest member of this great extended family. To Dora Keeling!"

Jack notices Ruth flinch, as if her granddaughter's full name hurts her. Tracy had suggested once, near the end of her pregnancy, that they might give their daughter her own last name, her dead father's name. But Jack was bothered by the idea. Tracy carried their child in her body, was going to give birth to her. Let his daughter at least have his name.

Everyone clinks glasses, sips quietly, as the TV dance party rages on.

"Right now," Luke says. "Now the psycho killer's gonna break down the door and shoot us all."

"What are you talking about?" Christina shrieks.

"That's when it always happens," Luke says. "When everybody's happy and celebrating and not thinking they're going to die."

Around twelve thirty, when the party breaks up, Jack and Tracy dress for bed the way they do now, since the baby. They used to sleep naked, had declared to each other, as part of their private marriage vows, that they always would. But if you have to get up multiple times on a cold winter night, it turns out it's best to be fully clad in flannel pajamas and wool socks. They kiss chastely and say goodnight, then roll their separate ways in bed. Just after three a.m., Dora awakens, bleats her milk-starved bleat. Tracy brings her into bed, pulls her own pajama top up, and glances at the clock radio with its glowing announcement of the hour. A friend had told her it was best not to look at the time when the baby woke you in the middle of the night, that it just made you feel more exhausted to know. But Tracy can't not look. One day at school last year, when she returned to her classroom after lunch, she found that some prankster had cov-

ered up the clock face with a homemade sign: "Time Does Not Exist." She kept it up there for the rest of the day, as a philosophy lesson, but it drove her crazy; she gave herself an F.

Jack stirs and strokes Tracy's arm, and she sighs, flinching at the tug of Dora's unforgiving mouth. "Why did we do this?"

"You mean have a baby? Or let everyone come here?"

"Well, both. But at least she's cute," Tracy says.

"Yeah, imagine if we'd had an ugly baby."

"But do you think we'd even recognize it? Maybe she's not really that cute."

"No, she's very objectively cute." Jack's still stroking Tracy's arm, from the shoulder on down, and then gripping her wrist tight, and she's hit with a charge she hasn't felt since before Dora was born: the effect his body can have on her body.

"I just keep stupidly hoping that they'll become people I can actually talk to," she says.

"No, they're stuck being a bunch of sourpuss Jews."

Tracy pulls her arm away. "Well, your family's a bunch of out-of-touch WASPs."

"Hey, it was a joke."

"Yeah, it was as funny as your dad's."

Dora's sucking has stopped, her eyes shut up tight. Tracy lays her back down in the bassinet. In her long white sleep sack, she looks like the angel that's missing from their Christmas tree. Is it wrong to feel the most affection for her daughter at this moment, when she's absent from the sentient world, in need of nothing and no one? Back in bed, Jack's body gives off heat. "We've made our own family," he says.

Tracy could press against him, draw that heat into herself. Enough time has passed; the bleeding ended weeks ago. Instead she lies still, thinking of her father. He comes to her at night, the way he looked in his hospital bed—desperately ill, his lecturing voice silenced, his solemn expression gone slack. Even when he was well, even knowing him for thirty years, she didn't know what, if anything, truly brought him any joy.

The parade of goodbyes seems to lighten people's moods, or Jack's anyway. "Be well! Thanks for coming!" he says, doling out hugs as everyone sets out for the airport. Ruth is the last to leave. Unlike the others, cheerful in the face of farewell for who knows how long, Ruth, who has made plans to visit again in

three months to see her granddaughter, dissolves in tears. She stoops down over Dora, who's nodding off in her swing, then comes back up with a wince and a moan: emotional torment, plus bad knees.

"Take good care of this darling," she says.

"We will," Jack says tightly.

"And of my daughter," Ruth adds. "She's tired and she doesn't have any family here, any community, to help out."

"Mom," Tracy says. Her face is sallow, depleted. Her hair stands out from her scalp. She looks like her mother.

"We're doing fine," Jack says. "Oh, and have you noticed how great things are going with your other daughter and her nice little family?" He knows he shouldn't, but he can't help himself. "They can't stand to look at each other, but they live fifteen minutes away from you in the great state of New Jersey, and they go to temple every Saturday."

"Jack." Tracy's mouth is turning down. She's preparing to cry the way she does, as if everything's his fault.

Ruth's tears have stopped. "It's lonely, isn't it?" she says, matching Jack's hard stare with her own. "Being better than everyone else? Believe me. I know very well. I know what loneliness is."

January 3: a date steeped in doom. It ends here—the winter vacation that had seemed so long and luxurious at the start. Jack hurries out the door before seven to scrape ice and snow off the car. The day stretches in front of him, one of those days where he wonders what he'd been thinking, trading his well-paying, moderately stressful, slightly boring job for teaching high school. Now that he has a child himself, he has no energy for other people's children, for the combination of teen drama and general laziness that gets in the way of what is supposed to be their work—but many of them don't see it that way. They're kids, not colleagues, and today he feels defeated already by that fact.

Tracy is taking this whole year off from teaching, a privilege they had planned for, saved for, but hearing Jack's car start up while she sits on the couch with Dora, she wishes that she were headed back too. She misses talking about books, even the same old books, accompanied by the commentary and questions she's heard herself repeat so many times, and the mixed reactions of

students, some of whom see reading as a lifeline and others who see it as a death sentence. At least students are people whose brains have developed enough—for the most part—to imagine other worlds, articulate coherent thoughts. If only she had a nanny, or better yet, a mother nearby: not hers, certainly, but one like her friend Dana's mother, wonderfully sane and thoroughly capable, who would come over during the day and take care of the baby for free.

It'll go by so fast, both Ruth and Adele had said to Tracy, as if they were confiding some profound insight, some realization about parenting that had never been voiced before. *Enjoy it*. As much a rebuke as a blessing. Okay, so they're getting to be old women—they have the right to be wistful about the passage of time, to romanticize the babyhoods of their practically middle-aged adult children. But it doesn't feel fast to Tracy. It feels slow as snow falling.

"What do you think?" she says aloud to Dora. "Anything at all. Just whatever's on your mind."

It's quiet but for the rush of the furnace shuttling into gear. They live off the main road, away from traffic. The neighbors who keep pets have quiet cats, nary a barking dog on the street. The mail carrier doesn't come by till late afternoon. Tracy sets the baby down on the couch, where, being too young to do anything but flutter her hands and feet, she will stay put.

Dora looks up—not a blank look, not a dumb look. In just these two weeks, her vision has sharpened. Colors are coming in. The red of her mother's bathrobe, the blue of the couch cushions. And distance, too, a sense of how matter aligns itself in air. The branches of the Christmas tree have assumed a branch-like structure, definition instead of blur. Dora can focus her eyes and track the movement of objects. She can see the strings of lights, descending from the tree now and disappearing into a box. The front door opens to whiteness, a blast of cold. The tree moves farther and farther away until it's out of sight. For a moment she's alone. Where to look? Where to look?

And then—ah, there it is. That face, returning. The most familiar thing, and still for now, for that reason, the most interesting thing, the most pleasing thing. She looks and looks as if she can't get enough, as if her mother's face tells her everything she needs to know.

SONYA BILOCERKOWYCZ

SAMIZDAT: A PRIVATE COLLECTION

I.
The Land of Green Plums
by Herta Müller, 1994
Circulation: global

When I am reading about the green plums, I am in the Black Hills of South Dakota, the land of ponderosa pines. I have never seen a plum here, although I'm told they exist. The only native fruits I know are small, desperate berries. I tend to assume that anything larger than a chokecherry is imported.

Herta Müller's universe is 5,500 miles and three decades away from my Dakota. Her characters are in Romania, living under Nicolae Ceausescu's police state, a communist dictatorship. They are university students who become dissidents, young people who read the dictator in every village tree because they are paranoid, but also because, in a way, he haunts all the limbs. Müller's language, even in translation, is hypnotic, paratactic: The narrator's father says green plums are dangerous, will make you go crazy. Local authorities gorge themselves on the unripe fruit, the streets so quiet you can hear chewing. The proletariat makes things no one needs—tin sheep, wooden watermelons. An exclamation point after a greeting is normal, but a comma means your life is in danger. Having a cold means you are being followed. Nail clippers are an interrogation. Everything sounds silly.

When I read about Müller's student dissidents it is summertime, so I take the book outside to an old army blanket spread beneath the ponderosa pines. It is 2011, the summer before I will move to Belarus to teach at the country's largest state university in Minsk. George W. Bush famously calls Belarus "Europe's last dictatorship" in 2005, but some political scientists say he is wrong, that it is not exactly a dictatorship. Bush is right that there are no free elections, no free press, and no sepa-

ration of powers. Alexander Lukashenko has been president for seventeen years, but his is still not a totalitarian regime. It is not as bad, not as wholly oppressive as that, the political scientists say. Over 50 percent of Belarusians still work for the state, but at least now there is a McDonald's, a Nike store. Today's Belarus does not make you speak in code. It is not Ceausescu's Romania.

But the summer before I go to Belarus, *dictator* is the loudest word, the one I hear most clearly. I am enamored with the sound of it, the danger of it, the raised eyebrows when I tell people, *I am moving to a dictatorship.* I am charmed by the weight of history and adventure in its three hard syllables. If it is possible to carry something like a word, then this is the one I take to Minsk.

I arrive in August, in time for the academic year. I begin teaching English but feel like every class is anthropology in disguise, like my students and I are studying each other through language. I am an eager researcher, but not always a good one. I project Müller's characters onto my students, as if all young people at state schools in so-called dictatorships are the same. After classes, I gorge myself on experience: A bombing in the metro. The worst inflation rates in the world. Cookies with worms in them. Women tricked into ballerina bodies and sex tourism. Radiation fallout, blowing north with the wind, full of state secrets. Jokes told over cognac.

I am gluttonous. I eat these tiny poems and try to digest them. Independently, the images are silly, meaningless, but taken together I am convinced they are hieroglyphs, signs pointing upward to Lukashenko, to the dictator. I can barely contain myself because I think I have figured it out, that I have cracked some code, and that I must share my findings. I publish an essay—"Six Truths and a Lie"—on a US-based travel website. I don't make a conscious decision to mimic Müller, but I am doing it; my language too is paratactic and cryptic. When the essay goes live I think that surely no Belarusians will ever find it, much less read it, which is perhaps the most laughable of my miscalculations. I am also young, and I take it for granted that writing is art, not politics per se, that it elicits nods and sighs and maybe tears but little else.

Some Belarusian dissidents, however, take it seriously. They are the kind of dissidents who have been forced into exile, the

kind who curate oppositional news websites from their new living rooms in Lithuania. Though I am an amateur—and a foreigner, a fraud—the dissidents must agree with something because they steal my words, translate them, and reprint them in their own corner of the Internet. It is illegal to access their website within the borders of Belarus. Twenty-first-century *samizdat*.

Less than twenty-four hours after the dissidents repost my essay without permission, I get a phone call from my boss at the university in Minsk. "You will need to leave the country," she says, but what she means is that I am a snake in the grass. I am a traitor. I am a troublemaker. She means that I have broken the first unspoken rule of places with dictators, which is that unless you want it to become as bad, as absolute as Ceausescu's Romania, you cannot talk about it. Of course the dictator is everywhere, but you must not mention him. When I hang up the phone, I am sick at how fixed and firm this rule feels, though still no one has ever said it to me. It is as solid as the green earth, as inescapable as humid air, things that simply are—things at once too big and too obvious to be treated with words. As a rule, only fools deal in poetry.

I am temporarily suspended from my job and am told to wait for further instructions from the university. I am too afraid to leave my apartment because I have made a mistake. I am from the land of brown grass and ponderosa pines, and I don't know the real danger of unripe fruit because all I've had are chokecherries, which never taste good anyway, and I don't know the real danger because all of this *dictator* talk was only ever an idea, imported through books and movies. Orwell, Huxley, Rand. I am taken by old tropes, and I am naïve. For weeks after that phone call, I sleep on the couch and have dreams about pulling tap wires out of the green wallpaper. I am haunted there, but certain that if I leave my living room, men in dark jackets will be waiting

"You will need to leave the country," she says, but what she means is that I am a snake in the grass. I am a traitor. I am a troublemaker.

with nail clippers. They will catch me and hold me under bare light bulbs. I will have to write to my mother and tell her about my cold, the pounding head cold, the one living inside me like a parasite. She will be so disappointed that I have gone and gotten myself sick. *Hi Mom , , ,*

After two weeks of this, nothing happens.

I am fine. I am not deported. There are no hulking men. I do not even lose my job. For reasons I am never told and do not understand, my boss lets me return to my students. I apologize to them, and I mean it, though I am not sure if I am sorry for speaking or simply for being a fool. My students are not satisfied with my brief, embarrassed explanation, and so they corner me after class. Theirs is my only interrogation.

What happened to you?

Where have you been?

We were worried about you.

We missed you.

I tell them everything is fine, because I am still nervous, and Anya, a girl with a mustache tattooed on her pointer finger, says, *We know you got in trouble, even though you didn't do anything.* I want to correct her and say that I did, in fact, do something, that I made the mistake of speaking about unspeakable things, and even though nobody told me the rules, somehow I should have known them. I should have known better. But before I can say this, another student, Eugene, stops me. *It's dumb,* he says with no emotion, *but that's how things work in this country.*

In 1979, many years before she writes *The Land of Green Plums,* Herta Müller is dismissed from her job at a factory because she refuses to cooperate with the Romanian secret police. A man wearing a windbreaker visits her at work, says to her, *I know you better than you know tulips,* which are arranged neatly in a vase on her desk. He wants her to spy and rat on people close to her. He calls it *collaborating,* which sounds like artists creating.

Müller tells the windbreaker man, *I don't have the character for this,* and he smashes her tulip vase against the wall. She says that when it shattered, it sounded like the air had teeth. In 2009 she is awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. In her acceptance speech, Müller acknowledges that what can't be said can still be written, that the subject of dictatorship is necessarily pres-

ent because its characters are wholly robbed of the ability to take anything for granted. The dictator is always there, implied, while words spell out what the tongue cannot pronounce.

When Herta Müller wins the Nobel Prize, Metropolitan Books in New York releases a striking English edition of *The Land of Green Plums*. The cover is green with orange accents and a clip-art statue of Lenin. His left arm is pointing straight ahead over the grassy space, as if gesturing toward some future. In the writer's bio, it says that Müller lost her job as a teacher for not cooperating with the state, but this is a misprint, a small mistake. She wasn't a teacher; she was translating descriptions of hydraulic machines at a factory. Müller says the factory is where she first started writing, where she realized that language is hungry, that it begs to consume her experiences. Gluttony is a thing I too understand.

II.
Soviet Ukrainian Dissent: A Study of Political Alienation
by Jaroslaw Bilocerkowycz, 1988
Circulation: familial

For the first twenty-three years of my life, I do not open the book, because it looks dull. The cover is communist red, the color of tomato sauce, with white text and no pictures. As a child I couldn't pronounce two of the words in the title, which meant that it must be boring. Even though my father's name is on the front and my mother's on the inside—*To Sandra*—and even though it follows me to every bookshelf in every apartment in every country I live, I do not open it until after I return from Belarus. By then I think I know what "dissent" and "alienation" mean.

Although in the mid-'80s my mother is an actuary and not a political scientist, she helps with editing and research. She accompanies my father to New York City to interview Valentyn Moroz, a famous Soviet dissident and defector, in his apartment. My father's dissertation becomes a book and is published the same year I am born—*The best year of my life*, he says—which is four years before the dissolution of the USSR. My parents divorce when I am one year old, and my mother gives me her copy of the book because she doesn't care about it anymore. It is regimented that I should see my father for six weeks every

year, and I am maybe fifteen when he starts asking, *Have you read my book yet?* I am a teenager, and it still doesn't look interesting, so I lie and say that I've skimmed parts.

At eighteen it is time to go to college, and I attend the university in Ohio where my father teaches, mostly because of tuition remission. We begin having regular dinner dates, and I realize that I am learning about him for the first time. He tells me stories about his research trips to Russia in the '80s. He remembers sitting in his hotel room, hearing a camera click and seeing a flash. They don't even bother to hide the surveillance. It is normal. He tells me about an old Polish friend, one who helped collect information for the book. I ask if they still keep in touch and he says, *We had to cut ties,* but won't explain. After a second cocktail, he lowers his voice, almost inaudible; I am practically lip-reading: once they were driving in Russia and a strange car tried to run them off the road. I am not to mention this to anyone.

During my college years, these quiet talks become a routine. My father motions for me to lean in; I pick up a fork to look relaxed, like nothing suspicious is happening here; he moves his mouth toward my ear; I casually lift the fork higher; he whispers. We have these conversations only in public because the house isn't safe. Neither is the car or the office. E-mail, too, is compromised. Something like privacy is possible only in a city park, a parking lot, or a crowded restaurant. We inhabit a register several pitches below the jingle of china and glassware.

At first the talks are about Eastern Europe, things he's seen and heard and doesn't want repeated. I love getting to know my father this way. I also love being let in on the secrets, though I'm not sure why they still need to be kept secret. I don't know who, exactly, he doesn't want listening. The Russians? The Americans? I play along with his discretion but am skeptical of its necessity and sometimes get annoyed. On the phone I'm sure he is leaving things out, dropping words, holding back, even on the most mundane topics. I don't understand why and ask him to explain. Over dinner he tells me that he started to notice strange things after 9/11 and the anthrax attacks, after George W. Bush signed the Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act, more commonly known as the USA PATRIOT Act. The act's

name is a "backronym," an acronym created in reverse to fit an existing word. I jokingly ask him—because how can this be anything other than a joke?—if he is a threat to America, and he says that the Bush administration is full of idiots.

It is car magnets he notices first. Those yellow, ribbon-shaped, support-our-troops car magnets. Two means you are probably being followed. Two of them on the bumper of a black SUV means you are definitely being followed. Do not drive anywhere strange. Work, home, work, home, groceries, home. Give them no reason to be suspicious. Bore them. Do not talk about illegally downloading MP3s, or fudging on your taxes, or smoking a joint. In fact, avoid these activities altogether. And if you can help it, do not own a cell phone.

I still think my father can't be serious, but I start researching anyway. The PATRIOT Act is passed less than two months after 9/11. Its reach is expansive. Section 206 is sometimes called the "roving John Doe wiretap" provision. It allows intelligence gatherers to be vague about where, why, and how they are collecting intelligence. Under it, authorities do not have to reveal the suspect's name in order to obtain surveillance rights. Section 6001 is called the "lone wolf" provision and simplifies the process for getting a court order to track individuals suspected of having but without proven ties to any terrorist organization. For a moment I think maybe this is what is happening to my father, but then read that the provision applies to noncitizens. My father was born in Chicago.

Next, I read articles about librarians gone rogue. Section 215 of the act gives the FBI the ability to summon library records if they think it will reasonably help protect against international terrorism or clandestine intelligence activities. When the PATRIOT Act is passed, librarians across the country are deeply troubled, worried what effect it will have on free speech. The American Library Association formally condemns the bill, and in 2003 it is reported that thousands of librarians start shredding their patrons' records in protest. In 2011 Barack Obama signs a four-year extension on three provisions of the PATRIOT Act: the roving wiretaps, the so-called library records provision, and the continued surveillance of "lone wolves." In researching, I find no answers about my father, but I do begin to sympathize with his suspicions.

I am afraid to speculate which parts of my father's anxiety are real and which are paranoia. I don't know if he is neurotic, obsessive, or observant; naïve or wise. None of these options seem preferable. After I graduate from college and spend a year in Belarus, I come home to find my father less apprehensive, if only slightly. Maybe he thinks that if his daughter can survive a year in Europe's "last dictatorship," surely he can relax a bit in the "land of the free." I return to America, obsessed with ideas like dissent and alienation. This feels like the appropriate time to open my father's book, but I am still scared of what truths will be confirmed there. I limit myself to small sections at a time.

I read about Iosyp Terelia, a longtime political and religious activist associated with the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, which, for forty-five years, is the largest underground church in the world. In 1983 he is sentenced to a one-year imprisonment for the crime of "parasitism." Since the Soviet Union is a workers' state, all able-bodied adults are expected to engage in "socially useful" work. If such adults refuse to do so for an extended period of time, they are considered parasitic. In order to avoid the charge, many dissidents and writers take up menial side work: street sweeping, window washing, making trinkets no one needs.

Maybe he thinks that if his daughter can survive a year in Europe's "last dictatorship," surely he can relax a bit in the "land of the free."

I read too about Valentyn Moroz because I remember his name from my mother. She speaks fondly of him and their meeting back in the '80s. At that time he had just emigrated to the US in a very public way, a famous Soviet defector who was offered a position at Harvard. My mother must have loved the adventure of it. Back in the USSR, Moroz had survived a prison-knifing and a 145-day hunger strike, both of which would have sounded grotesque and exotic to a Protestant girl from Seattle.

Moroz is first arrested in 1965 for possession of *samizdat* written by someone else, says it surprised him because the document wasn't even explicitly oppositional. He is a historian and professor by trade, but gets arrested again five years later, charged with "anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda" for pub-

lishing a series of three essays that circulate underground. In the essays, Moroz discusses the culture of fear, calling it a "giant refrigerator for human minds," brains that can no longer think or create independently from the Russian state. He laments what he sees as calculated homogenizing, which he connects to the destruction of Ukrainian art by the Soviets. But not just Ukrainian art. He cites suspicious fires that have occurred in major libraries across the USSR—in Kyiv, Tartu, Ashkhabad, Samarkand. How the casualties of these accidental fires were mostly ancient texts in the local native languages and how isn't it strange that no treasured libraries in Russia have ever burned?

I do not finish the book, but not because my father is a bad writer. He is a great one, in fact, and those 242 pages are meticulously researched, a clear labor of love, years' worth of worry and ache, long flights and hard questions. But I still stop reading. When I get to the section on psychiatric incarceration, I cannot bring myself to continue. I read a few lines about how the Soviets often accused dissidents of being "madmen" and used that as a pretext for holding them in psychiatric hospitals, indefinitely. Diagnoses like "sluggish schizophrenia" and "paranoid ideas of reformism" hover above the page. Iyosyp Terelia, who spent four years in one of the psychiatric hospitals, describes the place as "the envy of Dante," that is, the most graphic version of hell. At that quote, I close the book, as if trying to restrain all of its floating parts. I realize then just how criminal it is to accuse truthful people of insanity, even when that truth is hard to pin down, unbelievable, oppositional. My face is hot and blushing, but the book cover is cool in my hands.

Sometimes when I am in a new city or on a strange campus, I go to the library to see if they have my father's book. Not to read it or check it out, just to hold it. I don't know why I do this. I already own multiple copies. My father never remarried, has few close friends, and no other children besides me. Each time a relative dies—grandfathers from old age, an uncle from AIDS, another from suicide—their copy of the red book is given to me. It is usually inscribed with their names in ballpoint pen, a regular greeting, a little book of the dead filled with hieroglyphs. I don't want to interpret them, but on occasion I find myself doing just that, quietly searching for answers.

This is my inheritance.

III.
Depeche Mode
by Serhiy Zhadan, 2004
Circulation: regional

I purchase the book from a small British press in the spring of 2014. I am living in western Ukraine, not far from where my father's father and my father's mother grew up. Although Serhiy Zhadan is one of Ukraine's most famous living writers, this is his only novel that has been translated into English.

Zhadan's characters reside in Kharkiv, an eastern Ukrainian city one thousand kilometers away from where I am living at the time. Zhadan is a poet turned prose writer, and you can tell; his sentences are long and winding, wild but rhythmic in a way that makes sense to some people, like jazz. In *Depeche Mode* it is the early '90s, and one-sixth of the earth's land surface is spinning off from the Soviet Union. Ukraine, too, is in chaos. A swirling cast of young characters deal with the fallout: The communist headquarters is now an advertising agency. Depeche Mode is on the radio, no longer on bootlegged tapes. American preachers wearing Rolex watches sermonize in city squares to thousands, but even the hired translator doesn't know English. Fatherless boys invest in vodka smuggled cheaply over the Russian border. The economy has tanked, and nihilists drink the day away on trolley buses. Everything is absurd.

The English translation has enough misprints to notice, but I keep reading anyway because Zhadan's reputation is illustrious. I also keep reading because it feels personal: in 2014 I am teaching at a university in Lviv, Ukraine, and Zhadan's son, Ivan, is one of my students. Ivan is seventeen and nervous. His hands shake when he passes his homework to me. He smells like cigarettes, wears mostly black, and once pretends to be Tim Burton for a celebrity speech assignment. He gives a brilliant performance. I want to ask Ivan which of his father's books he most recommends, but I don't want to embarrass him. I hear from another student that Ivan says he hasn't read any.

I read *Depeche Mode* in the months when Lenin statues are falling across Ukraine. Lenin, the first great defender of the socialist fatherland, has fire at his feet and ropes around his neck all over the country. The major Lenin statue in downtown Kyiv is toppled in December 2013 during the second week of anti-

government protests that will eventually run the pro-Kremlin president, Viktor Yanukovych, out of office and over the Russian border.

Like his characters, Serhiy Zhadan is from Kharkiv, the second largest Ukrainian city, home to mostly Russian speakers. Zhadan was born speaking Russian, too, but now writes in Ukrainian. He is an activist, but his politics are neither blindly pro-Western nor anti-Russian. I hear him give a talk in February, just days before the final firestorm of the revolution. *Yanukovych has long lost legitimacy,* he says. *When the* EU *deals with Yanukovych, they need to understand that they are dealing with a dictator.* He signs my copy of his book with long, upright letters in blue ink: ЖАДАН.

His is a kleptocracy, and when the regime is finally ousted, the people will turn his presidential estate into a public park.

Some political scientists will likely disagree with the "dictator" label, though Yanukovych isn't democratic, to be sure. He famously falsifies an election in 2004, causes Ukraine to lose forty points on the Press Freedom Index, throws his political opponents in prison, and uses his SBU (formerly KGB) agents liberally. But it is perhaps more accurate to call him a simple crook. Estimates place his stolen wealth anywhere from 20 to 100 billion dollars. His is a kleptocracy, and when the regime is finally ousted, the people will turn his presidential estate into a public park. I too will peer into the windows of his newly built mansion and see $64,000 Lebanese wooden doors under light refracted from $100,000 crystal chandeliers.

When the revolution starts there are no guarantees that it will succeed, and this is the biggest risk. My university is outspoken and active, encouraging its students to skip class in order to go protest. The administration organizes buses to Kyiv, and though the air is electric with talk of change, the old order is still intact.

One day in December SBU officers visit the dean of the school, talk to him in his office, which is right across the hall from mine. The men ask for names of students participating in the demon-

strations, want to see attendance rosters, pose threats. The dean refuses, saying, *Our student records are private,* and the SBU officers tell him that criminal cases are being opened against them. My students confirm the intimidation: they receive phone calls interrogating their activities, warning them about being vocal online. I am amazed none of them seem deterred by this.

The situation escalates in mid-January when Yanukovych rams a series of anti-protest laws through parliament. The bill criminalizes "extremist activity," loosely defined, and has, among others, provisions on Internet censorship, wearing masks, and the unauthorized installation of tents or sound systems. On paper, Ukraine looks like a dictatorship, but in the streets people dissent loudly, heatedly. I visit Maidan, Kyiv's central square, and see the barricades composed of trash twenty feet high. I see gas masks, riot gear, things on fire, men with plywood shields and army green helmets left over from WWII. I see an Audi pull up to the crowd and a man in a suit unload crates of bottles, rags, and petrol for Molotov cocktails. He is delivering supplies to the front line, where protestors and riot police are facing off. I realize then that I am too close and retreat to the doorway of a nearby hotel.

From February 18 to 22 more than a hundred people—mostly protestors, some police officers—die in Maidan from sniper fire, and by the 23rd Yanukovych flees the country in his helicopter. During these few days alone, 219 Lenin statues are reportedly toppled throughout Ukraine.

Most mayors and governors of the eastern regions flee, too, and in the power vacuum, cities like Kharkiv turn especially violent. Clashes between pro-Westerners and pro-Russians are like small microcosms of the whole country, and when strange troops with Russian accents are spotted in Crimea, the question of West or East, this lifestyle or that one, is tangible, not theoretical. In early March, Zhadan is acting as an organizer for an ongoing pro-Ukrainian rally in Kharkiv when counter-protestors storm their building and attack. *Cuts on the head, eyebrow dissected, concussion, broken nose suspected,* he writes on his Facebook page. He says when the men are beating him, they order him to kneel and kiss the Russian flag. Zhadan tells them to go fuck themselves.

As Russia annexes Crimea and sends tanks over the border into the Donbass, the revolution becomes a war, and my student

Oksana says in class that this is like *four hundred years of history happening in four months,* and my student Sasha says in another class that *those old people don't really miss the USSR—they just miss their youth,* and I am exhausted thinking about all these expanses of time.

Three months after Zhadan is sent to the hospital, I visit a prison in Lviv. It is no longer a functioning prison, but a small museum, a memorial to the victims of communist oppression. There, I attend a talk given by Valentyn Moroz, who has just released a new history book. The building's exterior is modest (I accidentally pass it on the street), but the place is intimately tied to the brutal history Moroz writes about. The prison served as the KGB's regional interrogation and detention center until 1991 and now displays the delicate and aging relics of its dissident-inmates: seized *samizdat,* letters home, eyeglasses, rosaries made of tiny balls of bread, embroidery done with fish bones for needles.

There are ten of us, maybe fifteen, who show up to hear Moroz speak. Most are older men, his contemporaries. The skin on Moroz's face is gray, like frost, and sagging; he talks slowly, the cadence of his seventy-eight-year-old voice echoing the horrible things he's seen—or, at least in my imagination it does this. When he is asked about the ongoing Russian invasion, he responds matter-of-factly, *Russia again wants to drive Ukraine back into its cell. But that is no longer possible.* He even smiles, as if this is obvious. The narrow prison room has been arranged with a few folding chairs, but is otherwise just concrete and cold, the walls pea green, a bare light bulb above Moroz's head. I hope he remembers my parents, but I am not surprised when he quietly tells me he does not.

When I return home to the US, I watch the news stream from a small computer screen, now seven hours behind. The destruction of the Donetsk airport, Malaysian Flight #17, the capture of Debaltseve, cluster bombs, sanctions, elections. History is on fast-forward, or maybe on replay. The new Ukrainian government blames Russia for the crimes, and in response the Russian authorities blame Ukraine. The absurd is not just a literary notion; it is a political strategy.

I also follow Serhiy Zhadan on Facebook. It is Ukrainian Christmas, January 7, 2015, when he posts a short verse. "Freedom," he writes, "usually lies in the fact / of voluntarily returning to prison."

IV.
Epilogue
Circulation: cyclical

In the same month as Moroz's reading at the prison, I go to the village where my father's mother grew up. I go to see Marina, my grandmother's cousin, who is in her eighties and frail now. Truthfully, we doubt Marina will live much longer, and this is one of the reasons I moved to Ukraine in the first place. My generation of the family—my own cousins—do not seem to care. They are not troubled by the thought of our Ukrainian line dying off, its stories vanishing undocumented. Perhaps because I am the cousin most preoccupied with words, the burden defaults to me.

Although my grandmother emigrated during the war, Marina has never left the village, says she's never even been to Lviv, a major city just two and a half hours away. Marina doesn't have a car. Her nephew, who also lives in the village, owns only a tractor and a bicycle. They don't have refrigerators or indoor plumbing, but there is bright, floral embroidery on every single wall of the house. Jewel tones, rainbows. The yard is Marina's bounty: chickens, turkeys, fruit trees, rows of potatoes, cabbages, carrots. She works the land herself. There are no books in her house, and I am ashamed to ask Marina if she knows how to read.

This is not my first visit, but my third. Each time, Marina points to where my grandmother's house was and tells me about change. The village used to have rolling hills, dense tree groves, and a deep brook, but the Soviets flattened and deforested all the land after my grandmother left. Her father—my great-grandfather—was the village mayor, an unofficial post that generally concerned itself more with the pastoral than the political; under Russian communism, however, the two became inextricable. When the Soviets tried to forcibly collectivize the local land, my great-grandfather refused to give up his family's plot. He was a patriot, a reluctant dissenter. Soon after his refusal, there was a knock on the door and some men took my great-grandfather away. Marina's mother went looking for him. She traveled to the prison in the nearest town, but they told her most of the prisoners had already been shot. My great-grandfather was never seen again.

After chatting in the kitchen, I ask Marina if she wants to walk to the cemetery down the road and she says, *I would go to America with you if you asked,* and we both laugh because it sounds silly, which is also sad. I am sad because of how callous it is, all this leaving and returning and leaving again, the loops that history makes. I imagine myself as a voice in the wilderness, when in fact maybe I am part of the problem. Maybe I am another cog in the cyclic machine of oppression, moving about with foolish intentions, writing things no one needs.

Three months from now, Russia and Ukraine will sign a peace agreement in Minsk. It will be broken shortly thereafter. In early 2015 the two nations will sign another agreement—"Minsk II." It will also be shaky, fragile, bloated with last-ditch hopes. Marina doesn't own a television, so she will hear this news on the radio, in segments bookended by English pop songs.

As we walk arm-in-arm through the light-blue headstones, we talk about the war. The grass is dandelion-speckled and tall, the apple tree branches above us heavy with white flowers, soon-to-be fruit. I see dirt in each crease of Marina's face and hands, and all of this makes me nostalgic, makes me read meaning into each limb and blossom. *What does Putin want with us anyway?* she asks, sheepish and smiling, almost self-deprecating. A few yards away the cemetery caretaker overhears her question and stops working. He leans against his shovel and shakes his head. The three of us marvel in silence, perhaps wondering how long it will be before the state—all of the states—see we are human, see that what they enact is violence. Maybe *What do they want with us?* is the same question I am trying to answer, only by way of a hundred confused and lyrical diversions, paragraphs and pages of beating around the bush. Maybe what can't be said still begs to be written.

White storks are nesting above us on a wooden telephone pole. They clatter their bills, which is the only sound as Marina, the caretaker, and I stand quietly, fumbling for words that could pass for an answer. We are desperate, and don't find them.

PETER SELGIN

SWIMMING WITH OLIVER

1.

After a swim, that's when I miss him most. In November, when the water temperature is in the sixties, when I've toweled off and put on my bathrobe and started up the leaf-strewn lawn from the dock to my house, that's when I think: I have to phone Oliver and tell him what a glorious swim I just had. I'd often call him on weekday mornings after a swim.

Then I remember. I can't phone Oliver. Oliver's dead.

2.

We met in the winter of 1986, at Simon & Schuster, his publisher, soon after *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* came out. I was still living in New York back then and had been assigned to interview him for a magazine. The office was at Rockefeller Center. On the street corner a vendor was selling hot chocolate from a cart. Having somehow intuited my subject's love of hot chocolate, I bought two cups and rode the elevator with them in a paper bag.

They'd set us up in a conference room. I found him there, a big shy Santa in a white physician's coat with a lush salt-and-pepper beard. He sat there with his knees spread apart, gripping them with his big hands, leaning forward into my questions.

"Would you say all people exist on a continuum of pathologies?"

"Ahm . . . yes, I suppose you could say that."

"When you talk to people, are you constantly aware of their tics?"

"If you're wondering if you're being diagnosed, the answer is no."

Having drained the liquid part of his hot chocolate, twirling a finger over the sediment at the bottom of his cup, with his characteristic stutter, he said, "I'm—I'm—I'm . . . tempted to—to—to . . ."

"Go for it!" I urged.

In tandem we licked hot chocolate sediment from our fingers.

3.

Ten years later, I read "Water Babies," his essay in the *New Yorker* about his passion for swimming. A swimmer myself, I thought: how fun it would be to swim with Dr. Sacks. I dashed off a letter—third item down on my bucket list of things to do before I died: "Swim with Oliver Sacks."

His reply came a few days later, handwritten in green Flair on cream stationery with a cephalopod logo. The writing was barely legible. He'd be delighted to swim with me.

4.

In the gloom of morning he calls from his car phone. "Olivah heah. Meet me on the Kappock Street ramp in five minutes?" With my gym bag holding my Speedo, goggles, cap, and towel, I hurry out of my Bronx apartment building, up the steep hill, and under the highway overpass slathered with graffiti. The sun has just broken over building tops.

He stands smiling next to his pulled-over Lexus.

"I'm pathologically early," he says.

5.

Mozart on the car stereo. Oliver sipping from a water bottle, discussing his book-in-progress, about his childhood embrace of metals, chemicals, and minerals. We take the Saw Mill River Parkway toward Connecticut.

Does this man know, has he any idea, what it means for me to sit with him in his car like this, guiding him toward my favorite lake for a swim? I remember those daydreams I had when I was a kid of the Beatles coming over for dinner.

6.

The lake is on the former summer estate of a robber baron, now a state park. At its center: a small island with the remains of a decorative stone lighthouse. Swimming is prohibited. We have to scramble up some rocks and bushwhack our way to the swimming hole. If the ranger comes by in his truck, we'll be hidden from view.

We undress and put on our Speedos. Since our first meeting Oliver's trimmed down. A swimmer's body: top-heavy, barrel-chested, and covered with gray fur, like a bear.

We swim twice to the stone lighthouse and back. Afterward we lie on a smooth rock, sunning ourselves. Bird songs. The wind whispering through tree branches.

"A beautiful day," I remark.

"We live on a very nice planet," says Oliver. "It will be a pity if we destroy it."

7.

We drove to my parents' house. By then my father had suffered the first of a series of strokes that left him unable to recognize people and things, including me. He'd been an inventor. While he sat in his chair in the living room, I took Oliver to see his laboratory at the base of our driveway. Papa's last project was a revolutionary transformer using spools of flat, lasagna-like copper instead of regular round wire for the windings. Oliver, lover of metals, was drawn instantly to a heap of copper scraps. He asked if he could take one.

"Yeah, by all means. Papa would be pleased."

As we left the laboratory, I explained how, walking up the driveway as a boy, I'd pass by the window and see my father at work inside, always with a big smile on his face.

"An inwardly directed man," said Oliver.

8.

For the next fifteen years, Oliver and I swam together. In pools, lakes, rivers, ponds, creeks, estuaries, oceans. Twice we swam across the Hudson River, jellyfish and other matter oozing between our fingers. Though we timed our swims to fit the twenty-minute slack tide window, the second time we still got caught and swept downstream by the current. In torn Speedos we scrambled up the rocks, laughing.

9.

Like my father, Oliver had a British accent, though his was the real thing, while my father's was something of an invention. Though both men intimidated me with their genius, Oliver was much more forgiving of my intellectual laziness and ignorance.

After swimming, we would often stroll in the Bronx Botanical Garden. These strolls functioned as a kind of scratchpad on which Oliver worked out topics relevant to his latest work-in-progress. My role was mainly that of an ideal listener. Every so often I'd throw a question his way, or supply a useful analogy. But mostly I listened.

Usually our walks took the same path, beginning with a tour of the Members Only garden, with its varieties of wildflowers, then through the fern section, then into the woods, until we found ourselves walking along the Bronx River toward the Snuff Mill, stopping at a waterfall to watch the water cascade in a white, curtain-like sheet.

10.

One day we discuss memory. Oliver distinguishes between two types of memory: procedural and episodic. Procedural memory applies to things we do without having to "remember" or even to think about them.

"The test for procedural memory is if you can do something else at the same time," says Oliver. "Procedural memory is what we use when humming a symphony or reciting Shakespeare."

"Or swimming," I say.

"Yes," says Oliver. "Or swimming."

Episodic memory is more complicated. "With episodic memories," Oliver explains, "the individual parts are connected or flow into each other like the links of a chain—though 'flow' and 'chain' don't fit very well together." As we keep walking Oliver arrives at a better analogy: a series of bridges below which, in a person with no episodic memory, there's a bottomless chasm.

"This is what happened to Clive," Oliver says, referring to the English musician who, owing to a traumatic injury, lost his episodic memory and can't remember what happened a moment ago, or the moment before that. "Clive's life consists of an endless series of discrete moments that exist completely independent of each other except when they're united in some pattern by some procedure or design—like the notes in a symphony."

We discuss other cases involving amnesia, including Jimmie, the Lost Mariner in the book that Oliver refers to simply as *Hat* or *The Hat Book*, and another man who, in order to compensate for his lost memory, never stopped talking, as though the

only way he could pass safely from moment to moment (bridge to bridge) was on a river his own words.

"That was his way of avoiding the abyss," Oliver says.

11.

In the fern garden we study the names in Latin. *Vulgaris:* common. *Silvaticus:* wild. *Praecox:* precocious. *Spicata:* spiked. The droll absurdity of plant names. "Snake root." "Strawberry bush." Back at the magnolia trees, I cup a fat blossom in my hands.

Oliver: "Look at it calling forth—all of nature signaling, putting up banners, saying, *Reproduce! Reproduce!*" His expression turns suddenly wistful. "Maybe that's why I feel the way I do today."

"What way is that?"

"Ahm . . . nauseated."

"I doubt that's what nature intended," I say.

Oliver laughs his snorty laugh.

12.

At an outdoor café table, we trade different substances we'd like to swim in. Oliver would like to swim in a sea of gallium, the metal with a melting point of 85.6 degrees, the same as chocolate.

"Why not just swim in a lake of chocolate?" I ask.

"I like chocolate," he replies, "but I love metals."

"A sea of mercury?" I suggest.

"That would be very unhealthy."

"What about Dutch gin?" (Oliver loved Dutch gin; a phalanx of the empty ceramic bottles lined the kitchen counter in his Greenwich Village apartment.) "You could get drunk while swimming."

"True, but since alcohol's density is lower than water's, you'd have to be an extremely strong swimmer, and even then you'd probably sink like a stone."

13.

A kiwi, a pomegranate, a persimmon, other exotic fruits: that's what my wife and I serve him for breakfast the first time he comes over. Our guest is delighted. Nothing he won't try once. He doesn't care if it satisfies his appetite, as long as it satiates his

curiosity. The fruits could be poisonous; he would still try them. Oliver loves novelty, variety, eccentricity, excess. No wonder the elements amuse him. He approaches the periodic table like a child in a *gelateria*.

At our kitchen table, Oliver reads the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, the only one we have ("You must get the King James"), quoting the nasty God of Deuteronomy, the "carrot and stick" God: *He whose testicles are crushed or whose male member is cut off shall not enter the assembly of the Lord*.

14.
When it's too cold for lake swimming, or when we don't have time for a day trip, we swim at Riverbank State Park on the Upper West Side. The park was built over a sewage treatment facility. When it first opened people avoided it because of the smell. The problem has since been remedied, sort of.

Arranging items in his trunk, transferring them in and out of an array of pockets and bags, Oliver indulges in some OCD counting:

1. Goggles in plastic bag
2. Plastic bag in coat pocket
3. Shoehorn out of gym bag
4. White sneakers in bag
5. Remove orange sneaker #1
6. Remove orange sneaker #2
7. Put on white sneaker #1
8. Put on white sneaker #2
9. Shoehorn back in gym bag
10. Seat cushion in plastic bag . . .

etc.

I'm reminded of Beckett's Molloy sucking his stones.

15.
We've changed and showered and stepped from the locker room onto the pool platform to find a group of lifeguards gathered around the shallow end, keeping us at bay as one of their number emerges from the water with a very small brown object caught in a fish net.

"Fecal matter," the lifeguard pronounces grimly.

A toddler has shat in the pool, which is subsequently closed.

As we re-dress back in the locker room, I can't resist saying, "What does a little fecal matter, anyway?"

Oliver: "One little turd and civilization grinds to a halt."

16.

We'd start lake swimming as early as April, with a ceremonial frigid plunge. We'd drive to one of several lakes up in the Catskills. Oliver's driving was a blend of skill and aggression, augmented by Tourettic outbursts. *Shit! Bugger! Fuck!* He hated being stuck behind another vehicle, especially one that obstructed his vision ("Swinish SUVs!"). He'd slap the steering wheel, bang his fist on the dashboard, kick the floor. If I happened to be driving, he'd snarl, "Overtake! Overtake!"

17.

Breakfast at a greasy spoon. With Oliver you had to be careful what you ordered, since he'd order the same thing, then get mad at himself—and by extension at you—if he didn't like it. I order a corn muffin: a mistake. Though good in other respects, the muffin is very crumby.

"Ach," Oliver says, picking crumbs from his lap with thick greasy fingers as if they're worms or ants. "I despise crumbs. Why did we order these damned muffins? I never eat muffins. Now I know why. They're much too crumby. I've never seen so many crumbs. Ach! Ugh! Remind me never to eat a corn muffin again!"

18.

We stay at a lakeside hotel, in one of six small cabins dotting the shore. With wetsuits on we swim twice around the lake, then take turns sitting on a rock, helping each other off with the skin-tight wetsuits. The resultant tableaux is half vaudeville skit, half comic book, Laurel and Hardy meet Plastic Man.

The hotel is under new management. We're the first customers of the season. They haven't turned the heat on in the cottages. They give us extra blankets. It's too cold to sleep. We spend the night shivering and talking. Oliver shares his sexual proclivities with me, a secret I'll keep for the next twenty years.

Oliver: "I don't initiate, but I don't refuse."

His sex life in a nutshell.

19.

"When you hear a piece of music in your head," Oliver asks later that day as we explore the lake's perimeter by foot, "what is it that you hear, exactly?"

"I hear the music," I answer.

"Note for note, fully orchestrated, or a simplified version?"

"Note for note," I say.

"Like you're listening to a recording?"

"Yeah. That's right."

"Interesting . . ."

"Why? What do you hear?"

"The raw melody line—as if a child were playing it on a toy piano or a xylophone."

20.

I asked him once if he'd ever encountered an old enemy, someone he once detested, but then, seeing this person years later, felt the urge to hug him or her. He had. I asked: "Do you think that response is the product of nostalgia? Masochism? Narcissism? Or a healthy outlook?"

"Maybe a bad memory," he answered. "I know that I've run into people from my past whom I'd disliked or even despised, but who sparked wild enthusiasm when seen again twenty years later. I think the mere fact of having one's survival thrust in one's face by the survival of another may explain it. They're still alive and so are we. A continuum is established and upheld for which we can only feel grateful, even if the other person happens to be someone whose guts we hated, who beat us up or made fun of us or gave us a stiff caning.

"Having said that," Oliver continued after a pause, "were he still living and were I to see my old headmaster at Braefield, my impulse wouldn't be to hug him, but to give him a swift solid kick in the rump."

"How often did they cane you in that place, anyway?" I asked.

"I don't know. Daily, twice a day, once every twenty minutes."

"No wonder you carry that seat cushion around with you."

Snorty laugh. "Very good!"

21.

In low moods, Oliver puts himself down, lamenting his lack of significant accomplishments as a "real scientist"—like Darwin,

Luria, and Mendeleev, his heroes. Oliver: "Ah, yes, Sacks. He had such promise, such potential. Pity he never amounted to very much . . ."

I cheer him up, or try to. "You're something as good or better than a scientist," I tell him. "You're an artist. You make beautiful things with words. You entertain and move and educate millions of people. Your books are works of art."

"Yes . . . ahm . . . I've had that thought from time to time."

All the time I'm thinking to myself: *If* he *hasn't amounted to very much, what the fuck have* I *amounted to?*

22.

Oliver had an absolute horror of dog shit. One day, as we get out of his car near Riverbank, he steps in a pile.

"Damn it, Peter! Why didn't you warn me? You're a young man with a young man's vision. Didn't you see it? These people with their shitty dogs. No other city in the world is so full of dog shit! It's everywhere! Remind me never to park along Riverside Drive again. A brand new pair of sneakers—ruined. I'll have to throw them out, or boil them. I'll have to boil my car. I'll have to boil this stretch of sidewalk. The entire Upper West Side—all of New York City—the entire world, must now be sterilized through boiling."

23.

Discussion (while walking through the botanic garden) inspired by glorious yellow and red tulips, their burning mouths open to the sky. Subject: Cryptogamic plants. "Cryptogam": a plant (fern, moss, algae, or fungus) reproducing by spores but that doesn't produce flowers or seeds. *Cryptogamic:* plants in which the reproductive organs are concealed (unlike tulips and most other flowers that flaunt them to attract insects). *Phanerogamic:* the opposite meaning. Plants are phanerogamic when their reproductive organs aren't merely visible, but gaudily displayed.

I ask Oliver, "Is man cryptogamic or phanerogamic?"

"Both," he says. "On the one hand, our genitalia are located up front and forward, designed to attract attention or at least to be seen. Baboons come to mind. With humans the whole issue of hairlessness and the invention of clothes complicates things, though a few tribes today still go around completely naked. As for the design of the human body itself, its erect posture, that

raises the question why—assuming he wants our genitals to be hidden—God didn't provide for their concealment as he does with the elephant, for instance, and other mammals—and not just by a dab of pubic hair, either."

"Other mammals don't walk on two feet," I observe.

"That's right," Oliver says. "As we must in order to use our opposable thumbs. If our pricks are exposed in the process, so be it."

We sit by the waterfall observing a lone Canada goose as he stands there, motionless, admiring the view, apparently.

"Another argument for man's essential cryptogamia," Oliver continues, "is the fact that despite being clothed and having his genitals otherwise hidden for millennia, man still reproduces himself very successfully. Clothes don't seem to have been an impediment."

"If anything they're an enhancement," I say.

"Right, which raises another question: were we to shed all of our clothes and be more 'at ease' with our nakedness—with the sight of each other's exposed genitals—would the sexual urge 'relax' and become diminished? In itself that might not be such a bad thing, but it tears a hole in the argument that nakedness is man's natural state. Whatever else nature wants of us, it wants us to reproduce as much as possible."

Oliver scrutinizes me. "Now you," he decides, "with your macho leather jacket, you're definitely phanerogamic."

"What about you?" I say.

"Me, I'm strictly cryptogamic."

The Canada goose stands there. We wonder what's going through its mind. A moment of pure contemplation? A moment of aesthetic appreciation? A state of mental and physical suspension? A form of meditation? A hypnotic trance induced by the steady white noise and endlessly repetitive visual of the waterfall?

"All of the above," Oliver decides.

24.

Of mentor-disciple relationships, someone (I think it might have been Russell Baker) once remarked that no matter how much more successful an older writer may be, it's a mistake for a younger writer to ever expect very much sympathy from

him. The older writer has relatively little time left; as far as he's concerned, the younger writer has his whole life ahead of him. Therefore older writer envies younger writer despite how little accomplishment or renown younger writer has achieved.

When I looked at Oliver, I saw someone whose talent and accomplishments I'd never begin to approach, let alone match, a man who, though nearly a quarter century older than me, had as much or more vitality and curiosity, and was far more industrious, intelligent, intuitive, and knowledgeable.

And when he looked at me, what did my friend see? Youth, time, infinite possibilities, inexhaustible potential: a (comparatively) limitless future.

25.

Another trip to Huntington State Park. The last stretch takes us down narrow, twisty roads.

Oliver: "How much longer? I don't like all these curves. Isn't there a less curvy way to get there?"

A few miles from the lake, a tree-surgery truck blocks our lane. Despite a small pickup heading our way in the opposite lane, in a bold move Oliver pulls around the tree truck. But the pickup truck's driver refuses to give way. Soon we're face to face with him. Finally Oliver is forced to give in. Reverse, his least favorite direction. As the small truck passes (and I cringe) Oliver rolls down his window.

"What's the problem?" he asks the pickup truck driver.

Pickup driver (stern-faced, lock-jawed, steely-eyed): "Obstructed lane stops."

He drives off.

"Was that psychotic behavior?" asks Oliver as we head on. "Would you say the driver of that truck was psychotic? What sort of person behaves that way, do you know? I've never seen anyone act so absurdly. What did he mean by what he said, anyway? It sounded like some phrase out of some sort of military-strategy manual. Obstruction lane *what?* What on earth was he going on about? Is this science fiction? And his face—did you see that face? The face of of of of—of *evil,* a *fascistic* face! Those dull, deep-set eyes, that snarling, vicious, half-twisted mouth. I can't do it justice. I doubt Poe could do it justice. Tell me: what sort of person has a face like that? I doubt that I'll ever forget it.

I'll have nightmares about it. A truly psychotic face. Only I've met psychotics, and none of them were that disturbing. I mean, there really was something sadistic in that man's look, in the furrow of his brow, in those cold, cruel, Satanic eyes. And just what point was he trying to make, anyway? What do you call such behavior? You're a writer—how would *you* describe it? Aggressive—is that the word? Confrontational? Assertive? Was this a demonstration of what is meant by the phrase 'to assert oneself'? 'Self-assertion?' Is that what he was up to, what he was demonstrating? That's the problem with America, with this country, this confrontational, aggressive, righteously defensive, self-assertive, don't-tread-on-me, Wild West aggressiveness. A showdown—isn't that what we've just experienced? One needs to carry a six-shooter with that sort of mentality. But no, really, I ask you in all sincerity: might that person have been insane? Is it possible? . . ."

Oliver's tirade lasts the rest of the way to the lake.

26.

As we're walking toward our swim hole, an old man fishing along an embankment sees us and jokes, "If we catch you, we keep you." I joke back that I prefer to be fried in olive oil, with a dash of pepper and salt.

"You're very sociable," Oliver says as we walk on.

"That's me doing my imitation of a normal person," I say.

"Well, you're very good at it," says Oliver.

27.

Oliver's loves (a non-exhaustive list in no particular order): cycads, cephalopods (especially cuttlefish), orange Jell-O, swimming (especially the backstroke), ferns, copper, the heavy metals (the heavier the better), Mozart, Mendeleev (periodic table), Darwin, schmaltz herring (and herring of any persuasion), Swiss Miss (diet), Alexander Luria, spicy Thai chicken-coconut soup, big bathtubs, Dutch gin, motorcycles, minerals, his patients, his friends, yellow pads and colored Flair pens (green, purple, red), his standing desk, his Montblanc fountain pen, his Selectric, smoked salmon, radishes, Proustian sentences, Gibbon's footnotes (and footnotes generally, including his own), hard cider, hot coffee (especially on the road), punctuality, his neck-worn pocket spectroscope . . .

28.
We took a few road trips together. In Woods Hole Bay, Oliver swam while his friend Paul Theroux and I paddled kayaks. In Brattleboro, Vermont, we visited Saul Bellow and his family at their farmhouse. We pulled into the driveway and there he sat, Nobel Laureate, author of *Herzog* and *Humboldt's Gift,* on a rocking chair, wearing a floppy fisherman's cap, reading the Sunday *Times.* Oliver and I sat on either side of him, sipping beers as Saul told us the story of how, as an undergraduate, he and a fellow journalism student hitchhiked to Mexico, intent on interviewing Trotsky, how they got there just in time to view his corpse laid out on a gurney under a white sheet.

"I'll never forget it," Saul Bellow said. "His white beard had reddish brown gunk in it. To this day I can't say if it was iodine or blood."

That evening, at the dinner table, Bellow, who at eighty-seven had stopped writing, told the exact same story again, word for word.

29.
In group situations, Oliver tended to listen rather than speak. He did so as Mr. Bellow shared with me his idea for a children's book that he'd been wanting to write for a long time.

"It's called 'The Elephant in Marshall Field's Window,'" Saul said.

"Really?" I said. "That sounds fascinating. What's it about?"

"I don't know," said Bellow. "I have no idea. All I know is there's an elephant in Marshall Field's window."

Having delivered himself of his children's book concept, Saul leaned close to me and, gesturing toward where Oliver sat, remarked *sotto voce,* "He's a rare bird."

30.
At the Shakespeare Festival in Stratford, Ontario, we sit through a dress rehearsal of his friend Jonathan Miller's production of *King Lear,* with Christopher Plummer doing a marvelous palsied Lear.

On the way back from Canada, we discuss possible titles for Oliver's almost finished memoir[1]. He likes "The Garden

[1] *Uncle Tungsten.*

of Mendeleev" but worries that not enough people know who Mendeleev was. We come up with some alternatives, including two inspired by Flaubert's "The mind, too, has its erections": *Sacks' Mental Erections* and *My Chemical Hard-Ons,* by Oliver Sacks.

Other topics for the drive: Kaleidoscopic patterns under eyelids. Mental symphonies: imagination or hallucination? On fitting in, being or wanting to be "one of the guys."

We take turns behind the wheel of Oliver's Lexus, seeing who can get the best gas mileage. I win.

31.

Christmas holidays. Riding the Amtrak from Washington, DC, to New York. We board the "Quiet Car," no cellphones or radios of any kind permitted, hushed voices: "A library-like atmosphere encouraged." *Eureka!* we think.

No sooner are we seated in the Quiet Car than we consider the possibilities. Why not Quiet Gyms and Quiet Restaurants, Quiet Cafés, Bars, and Beaches? How about a Quiet Brothel or a Quiet Construction Site? Our minds race with possibilities. Quiet Buildings. Quiet Streets. Quiet Neighborhoods. Quiet Counties. Quiet States. State motto on license plate: "Shhhh!" Imagine Quiet Radio Stations (instead of listening to talk or music, you tune in to silence). Quiet Books. Quiet Websites. "Quiet for Dummies." Is it our imaginations, or do all of the passengers in the Quiet Car seem more sophisticated, better-dressed, better-looking, healthier, wealthier, wiser, and wittier?

Oliver and I (quietly) read our books. Oliver: *Proust Was a Neuroscientist.* Me: *Out Stealing Horses.* When we get bored we wander to the café car, Oliver bracing himself, his feet unsteady down the swaying aisles. We snack on hummus, olives, and tea. Back in the Quiet Car, Oliver is in a chatty mood. He whispers, discussing the distinction between romantic and clinical descriptions. I'm not sure how long we've been talking, whispering—five minutes, ten?—when a tall passenger wearing expensive tortoise-shell bifocals materializes, crouching in the aisle so his face is level with ours, a middle-aged face with thick gray hair brushed back and parted in the middle. His face is red; his eyes bulge.

"Excuse me," the man seethes, "but you are talking"— his lips spell the words for us—"VERY LOUDLY. This is THE QUIET CAR. If you want to talk LOUDLY, move to some other car.

This is THE QUIET CAR." His jowls tremble. He looks as if he is headed for apoplexy. I say, "I don't think we were talking that loudly." "Yes, yes—you were talking VERY LOUDLY and this is THE QUIET CAR."

The man returns to his seat.

Oliver and I exchange looks, then bury our chastened heads in our respective books. After a few moments Oliver opens the little vellum notebook he keeps with him always and writes, using one of the three colored Flairs he likewise keeps on hand at all times: *Was that a bit exaggerated?* He hands pen and pad to me.

I write: *I think we've just encountered a Quiet Car Fanatic.*

Oliver (writing): *A Quiet Asshole.*

Me: *A Quiet Hole.*

And so on. We giggle like school kids—silently. This is, after all, the Quiet Car.

32.

In some ways he was like an older brother or an uncle to me; in others more like a father. Like a father he could be critical. On learning that, at fifty-three, I'd become—not on purpose—a father myself, his response: "That's kid stuff, Peter. At your age you should know better." He disapproved of my saying "different than" (as opposed to "different *from*."). We disagreed over the proper use of "that" vs. "which."

He could get angry, too. Once, at a swimming camp in Curaçao, while pulling ahead of him in a race, I accidentally kicked him in the face with my foot. I had no idea I'd kicked him. Later, in his room, I found him seated at his desk strewn with papers, with more sheets scattered on the floor, all with strange diagrams drawn on them with his red and green Flair pens, the sort of diagrams football coaches draw for their players, with circles, arrows, and Xs. They were Oliver's schematics of "the event," proving, beyond any doubt, that I and no other swimmer in the pack had kicked him in the face, as if he were preparing for a tribunal. I pleaded guilty. It took him a day or two, but he forgave me.

33.

I was still living in New York when Oliver learned about the melanoma in his right eye. He'd picked me up for a swim. As soon as I got in the car I noticed the strained look on his face. I

thought his sciatica might have kept him up. It had been acting up lately. As we pulled away he said, "I'm afraid I've had some rather distressing news." He explained how he'd gone to the movies two days before to see the latest *Star Trek* film. At some point while watching the film he became aware of a strange, burning shape, like a glowing coal, in the upper corner of his vision. As the dark screen brightened, the glowing coal disappeared, but soon it was back, along with flashes like camera bulbs going off.

"At first I thought I was having a visual migraine," he explained, "only it affected just one eye, which is odd, since migraine auras originate in the brain and typically effect vision symmetrically."

The visual distortions persisted through the movie and afterward, when he got home. He phoned his opthamologist, who, it turned out, was away on vacation. Another doctor was covering for him. The doctor, who saw him the next day, found a growth close to the retina. It might be a tumor, the doctor said, or a blood clot from a hemorrhage, though the color was more indicative of a tumor. If a tumor, it might be a melanoma. If a melanoma, then—worst case—it might have already metastasized to the liver, as eye melanomas are known to do when they grow to a certain size.

"If it has metastasized?" I asked. "What then?"

"That would be a death sentence," said Oliver.

He said it matter-of-factly. I remembered the story he told me of Bishops Latimer and Ridley being burned as heretics at the stake. *Play the man, Master Ridley.*

34·

We had our swim. Afterward, as we walked back to the car (he with a cane now; since breaking his leg in the mountain fall recounted in *A Leg to Stand On,* he'd not been very steady on his feet), he spoke of how the news had changed his perspective on things, how it had forced him to consider his achievements, to ask himself whether, were he to die in a few weeks or months, his would have been a worthy, satisfying life. His friend Stephen Jay Gould came up in the ensuing discussion, so did Susan Sontag, Hume, Gibbons, Freud, and others who'd lived life to the fullest and faced death bravely, and even (in Hume's case) with great good cheer. Then there were less posi-

tive examples, like the polymath physicist John von Neumann, who'd been an atheist until he learned that he had eighteen months to live, when, to the dismay of his fellow atheists, he became a Catholic and lived out his last months in fear of hellfire and damnation.

"I don't see that happening to you," I said.

"Nor do I," said Oliver.

35.

In his office he reads to me from a slim vellum notebook: the diary that he's kept since learning of his eye tumor, recounting that moment in the movie theater. The notes sound like notes from one of his case studies, only now the patient is himself. He describes blind spots drifting like clouds over the newsprint in the Sunday *Times,* and how the day will soon come when he'll have to say goodbye to bright colors and stereoscopic vision (*Goodbye to All That,* the title of Robert Graves's autobiography, keeps recurring to him). He smiles while reading, amused as ever by his own words and observations, despite their being occasioned by a life-threatening illness, his own. He approaches his own mortality with the same spirit—sympathetic, curious, with wry, deadpan humor—as he approaches his patients' symptoms: with empathy and interest rather than detachment; sympathy, but not pity; concern, but not alarm; clarity, without coldness. Like good poetry, his notebook is the record of emotions recollected in tranquility.

36.

The growth is malignant. Worse, it's right next to the optic nerve. Radiation treatment will be risky. The good news: the tumor is small enough that it probably hasn't metastasized yet. He orders his priorities: *life, sight, eye*. He's already decided against enucleation—a gruesomely scientific word for having one's eye removed. Radiation offers the best prognosis.

"Either way, I'll probably lose all sight in that eye and with it my beloved stereoscopic vision. Still," Oliver says, "if it saves my life, the loss will be worth it."

I ask him what he plans to do for the holidays. He says he's not sure. Usually he goes to DC to visit a friend and his family. On one hand, the distraction may do him good, he says. On the other, he doesn't want to have to be merry around strangers.

37.
(Every so often, though, the clinical detachment dissolves. Oliver's beleaguered eyes lose their focus. Gravity draws down the edges of his lips. Under his gray beard his jaw tenses: he steps out of his clinical observer's role into the body of a man diagnosed with cancer. The poet/scientist disappears; the helpless patient takes his place. He needs the detachment offered by language, by analysis, by thoughts and words sweeping over a page, the alchemist turning despair and terror into words.)

38.
"Let's have a walk, shall we?" he says.

We bundle up and head out in search of lunch. The Japanese restaurant is closed. We go to the Bus Stop Café. It's afternoon. Oliver orders a buttered bagel and coffee. I ask for a glass of Chianti. Tomorrow Oliver goes for his liver test (one reason he abstains from wine himself, though he doesn't much care for wine anyway: too sour; at home he even puts sugar in it, or mixes it with Jell-O). If the test results are negative, it will mean that the cancer hasn't metastasized; if not, there will have to be other tests to determine for sure if the cancer has spread or not. One way or the other, he'll know the worst.

39.
At noon the next day he phones. No metastases.

40.
In 2009, having accepted the first of several visiting positions in pursuit of a new academic career, I left New York City. That pursuit led me here, to Georgia, to my house on a lake.

Whenever possible, on my visits north, Oliver and I would swim together. Otherwise, at least every other weekend, typically after my morning swims, I'd phone him, my Speedo still dripping, to rub in his face the fact that I lived on a lake (as he had once) and try to entice him to visit. During one call, after we spoke of other things, he shared his bad news: after a long remission the melanoma had metastasized to his liver. Some treatments might extend his life for a few months, but there was no cure.

"This is it," he said.

Outside of his assistant Kate and others in his "inner circle,"

he hadn't told anyone. He would make the news public in writing, probably in a *New York Times* essay. He didn't seem all that scared or sad or even concerned. His words carried more resolve than anything.

He shared with me his determination to use well whatever time he had left. "I'll spend it with my friends, swim and take walks, read and play the piano, laugh and have fun."

But the main thing he wanted to do was to write.

"You sound resolved," I said.

"My cancer is resolved. Why shouldn't I be?"

"Well, Oliver," I said, "it's probably no comfort, but dying is just about the only thing you haven't done yet in your life."

Snort. "Very good."

I'd carried my cellphone out onto the deck, where I could look out at the lake as we spoke. Afterward I stood there, holding it, crying.

41.

I remember my last visit with him. We and his partner, Billy, swam together in the back yard pool of his home in Rhinebeck. The pool was just big enough for the three of us to swim back and forth abreast of each other. Billy and I had a push-up contest. Then we sat there, the three of us, lounging under a pergola in our wet bathing suits.

Our last swim.

Two weeks later, back in Georgia, I awoke to an e-mail from Kate saying that Oliver had died that morning at two o'clock. He died peacefully in his sleep within days of putting the finishing touches on his last essay.

42.

December. My last lake swim of the season. The water temperature has dipped below 60 degrees. At first it's painfully cold, but after a few dozen strokes I feel as comfortable as if the water were twenty degrees warmer. I do my usual swim to the dock four houses away and back, two hundred strokes each way, thinking, as always, of Oliver.

Whenever I swim now, for as long as I keep swimming, I'll think of him. I'll swim for us both.

SUZANNAH SHOWLER

RIDEAU

In high school I commuted on ice skates. I lived in Ottawa, the capital of Canada, and each winter morning I would head a block and a half up the street, jaywalk across the Colonel By Drive, and descend a basement's depth on clanging, iron-grate stairs to the ice surface of the Rideau Canal. If I was running late, I'd put on my skates sitting on the steps, pinching laces through eyelets in the cold, sacrificing feeling in my fingers. Better, if there was time, to lace up in the shack at the top of Dow's Lake, warmed by its perennial smell: sweet cedar plywood, industrial rubber, trickle of sweat sock.

The Rideau Canal runs 126 miles, connecting Ottawa to Kingston, a small city and fort on Lake Ontario, which forms the border with the United States. From the canal's southern end, a boat can reach Toronto via the lake, and at the northern end continue on the Ottawa River, or la rivière des Outaouais, to Montreal and the St. Lawrence.

I think of canals as manmade, but the Rideau is more claimed than built. Its path is drawn over already-existing rivers and lakes, transformed from natural features to feat of engineering by way of connecting locks—small, adaptable dams that come open in the center, raising and lowering the water level, lifting boats from one body of water to the next.

At the canal's mile zero, a flight of eight locks ascends like an oversized escalator, a reverse-waterfall performing a seventy-nine-foot, hour-and-a-half lift from the Outaouais into the center of downtown. On the southwest bank, the Canadian Parliament building branches like a thick, stone candelabra, matched by the Château Laurier on the other, copper roofs on both buildings oxidized to a green so bright it seems it must come from something alive. Rumor is they get it that color with an alkaline wash of horse piss.

The path through Ottawa proper is the canal's longest constructed stretch. A cement trench meanders south through the

city, joining the Rideau River at the Hog's Back Falls. It is this manmade corridor—4.8 miles from just shy of the parliament building to the last set of locks before the Hog's Back—that is cleared, brushed, and smoothed into the Rideau Canal Skateway each winter.

"I skated to school" is an anecdote I offer, usually to Americans, as a kind of burlesque of Canadianness, a true-life substitute for all the igloos I never lived in and dog sleds I never ran. It might sound quintessential, but truth is, skating as a mode of transit is just as foreign to most Canadians as it is to Americans. The skate-commute is unique to Ottawa, something I understood only when I went away to college, made friends from other cities and provinces, people whose hometowns were not shot through with an artery of ice.

I moved to America last year. I live in Ohio, a state they say is the shape of a heart, but all I see is an udder. I couldn't have picked Ohio out on a map eighteen months ago, though it shares Lake Erie with Canada.

Once again, with moving comes a change in perspective, its attendant change of scale. Now that I live in the United States, I find the stories I tell are more likely to be—both for me and my interlocutor—emblematic of a larger identity, bloating to contain a whole nation.

Which is to say: as soon as you aren't in Canada, commuting on skates is a very Canadian thing to do.

The canal was built, of course, to keep America out.

Though we'd won the War of 1812 (except there was no "we"; these were British colonials), it was a haphazard victory, the conflict poorly strategized and raggedly funded on both sides.

The British believed America was not done invading the colony. A supply line was needed, something to suture Fort Kingston, on the vulnerable inland sea border, to Montreal and the St. Lawrence Seaway.

Construction of the Rideau Canal was started in 1826 and finished six years later, in 1832. It was overseen by British-import Lieutenant Colonel John By, who'd hopped from Royal Artillery to Royal Engineers. He'd worked in Canada before, fortifying Quebec City and the St. Lawrence Seaway in the lead-up to 1812.

Canadian nationalism didn't really become a thing until the late 1960s, around the centennial of Canadian Confederation. The Vietnam War was on, and when Canada did not follow America's suit, an identity grew up around the absence of action. We began to see ourselves as a nation of non-participants, our country a haven of resistance. (No matter that we sold billions in war materials to the US, or offered up the empty northern prairie as target practice for carpet bombs.)

People had been skating on the canal casually for years, but it wasn't until this period of newborn Canadianness in the mid-twentieth century that a government-endorsed, groomed rink was formed, a small section of ice downtown cleared away by city workers with brooms.

The full breadth of the canal was made skateable for the first time in 1972. That same year, Margaret Atwood published the first concerted discussion of Canadian literature. In it, she proposes that the central metaphor in the stories Canada tells itself—as the Frontier is to America, or the Island to Great Britain—is the story of our Survival. Canada, Atwood proposes, is a place where Man vs. Nature really means something.

The canal was mostly built by unskilled workers. Many came from the former French colony then called Lower Canada; many more were poor immigrants from Ireland.

Records are thin, but the estimated total number of workers over six years of construction goes as high as ten thousand. It was rough work. During periods of particular drudgery and disease, the men were plied with free grog. Once, they were given blankets. It's not known how many died, but the guess is about a thousand, mostly from malaria, others by construction accident. At Hog's Back Falls, three iterations of a dam failed, nearly burying dozens of men in mud and clay.

"I skated to school." It know it sounds sepia toned and turn of the century, fur muffs and skating parties and linked arms. Or maybe European, a Flemish tableau, tiny skaters scattershot without perspective over a canvas of ice.

Usually, it was horrible. The mornings were colorless and frigid. Afternoons, the surface of the ice had been hacked to mulch by the weight of a thousand tourists. Though the canal

snaked acutely, changing course, the wind remained against me no matter which direction I was pointed. I skated like I was locked in a frustrated dream, kicking off with all my weight and barely moving forward. I wore fat, tinted ski goggles that jaundiced the world and left a raccoon print on my face.

Too disorganized to choose which books I needed to do the bare minimum of homework—just enough to keep up as an unremarkable, near-successful student—I lugged the full contents of my locker to and from school each day. I was like some kind of hoarder snail, heavy book bag extended two-pockets-deep off my back, unbalanced by the weight.

Had things gone differently, the canal might have been built earlier than it was. In 1818, the first post-war governor general was particularly gung-ho about the project, but he was bitten by a Quebecois soldier's semi-tamed fox, and he died of rabies. In fact, he died while chopping through the near-impassable brush, surveying the would-be canal route.

The canal is named Rideau after the river it bypasses and then joins, and the river is named for its ending, two falls dropping into the Outaouais. The falls are wide and straight and clear, like a swath of fabric pulled across a window: a *rideau,* French for "curtain." The curtain makes a border, marking off where one thing ends and another begins. It's a line you see, but can't see through.

The Rideau Canal is the world's longest outdoor skating rink.

At least it was, until 2008, when Winnipeg—an even colder, more barren place than Ottawa—cleared a 5.3-mile path where the Red River meets the Assiniboine. This is how Canadian cities throw shade. But the Winnipeg Skateway was just one Zamboni wide, and its total surface area still didn't match Ottawa's, which is the equivalent of ninety Olympic rinks.

The Canal rebranded. The world's *largest* outdoor skating rink.

I wasn't alone. In the winter, the skateway is the quickest shot downtown from any of the neighborhoods that border the Canal, and plenty of people commute. Bureaucrats from the many federal buildings downtown, office workers in the small financial district, professors at the University of Ottawa. They come

from the Glebe, Old Ottawa South, Little Italy. Not a majority, especially at high tourist season, but a visible presence: bright figures swathed in Gore-Tex and microfleece, carrying briefcases and suit bags.

In the end, America never came. The canal never fulfilled its intended purpose, was never used in defense.

It still works, though. The locks are hand-cranked open and shut all summer by teenagers in white T-shirts and forest green Parks Canada caps. And Americans do invade, but they come in pleasure craft—sunbathing and drinking and feeding our economy as they bob up and through the odd, ancient water gates that receive them.

I lived on one end of a very long ice rink, and most of the places I wanted to be were near the other. It wasn't only a path to school: I've skated home from bars and parties, dates, dances, getting stoned in the park.

I was wearing skates the first time I kissed the first boy I loved. Laced up to go home after a movie we'd spent brushing elbows, I found that on my blades, I'd grown to his height. The sudden nearness of his face made me bold, and I glided close and kissed him first. I remember the contact of temperatures, his lips cool but mouth warm, the cold end of his nose touching my cheek.

It isn't completely true what I said.

I've remembered the skate as grueling, but when I think about it now, this seems to be a one-way truth. Yes, the mornings were harsh—after all, I wasn't just skating, but skating to high school, and there was little to look forward to at the end of the dark, numbing battle with the wind down the corridor of ice. But when I think about it now, it seems the skate home was not so bad at all.

By the time school let out, the sun was already low in the winter sky, catching snow crested in banks along the stone walls of the canal, illuminating fragments, bringing all the frozen wet to life.

The wind wasn't really always against me. Sometimes, it was the opposite: a lift from behind that urged me so fully I moved without will of my own. There was a freedom in the glide—a

feeling of possibility so huge and open it was almost too much. I felt like I might leave everything behind. Flight on foot.

I would fit the headphones of my Discman under my toque, let Radiohead or Ani DiFranco or Elliott Smith sing me down the sparkling, lit-up tunnel home.

The present is necessary, something you can't help but be in, what you are doing just by being alive. The past, though—that is all choice. You select what you carry, and whether you mean it to or not, who you are—and who you are becoming—happens to you. Not in what you do, but in what you choose to tell.

I didn't skate the Rideau Canal to make an identity. I skated it because I had somewhere to go.

In the six years it took to build the canal, Colonel By contracted several bouts of swamp fever, but managed to not die. He stood beside—sometimes on—the Hog's Back dam as it failed and failed and failed.

The fourth-time's-a-charm dam and several military blockhouses not approved by the British ran the canal to nearly double its budget. No matter that he'd driven a path of water through impassable country, Colonel By was recalled to England and subject to a public hearing that buried his career. He died four years later.

The settlement at the mouth of the canal, a dense patch of wilderness once considered impossible to build on, was called Bytown. Later it would be Ottawa, and later still Queen Victoria would name it the capital of the new country of Canada, splitting the difference between Montreal and Toronto.

Canada is an answer to a question no one's asking. Who are you not? The United States. Great Britain. France. It's an identity forged by negation.

Four-fifths of the Canadian population lives within a hundred miles of the United States. We are a true north of southerners, huddled up against our only border, keeping warm, seeing where we are by the obtuse, unwavering light of our great, relentless, only neighbor.

Intellectually, I know the whole idea of national character is just a hangover from modernity, too facile to really be useful.

A quick tumble into stereotype, into laziness. It's such a boring conversation.

And still, I feel this urge. I want to claim this feature of my upbringing—skating as transit rather than recreation—as indicative of something real. I want to say it isn't just another expat anecdote, an easy way to come off foreign and funny and strange. It reminds me so much of where I'm from.

Skating as a way to get around might not be a common Canadian experience, but that doesn't mean it isn't a very Canadian thing to do. Something in the pragmatism and the quiet, almost undetectable resilience this pragmatism demands.

The environment is harsh. We are resigned to this truth, and yet we remain almost guilelessly undaunted. It isn't something you talk about. There is no fanfare. You just get to where you are going.

It's not the skating that's Canadian—it's the view. To see a thoroughfare in the wilderness asking to be claimed. To see the ice as a path at all.

My parents still live in the same house by Dow's Lake. This past winter the weather was cold but calm. Good skating weather. My father's e-mails always include an update on ice conditions.

My dad turned seventy-one in February, on a day the temperature fell 17 below zero Fahrenheit. I missed him when I called the house, so sent an e-mail to wish a happy birthday. He wrote back at 3:35 in the morning to say he'd had a great time, closed down the bar with some friends, skated home alone.

I know that skate. In the middle of the night, when you are the only one on it, the canal is windless, neither flushing you down it nor keeping you from where you're trying to get. Around midnight, city workers come out with hoses, create a skin-thin flood that freezes on impact. It isn't ice, now—it's glass. And you'll glide over it, hatch thin, forgettable scratches across the surface, mark your way home.

BONNIE ARNING

BLACK ACRES

The red dot on the map reads: you are here.
I place my finger to the circle, then against
my chest. There was a time we thought
we never left the garden, that our problem
was simple: a failure to recognize the canker
and bagworms of paradise. A hundred days
gone and I wonder if the wasp who dropped
into my lap, flexed its wings, then died,
is the only blessing I'm fit for. A woman
who leaves her husband—she is free
to launch her body anywhere like a fat
rubber band. The boys who soap Civics
in moonlight, the neighbor whose linens
slap at my window, the man who leaves
hickeys and bite marks that scar—what if
this is what I was allotted the day I was born?
The wasp didn't sting and when wind uprooted
the tree in my yard, how beautiful its blooms
became once scattered in dirt. I press my finger
to the circle, then against my chest. What's mine?
Here are all the black acres of paradise.

UPDATE #1

From many I can make
something.
There is the meeting
in a janitorial gymnasium
with the man who is so great
I am afraid
to miss him.
The dance with my middle-aged grandfather
who is dying
shows me what is off.
There is the art class about
yellow.
The classroom holds its place.
There is a shower door
where water drops confirm the existence
of alien life.
There are rabbits in the bush
that won't keep its shape.
There is a wedding in the body
of an actress.
There is an eye doctor's office
where I show up for your appointment.
There is the one where you aren't grateful.
There is a stupid violent undergraduate play
that makes me angry.
There is a store that makes me confuse
one and three.
There is a soldier who tells me I should stand
in difficult places.
There is no world that won't be like that
anymore.

GEOFFREY BABBITT

ON PECKHAM RYE NEAR DULWICH HILL

not the picturesque tree
on the majestic hill, not the tree
a stone's throw from the walker—the tree
overhead, where no path
intersects the path as it winds
round the thick trunk—smell
of fallen leaves compacting
their dampness, moss
sweating on stones—behold:::
every bough sidereal
—faces unexpected—hair as if under-
water—not what you would
choose—tin flash in the leaf-gleam—
an angel's face is always changing,
always troubles and is symbolic
of nothing—company
of wings bespangling the leaves
is its own tall point

LOS'S LARK

On the highest lift of his light wings,
a lark reechoes into the great expanse
of sky that is a shining shell.

His throat holds a treadle loom
whose song weaves blue.

The entire bird is its organ of perception.
Blue song builds light wings.

On the highest lift of his light wings,
the lark becomes what he beholds, reechoing the expanse.

The sun's vortex folds into itself.
Working the treadle builds the loom.

Blue looms
in the throat of the lark.

The entire bird is its organ of imagination.
A lark's song builds the bird,
reechoing into sun, reechoing lark song into lark.

GILLIAN CONOLEY

MY SISTER'S HAND IN MINE

No longer a bride's not yet the crone's
but a galactic fact
on a steering wheel competent flexion
unscrewing tops all sorts
one brushing
lint from
the hospital bed
Last act of many graces
my mother lies straight as if on a plank, her hands crossed
as though already buried
my sister and I "have" our mother's hands
hers the more delicate
piano fingers

My hands hold the book I read to my mother
though she and it might as well be on Mars

If the sentry leaves
the chorus sings

whether or not to bury their brother and how
Antigone and her sister ask
which law is greater
God's or ours
Or is each a law
of the past serpents
One hand
searching for the other,
by these signs you shall know us

Though we have no real way
to talk, plexus, do you
want the screw and nail
from before, or
how does the universe
make itself
known through you

Palm's girlish hips
five spikes of crown
to scrape against the rim
to throw with the linen

If the nurse begins to smoke and walk towards a portal
I wonder how my hand was manufactured
and is living
a bunch of bananas
a prehensile organ such as that
on all four limbs of a monkey
a peacock's
stretched claws
at the bottom of a bronze lamp—

It is 1922, heavy winds blow hats into the dirt's furrows.
To lie still is like the memory of a lavish dress.
Figure, ground, when we run we run each mile away.
Sweeping up, whose hands were whose
we forget. Proust dies, the California grizzly
becomes extinct, Ulysses is published, the Eskimo Pie
is patented, Judy Garland is born.

All is about to be but not quite
forgotten, veiled, erased, or repeated.
The body consumed with love gives off heat.
Self by self flies off the shelves,

we have to make it back before dark.
How long did Lo Fu look at the branch
before he turned away.

Vision, blindness, we would like to order
two nurses' caps, two tries,
one to flee, and one to fold.

COLIN DODDS

THE PIGEONS DON'T COMPLAIN

By Bethesda Fountain German words
tumble into chilly daylight
With peculiar currencies and fragilities
tourists purr like cats chirp like birds
attempting the sensual certitude
of the oil paintings they photograph

The afternoon pageant fritters itself
Bikes like foxes and buses like buffalo
in the finger-smeared glass
of Prosperity Dumpling

Pigeons with oil spill necks
poppy seed eyes and grandmother feet
don't complain about the rent
swooping down and flapping up
between school and housing project

Daytime trucks and nighttime cars
Shouting accompanies the stars

Full of majesty
Majesty gray in winter and green in spring
Majesty accidental and intended
Nonetheless you should bring your own

A woman on the F train applies makeup to her knees—
A fresh mystery for which I add my thanks
to the city which every day writes a library of thanks
blasts a cannonade of thanks leaves a slowly congealing
puddle of thanks every aperture of the loquacious leviathan
bursting with thanks burying itself alive with thanks
and shaking itself free for a moment from shackles of thanks
to say thanks

FROM "HUMAN KNOWLEDGE"

All around us, society is being used
to tell itself a story.

Know what it doesn't say?

Doesn't say precisely how
this one brick got here, how it got
to be part of this walkway, only one
of its faces visible.

Doesn't say how this brick shines
with wind. *You're beautiful.*

One thing I'm not debating
with myself is whether
the desire to say so
is urgent.

Know what we are?

Two organisms that crossed paths.

Know why I didn't speak?

Trying to hush
the moan I heard
in my head.

I'm in pain and thinking
about dying. Body wishing
this little moment
(the sun just set, the sky dim,
water sloshing against brick)
could be its last.

~

I can't hear what you're asking—
maybe you're not
saying anything.

I answer that your skin smells like
lemon, and when we're in the fields
the scent gets stronger,

and when I speak
your skin sloughs off
and yellow light shoots from the top
of your head into the sky.

Much later, we'll all be
just little hills
with stones on top.
I have a sweet feeling.

~

If the universe is an overgrown garden
the size of a universe—

and if all human knowledge is the size
of this little lemon balm patch—

~

My body sends information to
my body. Out with it.

The sky, too, has a soul.

Above a cloud field,
the light keeps painting
a pink sea, a rosy welt.

Your cheeks, too, are pinked.

You're in motion
because beheld.

~

I took a street,
I put my palm over its eye.
But the street led to a shore;
but when the ocean splashed out,
there was a water stain on the sky in the shape of a vertebra.

My body was a sculpture made only of salt. It fell beneath
a curtain, the interminable salt water
parting.

EMILY GEMINDER

DEER LUCK

1.

One crow is good luck. Two crows, bad.

Ladybug, ladybug: your house caught fire.

One petal: he loves you. One petal: loves you not.

Here is the body: stiff as a stick.

Here is the feather: now you float.

She's looking sick: she's dying, dead.

One petal left: you're dying, you're dead.

One crow: good luck. One deer: deer luck.

Dead deer in the woods: still counts.

2.

Dead deer in the woods, ribs bashed in: a car on the street.
A car on the street, and animals like to crawl someplace
lonely to die.

Dead deer in a dream: in dreams, your house keeps burning.
You run to the woods: lucky, alive.

Numb of winter: you forget the deer, then stumble on the bright
broken skeleton
in spring: bones licked white as stars. Through the skull:
a blade of grass.
Through the ribs: light.

Ribs collapse: this means dust and dirt and time. Means the
world turns
around a burning star and you turn too, dumbstruck and
alive.

Bodies collapse, years: you grow up. Time grows small. Stars
collapse: become dust,
become bone. Through them comes the light.

3·

If you drive a boy's car to the Texaco
for cigarettes, this means
it's midnight.

This means he loves you and he's throwing
every object in the room one by one.
He loves you, loves you not.

If a deer leaps from the woods, pauses
mid-air, pinned still
by headlights.

If the crash comes slow as unstrung lightning.
If you wonder if maybe
she wanted to die.

If there's a way to save a thing that wants to die.
If you come back with the boy in the morning.
If he loves you, loves you not.

If a boy who loves you always wants to save you:
from the past, from the future,
from himself.

If always a boy who wants to save you
wants to kill you
a little too,

you know the deer won't be there anyway.
You know she's in the woods,
dying alone.

If you love the thing that wants to kill you,
your luck will burn like a flare:
brief but shining.

4.

Some say there are deer. Some say there's luck.

If once on a bad trip your mother saw a deer and knew everything would be okay—

even you, her far-off, unborn child; even with the world on fire—

all her life she'd tell you: a deer means good luck.

And you'd believe her, always.

Even when deer flew through windshields all over town.

Even on a dark road late at night, even if the doe was coming just for you.

Even then there'd be a moment—your animal eyes meeting, brief and shining.

BAL DES ARDENTS

Believing myself made of glass
I Charles in time of war for fear

of shattering completely
allowed no one's touch
to touch me how it sounds now

when I say it is not how it felt

•

Last winter you see
a six of sweet courtiers

and the sweetest one dance *en masque*
as beasts sprung from the brush,
gowns of linen soaked with resin

lined with flax, broad shoulders bare,
their twelve legs chained together

now shriek and leap *en masque*
You see the long handsome arm,
the one arm that toward himself
topples a torch almost inevitably—

•

My wooly boy, shorn-gone,

•

his smoke had the sweetest scent.

•

The Sixth, they say. *The Beloved. The Mad.*
I found a new one I want for mine

seized in the forest of Le Mans
in August *When the wind is Southerly . . .*

What remains after a year of rot?
Always the pit, never the peach.

To become, overnight, a *survivor*—

I wouldn't wish it on anyone.

STACY GNALL

SWAN SONG

after *The Warriors*

There is no shelter near

and so we run

    and so we throw ourselves
upon the city's throat

circling back over it
back over
pipes and pressures

through tunnels
like veins that web temples

past people
where they sleep
unable to breathe

        Show me the sea

the great fright
machines off
            screen

their neon and fried
light turned low
    for the night

        Show us the sea

the waves an always-
initiation

where no one is healed
    but gathered and used
again

Here we are

on the beach
surrounded by
Riffs
            for the kill
            chomping the bit

Here we are
so late by now it is light

    the sun half an hour high

        Here
in the company of this thrill

Struck full of fire it's
our turn to live

"Swan Song" both uses and is inspired by lines from Sara Teasdale, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Quentin Brown, Hugh Seidman, Muriel Rukeyser, Galway Kinnell, Matthew Rohrer, Walt Whitman, and Kimiko Hahn. All of their poems are about Brooklyn, or Coney Island specifically.

KEYS

The boy came to a clearing on the far side
of the forest. An abandoned piano sat in the dead grass.
It was out of tune, but that was fine—he hardly knew
the difference. At first, he played some notes just to hear them,
nothing in particular. But soon he found himself
playing the curve of his father's belt. He played the way
his sister had looked down when she told him what
happened to her. He played what was left of his small
bag of almonds. All around him, bald trees slept.
His fingertips went numb. He played until he was no longer
playing, but was himself a key being pressed by the weight
of the pale winter day he had chosen to wander into,
having reached the end of what he could explain.

MICHAEL KEENAN

RHODE ISLAND EASTER

When Tutankhamen awakes
and sees me sitting

beside him with a book
by Rimbaud, he says, I knew you

would come. Did you ever

see Tina again, he asks. Not yet, I reply,
but I've been thinking about it.

I remember sitting
in Denny's trying to teach

myself to smoke and write

at the same time,
he says. I remember that, too, I say,
it was a long time ago

but the story isn't over.
As long as I'm in it, he says, sitting

up, as long as the girls
are on fire.

MICHAEL KROESCHE

MY SILENCE AND SAPLING TIME

Do my trees talk to one
another?

At times

We don't speak to
the little souls who come in
our bark smells the city
on their clothes, dry hacks
from machines dusting hair

They love the iron nails
that pin the dolls, notes
remind them
of their sapling hours
a time between above
and below, then
the hard shoot spearing
dirt

MICHAEL KROESCHE

SUNFLOWER

Alone, I noticed
the dumb sunflowers
dumbly turning towards
light
Another flower face
petal round assents
grinning arcwise through
daytime
full from dozens
tumbling bees

STILL LIFE

Wheeled to the window
to blush at the folly of dawn.
Maybe love is the afternoon
of poised barroom darts,
the empty threat
of a green cloud
with no mountain
to break itself against.

—To crack open the vista
and pour out all the birdsong
into my twenty-first-century
hearing horn! But you
will look at your hands and say
Give him what he wants now
and when will it end?

BARNYARD DEPORTEES AND REFUGEES

Well back from
tour routes, Julio's jeep burrows
between rock piles. We scout along the north shore
to rough coast waters, a high-risk sharks' feeding bay inlet.
In winter, waves twenty feet high.
Danger signs in three colors posted at every bend of circuitous
dirt roadway. Ten or a dozen body-
surfers braving those swells . . . *No problem. It's*
the safer season.
Local couples know the ropes. We swerve inland,
climb steep uphill
slope, and emerge on gravel path midway between
two highest rolling bluffs anyplace
in sight. We brake, skidding in dust clouds, and halt just
short
of clobbering two parti-colored goats,
long-eared, frolicking from hummock to lower knoll,
followed
by dense passels of sheep and goats and hybrid
quadrupeds. So many colors and
crazy-quilt skin

patches on backs
and hindmosts, I'm at a loss to name
those breeds—spotting my befuddlement, sly Julio
points at the rumps."Take note," says he.
"Since Aruba's blessed with many short-fleeced sheep and
long-haired goats,
the only sure-fire true-blue way to tell them apart:
goat tails point up, while sheep tails
point down. That test never fails. We have fewer
wild donkeys here,

but no confusing that noisy bellowing hoof-
kickuppity lot . . .
Throughout the outback swale and hillocks meander
some nine hundred odd wild goats,
about three hundred fifty wild sheep,
maybe one hundred fifty *near-*
crazed garden-trampler bucking-wild
donkeys, rabbits and ducks unnumbered
and plenteous lizards,
snakes: only a few poisonous rattlers left
among them, but you must be on
lookout for that

stray tail-chatter
serpent . . ." Since the multi-farm
shutdown of the nineteen-forties, most livestock
breeders gave up their foalings and nurseries. And despite old
laws still on the books prohibiting
game animals to be on the loose
(no goats, sheep, bulls or the like
may be left untended, nor free to roam about
the countryside),
most game wardens and agri-police look away,
since fresh lamb,
mutton and goat stew are *a must* for the holidays.
"Frozen meats, we frugal Arubans
can make do with for most of the year. But every winter our
wild herds refurbish the low, low supplies,
and hunters—who compete in a rope-slinging free-for-all—
may have their limitless pick of those bounding
frisky nibblers the weeks before
X-mas and New Years."

NEW TO THE BOTTOM OF STONE

Canyon, we wade middle Plum Creek to find it
low this August. All afternoon spent sifting

with bug nets in shallowed water. Each overturn,
another thing caught: loose

rock, mayfly nymph, bottle cap, minnow's silver, old
leaves folded oddly & over themselves.

Search for names; turn them back
to the current, clumsy— meanwhile:

a kestrel cuts
in-out overhead, hard hunting for

something here, then somewhere; you
snap a photograph of a crawfish, limpdead

& carried down & through. I thumb a tear
in my pocket over & again—

by now, our shoes are wet with creek & mud;
how strange to be reminded this way

of our feet. Over & again, nets all middled
with keepless things; how strange,

this way, to be reminded—.

LAST NIGHT I RUINED EVERYTHING I LOVE

A boy jester dressed in scarlet
plumage held a gold carp
before him, his face open
and luminous.
When I
beheaded him, his eyes
startled wide, the head fell,
rolling swiftly
into his father's field—

the rest of him
staggered, loose-skinned,
toward the woods
like an animal
blinded by buckshot—

while the head kept rolling,
its mouth working drily . . .

He wanted the scythe his father
had left in the grass.
He wanted his hands back.
He wanted to touch
his own face.

RICK LYON

BUTTERFLY SUMMER

Why so many butterflies, I'm wondering,
blue ones, black ones, oranges and black, yellow?
It all started with a chartreuse luna moth
languishing on the front doorstep, winded,
but clinging to the screen door, vertical, come morning,
its furry antennae like reindeer antlers
tuned to the forest's turnings, whims,
while our new neighbor fells trees, chain saws,
to whittle a clearing where his house will go.
With plentiful rain, the woods are green, mosquitoes everywhere.
The fluttering airborne blossoms flourish,
designed to delight, as if to say
the forest is ours and will remain, willy-nilly,
unless you'd choose to live in a colorless world.

WHAT WE BELIEVE WE BELIEVE

Some say God appreciates restraint,
as the oriole prefers the banyan's higher branches,

or as gravity welcomes a canted surface.
Thus containment sucker punches contrition,

each passing pleasure like another lost note to our ears.
Let's say I feel saintlier when language's unsalvaged sugar

shifts in my jaws. Is this the sacrifice that
matters to the angel's hand, whose feathered pen

inscribes a life's geometry? We should guide each other
to the ends of our days, like tugboats dodging bad barges

misplaced midway downriver. Every life
might be worth scratching into a cavern's rib,

worth practicing in chalk or in charcoal. If I say
Lord, I am dizzied, must I still say *let us pray?*

KEVIN McLELLAN

INTRINSIC

the present will break down
easily / will feed a memory

landfill / you consider the

torso's pulse points as you
walk into oncoming traffic

/ the language of almost /

almost aligns with all other
instances / in your mind

these instances create an

irregular perforation / there
must be more to you than

a dotted fault line / must

stop focusing on pairs /
torsos / pairs of torsos /

you see a shadow / yes /

you're hardwired to your
phantom / yet you know

the railroad will continue

to muscle the people / and
those vile portmanteaus

CHASSIS EXCAVATION

Is there a customer here?
Up the Billy Budd hillside dark
marauding strangers stumble
back and forth, unsure
surely mongrel sorrel rats
apiece with five feathers,

draining out the mess
they've made of the beach
meantimes, the sudden
little paths between the house
and the great open
always empty sticks of reeds
protruding, the dry-spine
grasses wet for only a week
of summer.

Minnows
of the pond—dredged
right to the bottom, houses
here once were plentiful
as buggies. And yet it looks
like what we think of as nature,
if castrated and recast
in some acidic form. The rains
of ink wash, colliding

on this spit of land.
Tensile storms nearer now
between the ocean and the bay:
the way one can disappear
either up or down, when stability
begins to seem so hard to master
as if your foot kept

sinking through
the skin of the planet here
on marshland, as if the swans
skimming the dockside each day
no longer seemed complacent
and you followed them home
and from their nest they ran at you
and what is awful happened.

Perhaps there are good reasons
for doilies and cooking lessons.
For categories that hold the mind
with surface
and let you stay there.

The year of calculus I
remember staring at her face
and trying to take the derivative:
trying so hard even now
I think there must be some way
to do it. And they say
what we do is private.

And what we do now
with the brain: the operations,
and from the dune and mineral
patterns, these hints of what has come before
that is the same as this, that again
comes.

FORWARD FALLING DAYTIME

at sunrise I say light shut up
reset the dashboard clock while swerving
a travel mug rolling in the passenger footwell
that was not, it turns out, spill-proof

boulder in the rearview, like some molecular rushing
outran its invasive historic wearing away
pitted weed against parasite and hollowed out
my placeless worry

left my initials on a tabletop in Bozeman
scratched a rude mountain from a borrowed knife
sunrise road so steep the car curses me rhythmically

don't return my mother's calls in full
just that I am with my two friends at the edge of a mine
don't name them because I am far away from generosity
in general things are fine, the pit says hi

gas is still cheap and I'm afraid I won't be famous
cheesy cracker aftertaste stuck in my molars
what if I am known for nothing but forgetting to floss

we talk through a script about the end of humanity
reclamation and prairie grasses nine feet tall

possibility and integrity both a lessness
like towns called Phosphate, Racetrack, Anaconda, Opportunity
I want us to disappear, but all together so we won't be alone

5.21

Must your face flush every time
I take your hand? It has fed old parents,
this hand of mine, written verses,
and helped children onto elephants.
So why does its very touch heat the waters of your heart?
A sea receiving a falling star.

93.14

When the strange rain singed the outline of the lake into the sand
we left flowers at every spot where a fish would perish.
The sand turned to glass and white in the sun.
The glass spread the sun like a chant.

PAINTINGS OF WIDESPREAD SKIES RECALL THE WIDESPREAD SKIES

When I stared into the alpenglow

When I dared to drink the water
and water was nil

When silence was a flock of sheep, and a path a line
broke my concentration

Planes lifted above our heads

when it was easy to manage the remote and was easy

I touched the base of a sycamore and light
refracted our flesh starlike
shards of yellow, and dun

when we were just children
made of lace and no content, like

When a bee landed on the sill, curling the mid-
ventral track when the wind picked up

tresses of hair, bits of thread

my sister was the first to die, then the dog
then September forgave no one
sleeping on the asphalt and burning

what, what then, what was left

I shoved in my pockets

when I gathered the azaleas where we were born
and time was as skewed as I

couldn't say if windows freckled
the house, if the clouds

received the people, the people
the clouds, I wouldn't know

my face from my palm two inches away

from apologizing outwardly, on the inside
dead and otherwise a thing

When ruin, when ruin, her ruin-shocked spine
the rake slammed through

When speaking softly was not a signal
of hierarchy, a mating call

dropped in the middle of an unspoiled panorama
mud and the copse surrounding

Memory felled like a tree
mist eclipsed the hay, just so

nothing can follow

"there is someone / watching us" this day
or this day or this day into night when a farmer
found her body all spread out in the field

when my hands were wet and red with petals

when dying young was a woman picking fruit
and shepherds were anything but

THE COMPLETE LIST OF EVERYTHING: AN ADDENDUM

Candle in a still life snuffed out
A coal-hard luster a stone-skittered surface
Coda postscript afterword errata

The rough edge of a blueberry's sweetness
Not the pearl but the initial irritant therein
Half-moon beneath the shelter of a bridge

Nameless shape a flock of starlings enacts
Consecrated relics blackboard drawings
Frontier for which a war is waged

The usual gossip the Gospel of Thomas
Chuck Berry singing "Back in the USA"
Mica flakes a ghost's vapor viscera

A waxy bit of lipstick smudged on her tooth
Chipped white paint on a tinplated first aid kit
The erotics of a chocolate grinder

A summons a writ a warrant a subpoena
The cardsharp the trickster the hawker
Raw observations a modest earning

The worked gold leaf of an icon's halo
Façade chipped by bullets back to brick
The uncorrected error the damaged link

The litany of mile markers across the prairie
The fifth foreclosure on the block
Frugal savings speed trap double negative

Vein of talc through serpentine
Myrtle wreath tilted cradle chain reaction
Venetian footbridge April eclipse

Transparent light that sharpens shadows
Time's constancy the accorded duration
A door removed and set on two sawhorses

Robert Johnson singing "Come On in My Kitchen"
Four cloaked mirrors a scruple of gold
Ocean surface desert floor nighttime sky

What Wallace Stevens calls *the vulgate of experience*
What flatters an evil spirit what enchants a fool
The intricate yet incomplete history of Hermeticism

A snake's ability to shed its skin
A plow's song a Mayan flint blade
Confirmed incidences of supernatural events

Wine lees roasted to produce a suitable black pigment
The walking wounded splinters of pitch pine
Figures types and analogies

Tomatoes tied to stakes with torn stockings
A struck match's brevity the laze and loiter of clouds
Orion's Belt raccoon scat beaver felt hat

A plaster crack's zigzag a decline of scree
The Blue Ridge Skating Rink
One of ambiguity's several effects

Wattle and daub tongue and groove
Magic knots charms and incantations
Flock of sheep under a child's sway

The past like a mooring pole
Creek ice cracked with tossed rocks
Aqueducts wells and cisterns

Timbers felled in early autumn
Babylonian tablet snowmelt dwarf planet
A mishap of little consequence

A loss for words offshore accounts
The darkroom's burnt-out bulb
Memories unsullied so far

Thoth incarnated as an ibis
Plausible deniability glyphs and graphs
Slender means peonies eradicated disease

Bitter wind through a cedar blown
In a shepherd's cave a dug-out fire pit
Light distorted by gravity's lens

What lingers of the ephemeral
The nothing-to-add the right-of-way
The angle of repose an angel's intercession

Olive orchard ablaze the bulldozed house
What the tide disinters daily
Noun meaning *time it takes a wound to heal*

Swift and tragic turn of events
A sloppy barroom kiss
Raw scold of Wichita wind

Beached whale towed out to sea
Drawn lots open season many mansions
Dionysus cloaked in goatskins

Ecclesiastes verse 1 chapter 9
Bob Dylan singing "Trying to Get to Heaven"
A door about to close

WE HAVE A LITTLE SISTER AND SHE HAS NO BREASTS

The Song of Songs: 8:8

(And never will—)

that could have been two fawns

twins of a gazelle

grazing in a field of lilies

How does our sister hide?

if she is a door she does not yield

if she is a window she is closed

if she is a spring she is dry

if she is weather, she is rain gone to vapor

if she is a bird . . .

She is an orchard that bears no fruit

She is a shadow that mocks embrace and slips away

Did she know she would die
before she learned the speech of the place

wounding another who came to claim her name
with a tiny, baffled cry

If there are clarities, they opaque
her momentary fixity

There is no view in vertiginous silence . . .

In this brevity

between two whys . . .

her bruised breath congeals the dark

Shapeless words
to and fro
pace and pause

A longing smokes through space

ashes sifted of cause coat my shield

sparkle a bit

for the sake of heaven . . .

TO THE NEW YEAR

Those are woods I would have chosen
the fright or fight I would have favored
for favors like this—
like the wooden forms of fauns—
come with tags
and glue like this will last
only as long—
meanwhile night is supple
its surpluses surprising
while the lost are lost
for a very long time
and the face of recognition
is the face of longing that lasts.

REPAIR

Edgeless. Hollowed out
and slowly filling
with moonlight, fog, and rain.

A space formed
from a space
withheld, lucent

like the sky's nightshirt
and winnowed to a briefness
barely enough

to steer by.
A bark, therefore.
A disappearance

into—unfettered
like the moonlight, fog, and rain
it holds and yet

gradually moving toward
some gap in the margins,
a distance

lost to leaves.
Soon it will be folded
into leaves

and emerge a small paper boat
drifting slow as sand
on waters

too deep and black
to see by.

A white space withheld
from blackest waters
its pulped body

will one day snare
a river's edge
where a boy

noising the air with whistles
will surely find it
and carry it back to his cave

where it will hang
like a crescent moon
with only the night air to warm it.

One day
he will take it in his hands
and remake it

with nightshade and moss-fur,
bits of star and gold.

Balanced on his fingertip,
it might resemble an ever-
turning globe.

Perched on his wrist,
a bird.

SOME OF WHAT WAS LEFT AFTER THERAPY

The sky staying open to its stars and
the paradigm of ever-changing clouds.

Watching three boys playing catch
in a mown field of winter wheat.

Having the choice to sit on the porch
or deadhead the wilting blooms.
And of course adding one more
perennial, this time maybe coral bells.

To know:
The monks are asleep.
The monks are awake.
The monks are in prayer.
The monks may be walking their dogs.

A woman in a minivan stopping
as I was walking my dog.
"I lost my dog last week.
May I pet him? Her?"
Letting her pet him.

Still no answer for the ocean.

Xylem rises. Phloem falls.

Somewhere a man is buying a hat.
Somewhere a woman is buying a hat.

HEADWATERS

Chattahoochee Gap Spring

Breached in stone,
fig-leafed with lichen,

a baptismal font
enough to keep its share

of future skies—how new,
exactly, this trickle? The Adam

and Eve orchids too
bespeak something

other, as the bird skull
alit on deer droppings,

as—miles downstream,
hours back—the tubes

on the river, asters
alkene and slick: ancient,

if not older than themselves,
rarer than stars, yes, and ordinary.

CLAIRE MARIE STANCEK

GREEN

down by eaten flocks by herds eaten and overnight
lifting dew dry on on drying backs

"uncut hair of graves" bloated turf in the way
green with green with green with green wreath

corpse hair grows a green thought not
a green the mind thinks

but rather a thought in shade bearing the cast of that umbrage
disappearing into green echoing green or darkening

look at this book fallen onto the floor pages
bent and splayed words

sinking like oily roots down
words and sinister intentions sinking

unkindnesses unremembered and unnameable lies and elisions
all sinking into the apartment below and below

into the earth permeating as noxious rootlets
as cankers on the chafing edge of time the line's

sliding root even so will wreath green grip
unseeing a thousand tiny eyes upending loam

SOMBRE HUMMINGBIRD

Capão Valley, Brazil

The Batista waterfall is half-
erased, disappears
before it hits the ground. Dona Aúrea
loves to talk about how
the world is ending. At my ear,
this drab throb, the canyon swallowing
the sun. I hold a glass of cachaça
up to the sinking light: a cloudy
eye. Once when we were young
and unyoked we watched oxen
mill the sugar cane to terrifying
proof. Dona Aúrea, it's true, the world
is ending: in the cataract's
obliterating mist. In the kiss
of the hummingbird's
fringed tongue.

DAVID THACKER

WHEN EVERYTHING'S YOUR BODY

As if a farmer, dragging a harrow
through the English garden we've been cultivating
these few seasons, the shrubs shin-high,
flagstones and blossoms
where we'd become accustomed—how easily a couple's habits
can be wrecked. I've been reading a lot
about simulation, how when I say, *a farmer, dragging a harrow,*
you see a row of angled discs and a red diesel, maybe,
while I imagine a rake like Apollo's hand.
I need to be more specific: I'm feeling everything
leveling. There's a low and anxious hum
inside my ribs. When we decided, your fingernails
spots of cool within my palm,
to make another human being, we agreed
to also make your body our omphalos
without saying so. We used to make the kind of talk
that snipped the overgrown between us
into animals we could walk around, pointing.
Let's call that couple's shorthand.
When you ask me now what I think
of *Emily* or *Jan,* I can only muster *either's fine*
and offer names like *Saint Larry.* Easy humor.
I'm trying not to see how the seatbelt pulls
your collar down. I'm trying not to let on.
It's become my conditioned response
when we're near each other. I own
I've let it. Remember how the new employee loaded
the paint shaker without clamping the can
and you called to describe the mess? I still simulate
an eruption of *Joyful Lilac* between you
and an early twenties fauxhawk.
Can we rebuild? I promise not to watch your body
too closely. I still don't know what you thought
when the lactation consultant called

a mammary gland an overripe pomegranate
filled sometimes with gravel. Let's sip ginger ale
beneath Orion. I want to tell you
about the girl teaching herself to juggle
with ears of corn in the parking lot. It was night
and I was trying to remember our grocery list.
I thought the flapping was geese in the dark.

KARA VAN DE GRAAF

MY APOLOGY

When you're at work, I take out your old toothbrush
and dip it in bleach. In my dirty Purdue sweatshirt,

I kneel in the bathtub, grinding the bristles
back and forth on the discolored grout.

The lines turn crimson from iron in the water
and crack a bit near the seams, like red gums.

It bothers you. Over an hour, the bleach does its work,
makes the caulking look almost new. Each time

I check, the shower is whiter, like a scene
from a time-lapse camera. I don't know

how else to show you. In the evening, I read you my poem
about the bird. You nod. How can you ask me why

I don't put our life together in words?
Everything I say is addressed to you.

CHRONICLE POEM

In this year there was the great mortality of birds
and shooting stars were frequent
and milk and butter were turned to blood

or was it someone else's
dream I was in // birds drowning
in the sunlight and resurrected • again

on a Wednesday at dawn the sign of the cross
was revealed in the bare legs of tables
and we put things out and put them away again

in the same year we started to get the moon on Friday
we watched the milk thicken in its pan
and the birds were frequent

in the great mortality
last year's reeds folded themselves onto themselves
and blood marbled the sky and then drained again

and the tide came and sliced ribs into the shore
until everything around it turned to glass and disappeared
and everywhere there were people

who looked just like us

which means the birds of the river
will dry up • which means this moon's
unscrupulous or I'll be home in time
to dig the garden for onion grass

DAVID WELCH

TRANSUBSTANTIATION

The audience talked to orchid until it unfurled
the white frill of its blouse and left it open
when it was noon, the bare bulb
of the sun singing over the field
where the audience lay lightly touching
the orchid, its mouth a blushed pear, its green legs
thrown over the ground where the audience sifted
their hands together until they became the field, the switch
grass beneath the wind, the dirt beneath the grass
where the orchid planted its feet as if it could run.
If we are the ground, said the audience,
what do you take from us, your body within us,
your body taking us in as if we were something
still in the water, a buoy, its lead dipping beneath
the crest of a wave until it breaks,
how it leaves then, aimless as a seed
in the wind, driven by the wind until
it arrives somewhere it never knew and grows
into the dark pit of itself, blushes past
night and day because it's made of blood.
Or because, like you, it came from the sea.

GHOSTS OUR DAYS BECOME

Sometimes the only thing you can do is wake up
in another person's story. So start here: a man
shakes your hand and smiles too long. He is sad
because nobody on earth is his dead wife
yet sees the movement of her hair in the morning
sugar fleeing in his coffee. Because the storm came
and he survived. Because little girls with mud on their cheeks
flutter like pigeons in a fountain and each evening was a lamb
turning on a makeshift spit. It was like a Goya painting,
one of the black ones, from that time when he gave up
trying to understand fear and pain and let them
emaciate the jaw of a beggar or tear red the eyes
of Saturn. *Lonely nipple of Mars in the sky,*
he said, *let me remember never needing a thing.*

*

For three years I tried to find a word for the sunken
ship of my grandmother still lit with stars. For that year
of termites mating in the cow's dead eye, for the disappearing
of Maggie Carlisle when I was ten. I'm not sorry for wanting
the dead pumpkin in December to come back to life. (Who doesn't
walk around like a visitor from another world, with sparklers
in both hands, screaming with the circus all tented up
inside them, with colorful acrobats curled into their ribs,
all the stories they never told.) All my life I've been a fox
limping between wars. I've slept in beds not meant for me
to stay, whispered promises I couldn't on my best day
keep. Sometimes I want to arrive in a city
where I know no one, to sit down with a desperate woman
selling apples, write an opera about the old idea that love
is fertile, is long, will save. Will save.

*

Ask me where I've gone I'll say: I got here
the same way the coin did. Ask me if we are redeemed
and I will tell you there is a way of being in love
with what you cannot keep. There is a language
for screaming. You don't have to live long to learn
the doors *no* can open. One man dying is another
woman dying so it's best to laugh when a friend says,
I'm no Christ but I can turn water into Kool-Aid. A map
means nothing without hands, and to the dead paradise is any
street you walk down, looking in windows, stopping for coffee.

*

I love those stories that begin: *once there was a meteor
and a small planet where happiness lived; once
an entire army fell dead near a river by the hand
of one child; once all the families of a very small country
placed stones in a cave, and when someone died, their stone
would be sewn into the belly of a crow.* I don't wish
to know the end. I love, simply, how bats clobber
bugs at dusk. Some mornings a man
with no arms asks for kindness by shaking
a cup with his teeth. A friend says she cannot be
in the same room as her child. What do you say
to pain you can't comprehend yet understand
too well? Have and not, pupil and retina, white milk
in a shattered eye. What do you imagine
when you imagine a world we survive?
Every day we are broken but do not
break. Smallnesses chase smallnesses
in the wild sky and I love what we don't know
about the end of this story we aren't telling.
How our hearts learn to walk around
in other bodies. I love Kentucky
and everything Kentucky is not. I love whiskey
measured in fingers, horses in hands, fire
in the ash of a friend. (Hallelujah to a thing as simple
as whiskey or ash. To us. Who've spent so much
to be this hungry. Burned everything to be this cold.)

*

Once the sky was a grazing horse and we were flies
falling to earth like dead teeth. Once a stranger visited
a small town in the shadow of a mountain, found an old hotel
and a bag of powder and drank, shot holes into walls, fell
in love with his own mania which he thought was the world
but was only the sound of cars in the street, only snow
ghosting between the fingers of trees, only sugar for the dying.

*

And still a field has something to say
like the other side of a window
or the too-wide smile on a vivisected
throat. This isn't the only story about wonder
but let's make this a story about wonder.
Last night two people took off their clothes
and today a dying man wraps cashmere
around his dog's missing leg. When we say *dream*
we are saying *I don't know.* We are halfway
somewhere and never nowhere. If you ask
about god I will say measure the hair on your child's
head. Not the sadness of the world
but the holiness of the sad. Rapture or whatever
it's called. People in the dark and one bell
from a lonely tower. Who sing because they remember
someone in their village is very sick. Their hands
thrown to heaven, silent as old world wives.

*

Take away the body and what's left
is the fact of a person burning.
A bowling alley at dark or the circus
before midnight—before the flaming hoop
coughs out its last tiger and glittering people
crawl down from the rafters. (Ruin and after
ruin. Song and after song.) Old wrongs
we go to bed with. Wars we'll never
understand. We're just trying to be

holy. The girl doing cartwheels, a father's finger
in a can of chicken soup. *When we die*
we are only as beautiful as the days we lived.
A neighbor said *this* every week to his children
until they left in a Volkswagen forever,
until they learned *childhood* is another word
for *hurricane*. Every day they grow closer
to conclusion, every day a stone is kicked
the whole broken way home.

*

No two futures are alike. One brings milkweed
for no particular reason. One spills holes
into the centers of sons. In the end, the world
is full of two kinds of people: those who hear
the harp and those who hear the music
it doesn't play. The wall history paints
becomes the wall we try to scrub clean.
Our song like a buck shot in a field of snow.
Our grief sweet as smoke in the hard music rising.

BEE

Am I one of the last of the boys who stare at bees
shuffling the yellow holes, haired and puffed,
in blue and orange pansies, that flop like 19th century shirts,
but wet and full of veins, or settling on a candleholder
in a Victorian suit of black metal and rivets and lattice,
where they sat in the sun, and rubbed pollen off
themselves in crumbling strips, on the candle roof beneath,
before they dissipated sporadic and inglorious
into an evolutionary dawn of new total lack?
How many generations since have grown to mist
the dirt and made the world new with their dearth?
How long has this syntax, as tiny as a Jurassic virus,
as beyond the precision of fossils as the digestive tract of bees,
been an anonymous complexity? How long has this poem been
forgotten?

JACKSON WILLS

HONEY

Death is large. The honey falls into the honey,
bright glass maggots catching light like
glass and flopping before assimilating to
the puddle on my spoon. The honey is old
and has grained with sugar, cloudy and thick
at the bottom like wheat beer. Grains flaw the image of the spoon.
I drink honey in my coffee. This first draft of doomsday
is reassuring, the undesirable wow muted and mooted,
death pleasant in the process and fluent in the eventual,
if death is honey going home to honey. Meanwhile,
clouds darken over brown mountains, and moisturize
the sandstorm, their dew tangled with the windy motes.
I can hope only for a death as bright and sweet and
grained with age. To be midwifed by bees into silence,
would it be sweet after the sense had faded?

PASTORAL

When I crushed the shell between my fingers I was
as good as gone, waking with a mouth
full of ink, mad with honey, a chest like a bird's
running light and hot while the clouds
overhead kept unfurling. I was a flame in its totality,
a constant, a flirt and an exquisite
mesmerist, in love with whatever it was that seemed to be
missing. Heigh-ho, dear comrades,
the sky looks ready. Who is it that I shall be kissing?
The music is as fine as a sedimentary grit,
a specialist wind. Inside, my blood is spinning like a wheel.
This is giant. The stars rise sonically
into the sky. Between the warehouses, a rain starts falling.

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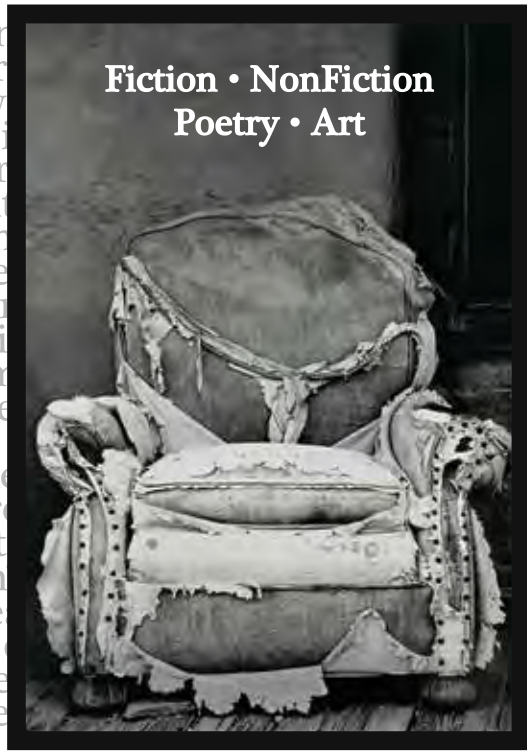

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