2010

Potential Energy

Edward Bull
University of Central Florida

POTENTIAL ENERGY

by
EDWARD DANIEL BULL
B.A. University of Central Florida, 2008

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in the Department of Creative Writing
in the College of Arts and Humanities
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

Spring Term
2010

ABSTRACT

BULL, EDWARD. Potential Energy. (Under the direction of Pat Rushin.)

Potential Energy is a collection of sixteen short stories. They range from the fictional to the autofictional to the entirely non-fictional. In all of them, characters both real and imagined struggle to live and define themselves in a world that is outside their control. They cope with the inevitability of loss, dangers both internal and external, and the passing of their own greatness. Some of these characters become lost while others learn to embrace life on its own terms—to accept "without hope or expectation." More often, they are not lost or enlightened, but simply survive to continue on, still uncertain.

Though all the stories in *Potential Energy* are stand-alone, they are thematically connected. The themes of family and identity are most prominent in "Potential Energy" and "Eulogy to Maria Mamani, Fire-Eater." Loss is confronted and the question of what comes next is asked in "Oysters" and "Slide." The conflict between fate and the need for control rises to the surface in "Threshold," "The Elizabeth Years," and the non-fiction story of Charles Whitman's deadly rampage in 1966, "Seed." Themes of ambiguity, moral erosion, and literary exploitation appear in the non-fiction "Bright and Loud and Then Gone," about a landlord burned alive in Chicago in 2008, and "What It Might Have Been Like If We Had Been There," an apologetic for the writer's right to write inspired by the 2007 Al Mutanabbi Street car-bombing in Baghdad, Iraq.

Most importantly all the content of *Potential Energy* tells stories of people trying to hold on to what is good when, tragically, everything must eventually come to an end.

For Melissa

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I'm still a little amazed that I had it in me to produce this thesis—and even more so that I am so ferociously proud of the work contained within it. So it is with total humility that I thank Pat Rushin, Jocelyn Bartkevicius, and Lisa Roney for helping me produce these pages, as my thesis committee, my professors, and in Jocelyn's case, also my Editor-in-Chief at *The Florida Review*. And Toni Jensen, in whose fiction workshop I produced a number of these stories.

And I couldn't continue without also expressing my debt to Chris Wiewiora, who offered thoughtful comments on all of the stories here, and also Kristina Kopic, Alex Pollack, Ashley Inguanta, David Sirois, and the students and faculty in UCF's Creative Writing MFA program who gave me more and better feedback than my sometimes reckless first drafts deserved.

In my time in the MFA program, I've discovered that writing is a more collaborative process than I ever would have imagined. And I've also discovered that the writer himself (or herself) also becomes a collaborative project—so I have all of them to thank, not only for this completed thesis but also for the writer I have and will become.

Earlier drafts of these stories have appeared in:

The Cypress Dome (Spring 2006) "$1,199,997.04 (Number Story)"

The Cypress Dome (Spring 2009) "Nightvision"

The Cypress Dome (Spring 2010) "Seed"

The G.W. Review (Spring 2010) "Oysters" – Forthcoming

Red Wheelbarrow (2008 National Edition) "The Couple in Room 202B"

Roger, an art & literary magazine (Spring 2010) "Potential Energy" – Forthcoming

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION: WRITING LIFE ESSAY

The collection *Potential Energy* is named after what I consider one of the most suspiciously unscientific concepts in physics. When the apple falls from the proverbial tree, it is inclined by gravity to move to a specific point on the ground. En route, it will expend a certain amount of kinetic energy; the energy yet unspent is its potential energy.

It's the yet-to-be. The might-happen. Potential energy of a more personal kind is something I grapple with in the first story and namesake of the collection, the non-fictional "Potential Energy." I play a game of darts with my father, and I muse that there is no chance in a game of darts—"A physicist would say that if he knew the trajectory of the dart the instant it leaves my fingers, he could tell me exactly where it would land." That luck is an illusion, a product not of a chaotic universe but uncertain human beings. The story ends by linking the trajectory of a dart with the trajectory of a son named after his father, set on a path from birth that he can never know but which is no less binding for that uncertainty.

The characters of the collection *Potential Energy* struggle to navigate and define themselves in a world that is beyond their control and full understanding. Without clear direction, these characters are left to find their own way, unknowingly tethered to their fates by strings they can't or refuse to see.

And so, in "The Elizabeth Years," a young man loses his way and ends a relationship for almost no reason at all, yet steels his resolve because he sees "only one possible direction, forward." In "Seed" I recreate the last hours of Charles Whitman, the

Texas A&M clock tower sniper of 1966, who may have killed fifteen people and wounded dozens more because of a tumor in his brain. From the collective consciousness of generations of witnesses to Whitman and his aftermath, I question: “Some nights, when we’re red-eyed and vulnerable […] we might have thoughts. If what we’re thinking is what we’re really thinking, if who we are is who we really are. If there’s a seed of change taking root inside our brain.”

As the collection progresses, more characters both real and imagined cope with dangers both internal and external, the inevitability of loss, coming to terms with their shortcomings, and the passing of their own greatness as they travel paths that sometimes converge and more often draw them apart. And it’s the not-knowing that gets them the worst. Whether things could have turned out differently (they couldn’t have) and whether there was anything they could have done (they wouldn’t be the same person if there was).

Some of these characters become lost, while others learn to embrace life on its own terms, as the narrator in “Potential Energy,” to accept “without hope or expectation.” To temporarily and gladly hold on to what is good when everything must eventually come to an end.

The earliest story included in this thesis is “$1,199,997.04 (Number Story).” In it, a man whose morals and personal integrity have been eroded by a distinctly modern sort of self-and-now-centeredness eventually loses the things important to him, and meets a dark ending. It is the most bleak story I have ever written. It is also the first I wrote.

I wrote the "Number Story" in CRW 3013, Intro to Creative Writing, as an undergraduate at the University of Central Florida. Russ Kesler taught the class. Before taking CRW 3013, I was looking at the computer sciences or possibly digital media. I had entertained the idea of getting involved in the production of video games (I still do occasionally). Russ's class was my first exposure to the possibility of writing literary work and I probably have him to thank for being drawn to this path.

An early draft of "Number Story" was included in the Spring 2006 issue of *The Cypress Dome* at UCF. Since then, it has been revised several dozen times, at least a couple of those being what I would term re-writes. Perhaps it's a way that I've grown since 2006 that I am now more willing and able to comprehensively rewrite. It took a few years for me to gain that willingness, the apex of that being a few humbling workshop experiences at the hands of former *Florida Review* Editor-in-Chief and UCF professor Jeanne Leiby (now the Editor of the *Southern Review*).

Consider the following passages, the first from the draft in *The Cypress Dome*, the second from this thesis:

> He had to stop at a gas station. He decided to get Windex, $4.19, a roll of Brawny paper towels (two-pack), $1.99, and a Snicker's bar to calm his nerves, 69 cents. Gas, too. $2.98 a gallon.
>
> So he made a sharp right into a nearby Chevron, filled up using his VISA debit-card, and strode towards the station's mangy little store, its windows covered in cigarette advertisements. Newport Pleasure. Be a Marlboro Man. SURGEON GENERAL'S WARNING: SMOKING CAUSES LUNG CANCER, HEART DISEASE, EMPHYSEMA, AND MAY COMPLICATE PREGNANCY. You Can Go a Mile On a Camel.
>
> Ten minutes later the man, whose name didn't matter but people called him Raymond Conner anyway, returned to the driver's seat with his goods, and a half-eaten Snicker's bar. Little dark crumbs, like mud

or refuse, clung to the sharp crevices of age lines along the sides of Mr. Conner's mouth.

Mr. Conner bent down with taxing effort and began to wipe off the blood and bone matter splattered over the smooth, polished front bumper of his brand new silver Buick. The cleaning motions left him wheezing; two shattered knees in his childhood destined him to a life of little or no exercise.

In the blue half-darkness of early dawn, he looked like a criminal disguising evidence. The craggy wrinkles of his chiseled face cast a dark maze of shadow that annihilated any of his more human features. His sunken eye sockets hid his brilliant blue irises, and instead expressed a dead absence of light. A black ski-mask would have been less concealing. His crooked nose, broken when he was 5, looked at once ethnic and sinister to the WASP clerk spying on him from the ad-covered window 30 feet away.

And from the new draft:

The driver stops at a Chevron, the closest one under $3.00, at $2.98 a gallon for regular gasoline. That's how he decides—he picks a cutoff number, something round like $3.00 or $2.90 depending on the day and his mood and the current level of bloodshed in the Middle East, and he doesn't stop until there's regular gas below that number.

He fills up using his VISA debit-card and then enters the station's mangy little store. Its windows are covered in cigarette advertisements. Newport Pleasure. Be a Marlboro Man. SURGEON GENERAL'S WARNING: SMOKING CAUSES LUNG CANCER, HEART DISEASE, EMPHYSEMA, AND MAY COMPLICATE PREGNANCY. You Can Go a Mile On a Camel.

The driver thinks of himself as Jeffrey, what his parents called him when he was a boy. But most people use Jeff, and that's what he writes down on important papers. So Jeff Conner returns to his car 4 minutes later with some Windex $4.19, Brawny paper towels (two-pack) $1.99, and a Snicker's bar, 69 cents. He rolls up his sleeves, takes a heap of paper towels, and cleans the armadillo off his Buick— 2001 Park Avenue he bought new the same year his daughter was born, $39,599.

The most obvious thing is that the new passage is much shorter and much less heavy-handed. The point of view is closer to the main character. And I shed my bad habit of always needing to visually describe everything.

It was around the time of my first workshop that I was given *On Writing* by Stephen King as a gift from my girlfriend. In it, King notes that one of his first rejections included the suggestion, "2nd Draft = 1st Draft -10%. Good luck." King goes on, "Whoever [wrote the note] did me a hell of a favor." I assume, then, that I owe King a favor for repeating it.

However, I'm not sure I'd call King an influence of mine. Before I began writing stories in earnest, I had read a number of Stephen King novels. *Carrie, The Shining,* all the most popular stuff. I was a *Barnes & Noble* front shelf reader in high school.

But it was in college that I first became exposed to a wider selection of authors, and I discovered that I liked them all. Steinbeck, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, all the authors of "classics"—or, to be more cynical about it, authors just old enough to not be contemporary anymore. I got this twitchy feeling in my throat when I first read Raymond Carver's "A Small, Good Thing," "Neighbors," and really anything from *Cathedral*. It was, I believe, what David Foster Wallace called the goal of writing: "Feeling stuff." I was moved. So, like any number of wide-eyed undergraduate writers after reading a great author, I sought to emulate and imitate. I fancied myself a minimalist.

It led to passages like this, from an early draft of my story "The Couple in 202B," published in *Red Wheelbarrow*:

> Clark and Jean left the mail room and walked to the elevator. They got in and both reached for the button to the second floor. Clark withdrew and Jean pressed it
>
> "Could I ask you something?" she said.
>
> "Shoot."
>
> "Are you hungry?" Jean played with her hair. "I have some dinner made—"
>
> "No." Clark suddenly felt very dry and old. "Thanks," he said.

> "Oh," Jean said. "Right."
>
> When the doors opened again, Clark walked Jean to her apartment. He wanted to say "good bye" but didn't. She closed the door. He stepped away from the peephole and listened to the click slide click of the deadbolt. He took the letter out from his pocket and it was still the newlyweds'. Clark had accidentally put his divorce papers in their mailbox.
>
> Clark went home and spent a few hours getting drunk. He needed those papers. So he went to room 202B but then he stopped and listened outside the newlyweds' door. He still had a bottle of champagne and he kept drinking. He wanted to never stop drinking. Clark couldn't hear anything but he knew they were in there somewhere, together.

I met with a lot of frustration during that phase. Every draft was like pulling teeth. I felt compelled to cut to the bone, and then to bleach that bone and polish it down to just above the marrow. I went too far; I cut my own personality out of my work.

It's not that I feel that Minimalism isn't an effective style of writing. For certain authors—or in the case of Carver and Lish, certain author-editor combinations—a Minimalist style has led to masterpieces like "Neighbors," one of my favorite short stories ever. But it's only one way of saying something, and it wasn't me. In the course of trying to emulate and imitate good writing, I stifled my own.

And, aside from re-writing "The Couple in 202B" as a graduate student, I have nothing to show for nearly that entire year as an undergraduate. But it was a learning experience, a chance for me to grow into my own skin as a writer.

Take the final draft of "The Couple in 202B" included here in *Potential Energy*:

> When the doors open again, Clark walks Jean to her apartment. He wants to say good bye but doesn't. She closes her door. Clark steps away from the peephole and listens to the click slide click of the deadbolt. He thinks, so this is how it's going to be. People will move in, people will move out, and he'll remain the old man at the top of the building. He'll leave his apartment less and less, and drink musty old

champagne and eat bags of walnuts and watch The History Channel on mute and wish, every goddamn night, that he was someone else. And then, he'll die, and they'll carry him out after he stinks up the place enough for the neighbors, if he has any neighbors by then, to notice.

He wants to look at his divorce. He thinks he'll feel better if he looks at his divorce. Clark takes the letter out of his pocket, reads the return address, and is confused. It's not right. It's still the newlyweds'. Clark accidentally put his divorce in their mailbox, and kept their letter. The two looked so similar.

Clark goes home and spends an hour on his last Jack. He tries to watch some History Channel, but it's garbage, worthless. At some point, when the bottle is most of the way lighter, he realizes that he'll see Jean again the next day. Always, she'll be there, down the hall. And he realizes that he has made a mistake. He has screwed up.

He could go down the hall. Knock on her door. Or he could leave. He could take everything important he has, put it in a bag, and be gone tomorrow. Find someplace else. He makes lists in his head, things he needs.

He needs his divorce. So he goes to room 202B and he stops and listens outside the newlyweds' door. Without the papers, his divorce isn't even real, it's just an idea. This is his divorce. He needs it. He still has the Jack and he keeps drinking, he tilts it all the way back. Things could have so easily turned out different. He wants to never stop drinking. There's no sound on the other side. Not even a rustle or a TV. Clark can't hear anything but he knows they're there. He knows they're in there somewhere, together.

After idolizing Carver, and Vonnegut, and Flannery O'Conner, and writing stories that imitated each, badly or at least obviously, I entered the University of Central Florida's MFA graduate program. I discovered Modernism and Postmodernism (how I missed them as an undergraduate is beyond me)—and fell in love with the four D's: Donald Barthelme, Don DeLillo, Dave Eggers, and David Foster Wallace. In fact, I went on a straight-out David Foster Wallace binge, reading in the space of six months everything he had written, *The Broom of the System* to *Infinite Jest*, thousands of pages. In the course of that, I found myself talking like him in odd intervals (minus the genius),

wanting to intellectualize about the oddest little things in both my writing and in my day-to-day life, and barely keeping my fingers from the Insert Footnote function.

But for the first time, I didn't want the style of my idols creeping into my own prose. I made a conscious and painful effort, and when that began to fail, I wrote a tribute to David Foster Wallace, "Q.[1]," in his own voice—both to mourn him and to get it out of my system.

In fact, for the first time, I began to see defining a writer's "style" as being problematic at best. Who was I to call David Foster Wallace Postmodern, when he himself wasn't fond of the term? And Raymond Carver dismissed classifications of him as a Minimalist.

I began to see that works of literature can be a part of a literary movement, but not the authors whom I so admired. So, where I had classified Raymond Carver as an example of a Minimalist and a Modernist, it might be better to point to his short story "Neighbors" as a prime example of Minimal Modernism (and I did just make that term up), whereas "Blackbird Pie" might not be nearly as good an example of Minimalism, and even less his non-Lish-edited later works or his non-fiction (though they are still, I believe, Modern).

So it might be not completely accurate to say that Don DeLillo has Minimalist tendencies—it would be more accurate to say that Don DeLillo's *White Noise* has Minimalist tendencies. *White Noise* is strict in the rooting of its point-of-view in Jack Gladney, the novel's protagonist. Yet the reader gets little from Jack or any of the other characters in narration, but instead mostly through dialogue. Jack and Murray's strange

conversations are perhaps the best example of this approach; the straightforwardness of their dialogue, as though they're saying exactly what they're thinking and feeling, with no filter and oddly crystallized, is necessary because without narration the text needs some way to convey the inner conflicts of its characters. While DeLillo used dialogue as his primary mechanic, Carver opted for more realistic dialogue with a focus on gesture, but I believe that their intent, a Modern one, was the same: to focus on conveying their characters as ontological subjects, being in a story, not as actors telling or being told.

I while I understand the impulse, I still sympathize with Carver's discontent at being labeled Minimalist or even Modern. Especially if part of the point is the problematic distinction between whom a person is and what they do.

I can't imagine Carver not being cognizant of himself, as a person, being labeled on a singular quality of some of the work that he produced, edited by Gordon Lish no less. So while I love the brief, packed-in power of "Neighbors," it is only one thing, one edited thing, and like all writing it can never represent a true whole. It would be wrong to expect it to.

In my story "Teeth," the main character Nick withholds a story of his childhood from his girlfriend, Adele. His father, to teach him how to swim, would throw him into the ocean, and in one instance, threw a freshly caught baby sand shark in after him. Nick "worries what Adele might think, how she might judge his father, not knowing him, on the basis of

this one little thing."

It was around the time that I was becoming aware of myself as a writer—and trying to understand where I stood in contemporary literature—that I read *This Won't Take But A Minute, Honey*, a collection of very short essays on writing by Steve Almond, author of one of my favorite flash-fiction stories ever, "Nixon Swims." In "The Myth of the Found Voice," he writes:

> And writers were supposed to 'find' their voices, as if these voices were something that might be unearthed via EST sessions or primal scream therapy or captured in the jungles of Costa Rica, like a rare bird. This conception of voice appealed to folks such as Norman Mailer and Tom Robbins, for whom writing served as a kind of performance.
>
> More often, voice is what emerges when you *stop* performing, when your voice on the page flows from your voice off the page, its particular tone and vernacular. (I can't tell you how many genuinely funny students have handed me pieces whose dreary minimalism all but screams, *Take me seriously as a writer, dammit!)*

Perhaps it's telling that the next chapter in Almond's collection of essays is titled "Fuck Style, Tell The Truth."

The place that I had come to, at this point, was that I couldn't define my style or my voice or the literary movement to which I belonged. Not that I particularly wanted to, I think that that business is probably best left to literary critics (and the author's role, while the author is still alive, is to deny everything, I think), but Pat Rushin asked me to give it a try for his Contemporary Literature class. I'm sure I could have called myself a Modernist and been done with it, but I hesitated, because once I pigeon-holed myself into

"belonging," I felt like I, as an author, would begin to dictate the nature of my writing. And I had more and more come to believe that what I was writing about should dictate the nature of my writing.

I prefer to subscribe to the view that literary movements are entities, influencing each other and whose life-spans often overlap. Granted, to say that Modernism stretches from Joyce's 1939 *Finnigans Wake* (before that, really, but it's a good early example) is to say that Modernism is pretty long in the tooth. But more recent contemporary work like Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* strongly follows the Modernist fixation on isolation, alienation, and disconnection (including an echo of DeLillo's death-paranoia), and the traditions of Modernist writers. *The Corrections* has an ontological focus on gesture and dialogue, a measured and deliberate use of chronology, perspective, and other narrative techniques, and a close interiority that, while not stream-of-consciousness, certainly shares the intention of closeness to thought.

If we think of it as an entity, Postmodernism, then, doesn't have to be at odds with Modernism or distinct from it, but can be a concurrent movement that builds on Modernism and takes things in a different direction. For example, a lot of the common characteristics of Modernism, and all of the ones that I have mentioned, could easily be said of David Foster Wallace's *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* that is firmly within the Postmodern movement. "Forever Overhead" by Wallace is essentially one long, drawn out gesture in the face of isolation, a young boy on the cusp of adulthood jumping off the high dive at a neighborhood pool, the story a suspension of a single moment a

trademark manipulation of narrative in the Modernist sense.

The reason I love this way of looking at things is because it lets me personify Postmodernism. So while Modernism is the serious father figure, Postmodernism is more of a cool tattooed uncle. One who only comes by every once and a while (he'd get old quick if he came by every day), and who lets you smoke and drive his car even though you don't have a license, and try all those crazy things that probably won't work but will be awesome if they do (donuts at 60 miles per hour in the parking lot).

Modernism wants to sit in front of the fireplace for hours and meditate on the fact that he'll die. I imagine him with some scotch (no ice) and a pipe, a moustache, and he doesn't look over when he speaks to you. The kind of guy you listen to because he speaks in at a low volume. But his slightly younger brother Postmodernism prefers Bacardi 151 and trash talks about the nature of truth and has "DEATH" tattooed in a triumphal arch across his back, the gates of hell right beneath. Overdoing it, sure, but ultimately dealing with the same crushing sense of mortality.

But I'm still left with the question: Where do I, as a writer, fit in? If I could snap my fingers and write like any author I've read recently, on a whim I think I'd pick Alan Lightman. I could have any other answer on any other day, depending on my mood and my current fixations, but right now, that would be my answer. And after considering this hypothetical question, my answer surprised me. Nowadays, I most like to read Postmodern authors. Stuff with footnotes, authorial intention, pictures, the nature of Truth with a capital "T," and the occasional diagram of a smiley face (*The Curious*

Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time, Mark Haddon).

And yet, as a writer, I am most concerned with moments and lyrical imagery and the way that clear and true visions of humanity can come through in those times when a critical moment opens up for what seems like forever. David Foster Wallace explores this in his "Forever Overhead," my favorite story in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. It is probably the most Modern story in the collection. But Alan Lightman captures the essence of moments again and again throughout *Einstein's Dreams* in a simple, elegant, and lyrical way that I truly admire. Like this passage from the dream about a place where time stands still:

> Lovers who return find their friends are long gone. After all, lifetimes have passed. They move in a world they do not recognize. Lovers who return still embrace in the shadows of buildings, but now their embraces seem empty and alone. Soon they forget the centuries-long promises, which to them lasted only seconds. They become jealous even among strangers, say hateful things to each other, lose passion, drift apart, grow old and alone in a world they do not know.

Even more interesting, a lot of Lightman's prose has a cumulative build to it, so that while the prose itself may seem vague or abstract, he has been loading it with meaning over the course of the novel so that the sentences become more than they actually are. By itself, the prose is like a cherry without the ice-cream sunday—still sweet, but it doesn't do justice the original whole.

Lightman, in *Einstein's Dreams*, doesn't have any Postmodern tendencies. And, despite my enjoyment reading Postmodern authors and works that 'play' in that regard, I realize that I too don't have any desire to experiment with that kind of meta-writing in my own work. I suppose that, at least in the conventions that I tend to follow, I would be a

Modernist. But I'm not sure about that, either. It might be a bit of a cop-out to simply say that I am a writer who is aware of Modernism and Postmodernism, who has written work with the qualities of either or both ("Oysters" and "Potential Energy" on one side, "Q.[1]" on the other, to name a few). But I feel that that is the best answer and truthfully where the majority of contemporary authors are.

These movements are defined not just by their conventions but by their fixations, and the wonderful thing about the massive and diverse amount of writing available to us at this moment in history is that, despite the sheer quantity of it, individual writers are still usually concerned with unique and original things, in unique and original ways. At least, enough so to confound such decisive classification.

Which brings me back to *Potential Energy*. I am hesitant to call *Potential Energy* anything other than the collected works of a UCF MFA student. I won't call it Modernist, despite its Modernist tendencies, or Postmodernist, despite its more Postmodern moments. Not Minimalist, not Realist, or any other word that ends in "–ist" that I haven't thought of yet. It is, I think, instead a series of questions, worded in either fictional or auto-fictional or non-fictional terms, about what it is like to try to live and define oneself in a world where everything changes and must eventually end.

And my earliest work, "Number Story," with the most ominous ending in the collection, is an example of that questioning yet to find an answer.

But in the more recent "Eulogy to Maria Mamani, Fire-Eater," the narrator finds an answer in one of those dark places—in the fiery self-immolation of his sister the

narrator finds a small affirmation in the way she had embraced life: “Maria died drunk and laughing and floating in that chemical ether just slightly outside of reality, where pain and hatred are illusions, and she went out just as she would have wanted, evaporated, in a bright cloud of smoke.” It is the best example of one of the characters of *Potential Energy* finding, if not a happy ending, at least a response to those questions—we may not know where life is taking us, but we can seize what joys we have now, recklessly, and as hard as we can.

POTENTIAL ENERGY

"Your turn," my father says. "Last shot." I step up to the tape and line up my feet and feint, once, twice, and I let the dart go, arcing across the smoky seven feet and nine inches to the board. *Thwack* is the comic book term.

Little cold dots prickle my fingertips like Braille, reminders of the goose-pimpled brass grip of the dart and that breathless moment of a missile anticipating its inevitable, sudden end. I close my hand. I missed my double for the checkout.

We're in my father's favorite bar, The Leapfrog. My father takes a gulp of his Corona and cleans his glasses with his shirt tail. The left lens is frosted an opaque snow white. In 1972, during the spring, my father flipped his top-down convertible on the steel Chain Bridge, crossing the Potomac River into Washington DC. The sun was hot, boiling the air just above the asphalt, and this was the last thing he saw with both his eyes before that asphalt ground his skull for two hundred upside-down, skidding feet. He always explains: there are certain head injuries that they can't anesthetize for. At least, not in the '70s. So the surgeons hit him with a local and told him to scream if he felt dizzy or dead while they pulled his scalp down over his face and extracted splinters of skull from his frontal lobe. He talks about this sometimes, how it felt, tasted.

"All right," he says, his voice hoarse from the alcohol. When he wasn't looking, I moved the board up two inches. 'Mister No Depth Perception,' his new family jokes. I suspect he suspects.

My father lets go of the dart like a little bird, its bright plastic wings flutter and then its point strikes the board, hard. It quivers there for a few seconds and is still. I've never seen anyone throw darts like him. He is quiet, and he doesn't laugh afterward, or curse. He hit a five and a big double; the last one exactly two inches lower than he wanted, squeezed tightly between the steel rims.

We're playing two out of three. I have one, he has one.

"I'm tired," he says. "I can't do another game. If you get your double, you can have the win. Good luck." I think of saying something to this. That there is no luck in a game of darts, only unfulfilled trajectories and uncertain players. But my father goes to ask for another beer, and when he comes back there is froth stuck to his beard under his lower lip, and he smells too much like this bar, cigarettes and old leather, the father of my youth, and I don't want to talk about beliefs anymore.

So I throw, and I get my first hit. I miss my second. Then I line my toes up to the tape. He's just standing there, one white eye, with this glint in the other that fathers get when they look at sons and see themselves. So I try it like him. I close my left eye, and imagine the board two inches lower, where it's supposed to be. It's an underhanded throw, an elliptical half-rotation that ends palm up to the ceiling.

Thwack.

We tell a story sometimes, in my family. It begins like a bad joke. A young man and a young woman walk into this same smoky bar. He's drunk; she's Peruvian. He talks about constellations of stars and the irregular orbit of Pluto; she laughs and touches his eye patch and the inch-and-a-half deep dent in his forehead, and her fingers come back

warm, curled, like she's holding something delicate, a bird. To his friends, he declares, "This is the woman I'm going to marry," and my mother doesn't understand much English but she understands that, and her eyes light up like polished obsidian, reflecting a vision of a smiling man, so small, bowing across that bright curvature. They get married, they have a boy. My father names that boy after himself, teaches him to play darts.

I'm standing in the middle of that smoky bar, one eye closed, one palm up. "Game," my father says, but I don't know if he means him or me. I think I'll take a minute to look at the board, and when I do I won't laugh afterward, or curse. It doesn't matter where the dart has landed, so long as it actualized its trajectory, and did what it was always supposed to do, without hope or expectation.

SEED

We imagine it went something like this:

On a Sunday morning in 1966, like almost every other Sunday morning in 1966, Charles Joseph Whitman ate his eggs and potatoes and orange juice. He and his wife Kathy, they really ate, they shoveled, and her cheeks puffed out round and happy, and she caught him looking and her eyes flicked up bright and she gave him this half-smile. After breakfast he rinsed and she dried and then he reviewed some self-improvement notes he kept in his journal, among them a numbered list entitled "Good points to remember with Kathy," beginning with number one: Don't Nag. Number five and number seven were underlined: Pay little attentions; Be gentle. "Be gentle" was capitalized and underlined, hard.

At 6:45 PM that evening he wrote some notes, and then in the middle of the night he went upstairs and stabbed his mother and his wife in their hearts, his mother once and his wife three times, and then at 3:00 AM he did some more writing. As confused as he was, he wrote like a marksman, precise, to the point.

That Sunday morning, like every other recent Sunday morning, a mass, a glioblastoma tumor, throbbed with each heartbeat in Charles's brain, between his hypothalamus and amygdala. People call the hypothalamus the lizard brain. It's primitive and old and essential. And the amygdala, that's our fight or flight, that's the hidden

source of power that opens up when a plane crashes into the ocean, or a tornado tugs at a mother's child, power that we never knew we could have.

Those of us alive then, we heard about what Charles did on the nightly news, from Walter Cronkite. And those of us in Texas, we called our friends and family in Austin. If they didn't pick up the phone, we bit our nails and worried. For weeks, we listened to Cronkite tell us about the sniper in the clock tower, about the young students' bodies splayed across the sidewalk.

There was shaky black and white footage of a woman standing behind a tree. She didn't look very frightened, even though the tree offered little cover. She wore a light-colored sundress and her dark hair was short, in a bob. Regular gun reports sounded off in the background every two and a half seconds or so. They echoed the way guns do when they are fired from high places near buildings, vibrations ricocheting off concrete, like the crack of a whip.

The last doctor Charles saw, Dr. Maurice Heatley, noted Whitman as "a massive, muscular youth oozing with hostility," complaining about not seeming to be himself and who made a "vivid reference to 'thinking about going up in the tower and shooting people with a deer rifle.'" Charles wrote in his 6:45 PM note that "After my death I wish that an autopsy would be performed on me to see if there is any visible physical disorder."

He would get these headaches; he ate Excedrin like mints, little segmented chalky white mints. Thirty-three years later, a newspaper writer named Frank Rich called Whitman evil, "if only for lack of a more precise term." It will have never occurred to any of us that evil could be so biological. Something to take Excedrin for.

This is what he wrote: "It was after much thought that I decided to kill my wife, Kathy, tonight after I pick her up from work at the telephone company. I love her dearly, and she has been as fine a wife to me as any man could ever hope to have. I cannot rationally pinpoint any specific reason for doing this."

After the first year's anniversary, we thought that it would be over. The nightly news had fresher tragedies to sate us. And over time, the clock tower would only come back every few years, then every tenth anniversary. Gary Lavergne wrote a book.

And then in 1977, only eleven years later, we heard Harry Chapin's song "Sniper" on the radio. Whitman was featured on *American Justice*. We saw a yellow-skinned Flanders climb a cartoon clock tower, high-powered scoped rifle in hand, in *The Simpsons* in May of 1994. We peer down the scope with him and he pulls the trigger again and again. Choosing. Some of us relive it; some of us experience it for the first time. The clock tower shooter has become a cultural archetype, a facet of our shared consciousness.

We know now that the tumor must have started, as all tumors do, with one genetic mutation, twisted by a mistake, or from an invisible wave of radiation in the air. It could

have come from anywhere. The TV makes them. Radio signals buzzing through the air. Microwaves—it's even in their name, waves. The sun.

The tumor lay dormant, waiting, until, for one unknowable reason or another, it started chanting, divide, divide, and it spread its roots into the pink layers of Charles's brain. Tumors have roots. Then the headaches started, and between each throb of bright, wavy pain Mr. Whitman began hearing something quiet, subtle, whispering to him from behind his eyes. Changing him.

We don't stand too close to microwaves anymore. We are suspicious of cell phones. We bring umbrellas to the beach. We always, always wear sunscreen.

Whitman finished his eggs and potatoes and orange juice and wrote some and later he killed his mother and wife and wrote some more and then the next morning he put on some khaki overalls, what he would have called work clothes, and went out to buy some guns and he filled a foot locker with those guns and he took that foot locker and he climbed the steps of the University of Texas administration building. Whitman knew his way around guns better than most. He had spent some time in the Marines before enrolling at the university, and though he had never fired a weapon at a live person, he had an informed understanding of what it would probably be like. He said hello to the receptionist, and then he hit her on the head until she was still and there was a slick stain of blood on the floor. He stuffed her body behind the furniture, not particularly carefully. Her elderly, pantyhosed calves and her feet were still in sight, heels ajar, if someone were to look for them.

It was almost noon, the hottest time of day, just under 100 degrees but it felt hotter because it was dry and clear and cloudless. There was very little wind, even at the top of the tower. Sightseers came and went. A couple stopped, chatted with Whitman. It was hot out, the view was good, have a nice day. Whitman had a rifle in each hand. He was pigeon shooting, they thought. There was blood on the floor. Maybe it was oil, they thought. He smiled, said "Good afternoon," and he continued on his way.

Pigeon shooting. Oil. We would have known. That was something that Whitman has taught us. There was a man in a tower on a clear, windless day, a sharpshooter's day, a rifle in each hand, blood on the floor.

We know now how that story ends.

Whitman barricaded himself in the observation area, two hundred and thirty-one feet up. From there, he killed two passers-by and disabled two others with a sawed-off shotgun. The shotgun was particularly messy. A ring finger here, intestines there. They were a family.

Then, using a scoped rifle, an un-scoped rifle, and a carbine, he murdered eleven more people from the parapet overlooking the surrounding park and campus buildings, including an unborn child and a man who died of his injuries thirty-five years later, and wounded twenty-eight more. From that height, they were arms and legs and torsos. No faces. Just jeans and maroon jackets. An eggshell dress and a bob of dark hair standing behind a tree.

Two hundred and thirty-one feet below, Paul Sontagg, an eighteen-year-old lifeguard and student, stood up from behind cover to call to his fiancée. “Claudia,” he called, “this is for real,” and then he was shot through the mouth. He didn’t die right away. He tried to get back up and then collapsed again in this spastic, animal way. He wrung his own neck trying to staunch the flow of blood. Paul gurgled. Claudia screamed and got up and ran to him, and Whitman shot her down. She was eighteen, too.

To her, Whitman was just a glint of light in a faraway tower, the source of a ballistic trajectory, the soft snap of a rifle chamber and the sudden spray of red. The ejection of a brass cartridge. To her, Whitman was just a flare and a puff.

We wondered if we loved our Claudia enough to stand up in the sights of the clock tower sniper and call to her. Whether we would forget our own safety in the face of her danger.

And we wondered whether we loved our Paul enough to run to him. What it would have been like to have been there. To have died like that.

All of this was ended when two police officers, one carrying a revolver and the other carrying a shotgun, got into the observation area while Whitman was distracted firing on the crowds below. The first officer emptied his revolver into Whitman, and the shotgun officer shot Whitman in the head and shoulder. Whitman slumped into the parapet, his head open and pink, finally bringing fresh August air to the glioma in his

brain. The officers then traded weapons, and the new shotgun officer walked up to Whitman's bullet-riddled corpse and opened fire again, point blank.

This is what he wrote: "If my life insurance policy is valid, please see that all the worthless checks I wrote this weekend are made good. Please pay off my debts. I am 25 years old and have been financially independent." And, "Donate the rest anonymously to a mental health foundation. Maybe research can prevent further tragedies of this type."

There was something different about the clock tower shootings, something that confounded moral classification. This was mass murder. But if we say that the tumor was the cause of it, that Whitman the sniper was not Charles the man, but an act of God, then we are left with a mass murder with no murderer, only victims.

If we say that it was the tumor, then the sniper in the clock tower becomes something different than a murderer. Charles Whitman becomes like an earthquake, or like lightning. What Gary Lavergne called a "legend." And we can't prepare for a legend. We can't negotiate with a chaotic universe.

Faced with this, we become afraid.

We can't really know if the tumor was the source of what Charles Whitman called those "unusual and irrational thoughts." For the most part we think we've forgotten the flare and the puff. We go to bed on Saturday with as fine a woman—or a man—as a man—or a woman—could hope to have, and we wake up on Sunday and we have eggs and potatoes and orange juice. But some nights, late, when we're red-eyed and

vulnerable, and the clock tower comes on The History Channel, we might have thoughts. If what we're thinking is what we're really thinking, if who we are is who we really are. If there's a seed of change taking root inside our brain. But they're just thoughts, and when we see those eyes flick up across the table, that half-smile, we say, "I love you," and then we forget.

OYSTERS

There's Katherine, smiling this wide smile. She's thin, almost waifish, and she hugs me. Her fingers slide into the soft, familiar nooks between my shoulder blades. She hugs just like her sister, my ex-wife. Her wedding gown crunches and crackles against my suit, like she's a paper doll. "It's been so long," she says. "I'm so glad you were able to be here." I had promised, it must have been five years back, to be there for her wedding. It was after Lola and I first separated, and I stayed with Katherine for a week while I found an apartment, and she first told me that this guy, this Jim, might be the one.

I used to tease Lola, my wife, that if things didn't work out between us, Katherine was next in line. Of course, things didn't work out, and then there's Jim.

So I say "congratulations," and then I shake Jim's hand. He has a firm grip, the type of self-consciously firm grip that comes from being in business, one of those jobs "dealing with people," where they think that a strong forearm and vice-like clasp somehow translates into something like "respect me, I am a capable person." And the goatee. He must have spent hours getting it perfect. I congratulate him, too.

Gently, Katherine leans back, still smiling, and she lets go of me. She guides me to the side with a light touch, and another guest moves up the line. She hugs him, and then puts her hands on his arms and moves him to the side in that same gentle way, keeping pace.

They held the ceremony on the beach, in the morning. There were no chairs, so the guests stood in two columns on either side of a sandy makeshift aisle. When the sun rose above the ocean horizon, Katherine appeared from the dunes in her white backless gown, drawn to the side by the breeze.

Lola was the maid of honor, standing at attention with the bridesmaids. Lola's gown was backless, like Katherine's, with a V-neck that dipped to her navel; a net of faux diamonds stretched across the V, glittering over her cleavage. Even in the morning, it was crushingly hot, and her skin was moist with sweat. Her ribs splayed like wings beneath her olive skin, expanding and contracting. While the bridesmaids waited for Katherine to come down the aisle, I could almost read her thoughts: breathe, breathe, breathe, she was thinking.

Lola's new fiancée, the dentist, was a few rows ahead of me, and from the row of bridesmaids, Lola made a face, eyes wide and tongue stuck out, and I almost made a face back before I realized it wasn't meant for me.

Katherine's father was dead, so an uncle gave her away. Katherine and Jim read custom vows, the generic bad poetry people in love always come up with, "you are my everything" thrown in for good measure, and everyone clapped and the uncle gave directions to the reception. As the guests left the beach, Katherine and Jim kissed in the surf while a photographer snapped pictures of their silhouettes against the rising sun.

It's at least a hundred degrees, and it feels hotter. The air is thick with humidity. The big blue tent Katherine and Jim set up in their back yard for the reception is no help.

The sun is still too low in the sky, and its orange rays find their way in, blinding any westward-facing guests and boiling the air inside. The fans spin, but more to the effect of a convection oven.

A young server, all long black pants and one of those white buttoned-up collared blouses that are supposed to be professional but fit tightly and burst with restrained sexuality, is distributing champagne and wine among the guests. She catches my eyes and smiles. I scan the centerpieces.

"Table Four," it says, set atop a fishbowl filled with turquoise glass beads and floating rose petals which swirl alongside Lola's lazily circling index finger. It's a habit of hers, to stir things. Coffee, tea, alcohol when she drank. A few delicate digits down, her new engagement ring, a thin little setting for a bright little stone, a spark just above the curve of her knuckle. It's not much different than the one I got her, the type I know she likes. She shifts her gaze to me. There are faint little ghosts of freckles across her nose. She had real freckles once, when she was a kid. It was her idea for us to sit together.

"Just you?" she says. There are four seats at the table, her and Dale the dentist in two, and the others are empty.

"Just me," I say. I had RSVP'd for two. I don't remember what I was thinking; I happened to be drunk at the time.

"Chris?" Dale says. "Howdy."

I stop for a second—who says howdy?—and then I say, "Howdy."

He gets up and shakes my hand, and I pump heartily, as if to say, no, I don't mind that you proposed to my wife, and no, I don't mind that you're living in my house, and yes, your little silky blue sports coat looks terrific.

I smile my best smile. I keep smiling and standing and sweating and shaking Dale's hand. His palm is clammy and moist, or mine is, or both.

"Jesus, Chris," Lola says. She raises a cupped hand to her forehead, casting a shadow over her eyes. "Sit," she says. She pushes some hors d'oeuvres in the direction of one of the two empty seats.

All the servers wear black pants and white shirts, but the one with the black pants and the white blouse, she makes her way to our table with a set of large silver platters and some champagne in a bucket of ice. The air is so hot that the ice steams a little, the vapors swirling past the neck of the champagne bottle. She puts a raised plate of oysters over the centerpiece, and each of us receives a plate of salmon, rice, and asparagus. As she leans over the table, she smiles, and I think, what the hell, and I smile back.

I pour myself a glass. Dale fills up a glass, too. Lola doesn't, even after I offer to pour for her, because she's clean and sober.

"You're still doing that," I say.

"Well if I stop doing that, they call it a relapse," she answers.

"I hope you don't mind, then," I say. I flourish with my glass, and take a drink. It's Dale's job to be supportive now, not mine.

Dale takes some of his champagne.

"So," I say to Lola. "Are you going to try the oysters?"

Lola makes a face.

"What's wrong with oysters?" Dale says.

"Your fiancée doesn't eat anything slimy and from the ocean," I say. "She never told you about the shrimp?" I'm drunk, so I think I have an excuse, and I put my hands together, wiggling my fingers like so many crustacean legs, and I attack her shoulder.

Lola shrieks and swats me away.

"She eats fish," Dale says.

"Nothing with mandibles, tentacles, or a shell," I say. "Never. Not once."

We eat. The salmon is edible, though not the best I've had. I wonder how much Katherine paid for the catering. The oysters, though, are excellent. Lola doesn't know what she's missing. They are steamed and served with lemon butter sauce and they are delicious.

The half-empty champagne bottle stands erect in the ice bucket at the center of the table. Sweat runs down its slender neck and drips into the melting ice. I'm drunk enough to be biased, but it's very good champagne.

"Chris never drank when we were married," Lola says, to Dale. "Not once."

Dale dips his glass in salute. "Is that so?"

"I wish you wouldn't," she says. "Jesus, it's hot," she says. Then, to me, "Are you hot?"

"Of course I'm hot," I say. "It must be a hundred degrees."

"Chew on some ice," Dale suggests. Lola does so, crunching loudly.

"So?" she says.

"I don't think I should be punished for your problems," he says.

"Punished?" she says.

"Punished," he says. Lola gets this look on her face, blank, and I know that this will turn into a fight later. Dale finishes off his glass.

"More?" I ask him.

"Yes," he says. I pour. He has more.

"Chris," Lola says, and I look at her. She's found an oyster somewhere in the mess, and she holds the shell to her mouth and slurps it up noisily. She gives me a grin, and then she gives Dale a big, wet, lemony kiss.

By the time the DJ, from his booth at the head of the dance floor, announces the toasts, Dale and I have emptied the champagne bottle. Lola grunts and gets up. Maybe I'm a little drunk, because I try to pull her chair out, but Dale beats me to it and gives me a look. Lola takes her place at the head of the dance floor with Katherine and Jim and the best man.

The best man begins by talking about how Jim met Katherine, in college, at one of his fraternity's social functions. Katherine was there with friends, and Jim approached them on a dare, picked Katherine out of the pack by luck, and he told his best man the next day that this was the woman he was going to marry. And so on.

"More champagne?" I ask.

"After Lola's toast," Dale says.

The smiling server girl is at the bar, drinking something clear. It's an open bar. It occurs to me that drinking is what weddings are for. Then it occurs to me that that would only occur to me at someone else's wedding.

"I'm going to get some real drinks," I say. I get up and go.

The smiling server girl smiles at me as I approach the bar, and she moves a bit to the side to let me talk to the bartender. She watches Lola give her toast. I spot some whiskey, which I want, and some Hennessy cognac. I ask for the cognac. It seems better for a wedding, or at least better than straight whiskey, I figure. Then I turn toward the tables.

"What are you drinking?" I say.

"Just water," the smiling server girl says. She has very nice teeth.

I wipe my hands on my pants and try to think of something else to say. There's an open bar right behind her, any drink she could want within arms reach, and she's drinking water. Over the microphone, Lola tells a story about how Katherine was always there for her, through her disease and recovery—Lola has never been a very anonymous member of Alcoholics Anonymous—and a tough divorce. She lowers her voice when she says it, like she's confiding something. A tough divorce, her words.

"That's my ex-wife," I say.

"Oh," the smiling server girl says.

"I'm divorced," I say.

"Makes sense," the smiling server girl says.

Lola wraps it up and the DJ speaks into his microphone: "If everyone would please sit down, it's time to cut the cake."

"Hey," I start, but the smiling server girl with nice teeth has already gone. I finish my drink, I'm already beginning to feel the heat in my cheeks, and I return to the table to take my seat next to Dale.

Lola adjusts her dress and takes her place by the cake with the other bridesmaids, the groomsmen, and Katherine and Jim. The wedding photographer hovers nearby, clicking her camera.

Katherine holds the knife, and Jim's hand covers hers. They cut, and they kiss. There is a disposable camera on every table, ours too, but Dale doesn't make a move for it. I pour myself a glass out of my fresh bottle of champagne and watch him watch Lola. His face is flushed, and he has liberated an oyster shell which he twirls over and under his forefinger with his thumb. He drinks, I drink.

A cheer goes up among the wedding guests. Katherine and Jim face off, each one holding a handful of smashed cake. They stare at each other, smiling, and I can see it in their eyes. They rush each other, past each other, Katherine to the groomsmen, Jim to the bridesmaids, to Lola, hurling handfuls of crumbling cake into faces and up noses.

Lola looks back at our table, shocked, her face and breasts smeared with icing. Her head is so round, her mouth in an "o," her eyes are so wide. A moment of simplicity and honesty. I recognize this moment, this silent instant before any emotion has yet taken

hold. People mistake it for disbelief, but disbelief comes later; it is recognition that something very different has just happened. Something that changes life in some small or huge way, like when your sister puts a slice of wedding cake up your nose, or when your wife says that she's going to leave you.

Icing and crumbling cake tumbles down her neck and catches in the glittery net between her breasts. Her hair is caked into stiff tendrils that fall in front of her eyes. She raises her messy hands and looks down at herself, and then she shrieks and begins to throw cake.

I laugh a little, but quickly catch myself. I'm turned on.

Dale is smiling. Then he sees me seeing him. I look away first.

Lola has cleaned up, mostly, but there are still bits of icing clinging to the faux diamonds across her cleavage, and stuck like lint to the thin black fabric of her dress. Our table is a seafood crater. There are bits of salmon in the rose petal centerpiece, oyster shells everywhere; it's just a gory mess.

Lola takes a breath, and then she takes an oyster shell in each hand. She slurps from one and then the other, fast, like they're shots of whiskey or something else that burns on the way down. Then she grabs two more and says, "Are you going to eat those?"

"I have a theory," I say. I pour more champagne for myself first, and then for Dale. Then I pick up an oyster shell. Lola glances over lazily, her eyelids drooping.

"Well, let's hear it," Dale says.

"I have a theory," I say, waving the shell. "I have a theory that maybe Lola is the lucky one out of us three. I mean, look at me."

The two of them look at me.

"I have no friends," I say. "I can't keep a relationship. I'm nearly forty. The longest conversation of my week, besides you, was with our waitress. Once, I let my car run out of gas so that I could call AAA. Really, I'm not kidding here. I am a lonely old man. And look at you, Dale."

"Me?" Dale says.

"You and me, Dale, we're not alcoholics like Lola here," I say. "But we're drunks. I mean, really, is this how people are supposed to be at a wedding? We're drunks without the benefits."

"You're drunk, buddy," Dale says.

"But Lola here," I say. "Lola here, yeah, she's struggled with this for a long time, and she hit a bottom and that sucked, but now she gets to go to meetings and talk about her *feelings* and her life and how bad her marriage is and God knows what else. And they actually listen, and they actually care. Where else can you find that? She tells her sponsor everything, Dale, everything," I say. "Even our sex, man."

"Chris," Lola says.

"Chris," I echo. I point at her with the oyster shell. "You've got your own free personal therapist and best friend all rolled into one. I mean it, I'm thinking about becoming an alcoholic myself, just for that reason."

"You've got a good start," Lola says.

"Don't get like that with me," I say. "So you get all pissed off and we fight and I have to go sleep in a Motel 6 alone with HBO and two cases of beer. But you, you go to a *meeting* and call your *support group* and go *bowling*. Where do you get off saying I was a tough divorce? Where do you get off?"

"Did I say that?" Lola says.

"Dale," I say. "Dale, listen. You two are about to get married. Listen to someone who's been there. I mean really, I've been there," I say, and I point at Lola with my shell. "And if you're really going to marry my wife, then this is my advice to you," I say. "Keep your friends. I mean it. Listen, I hope you two have the best little life together, I really do. I hope you never fight and you both grow old and wrinkly together and have old-people sex and when you're a hundred and five you both die in a plane crash at the exact same instant. Really, I do. But keep your friends. Because if you two end, then she's fine, she's got *people*. But you, you're alone and middle-aged and completely, absolutely fucked."

"Easy buddy," Dale says. "You're drunk."

I shrug. I am drunk. Maybe they don't care; maybe I'm just the annoying drunk ex-husband who won't for the love of God shut up the hell up. But my face is warm, my throat is sore, I'm talking, and I feel good.

The oysters are gone. I had a couple, Dale had a couple, and Lola ate the rest. Lola's face is red and puffy. Her skin is too smooth, stretched taut. She's breathing

heavily. And her head is too round, like a grape at the top of a stem. I always loved the shape of her head. Even at her skinniest, when we just got married, when she would jog every morning in a sports bra and shorts and we'd have sex every night and I'd sleep with a hand resting in the dip between her hips and her lowest rib, she still had the plump, happy head of a fat woman.

"Are you okay?" I say.

"I'm okay," she says. "I'm really hot."

"She's okay," Dale says.

Lola says, "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that."

"I'm sorry, too," I say. I've forgotten what we were talking about.

She gets me some cake, and she refills my glass. I eat, and they watch me.

"Jesus, it's hot," Lola says. She hangs on her S's. She's wheezing. She waves her paper plate as a fan.

"It's not too bad," Dale says. "The sun went down."

"I think I need to lay down," Lola says. "I'm so tired."

"You know, if you were drinking, the heat wouldn't bother you so much," I offer.

"Shut up," she says. "Something is wrong."

And just like that, she falls off her chair. Dale catches her. Her breast heaves, and she chokes, and her big black eyes are glossy, confused. I think of a cow's eyes.

I see her swollen fingers gripping Dales arm, like little sausages. Her engagement ring finger is purple.

Lola breathes.

Dale wraps his fingers around her neck, opens her eyelids. “Shit,” he says, and then he says, “Chris, did you say she never had anything with a shell before?”

I tell him that that’s exactly what I think I had said, I think.

“I think she’s allergic,” he says.

I ask him if that would be something that a dentist would be able to know.

Dale puts his palm on Lola’s forehead, runs through her hair. He whispers something in her ear. I think I can hear him say, “Lola, honey? Baby?” Then he says “I keep an aid kit in my trunk. It should have an Epi-Pen in it. Stay with her, okay?”

He’s already on his way through the crowd when I ask what I should do.

“I don’t know. Hold her hand or something.”

Lola breathes. I hold her hand. I put my fingers on her back, feel her ribs, her wings. Finger, rib, finger, rib. She’s so skinny. She’s scared. I can read her thoughts. Breathe, breathe, breathe.

I feel Katherine’s hand on my shoulder, smell her perfume. “Lola? Lola, are you alright?” she says, and her voice is scared. Lola nods, and she looks at me in this blank way that makes me look away. Dale gets back. He has an Epi-Pen, and he stabs my Lola in the leg. She breathes, and then she sits up.

“I’m okay,” she says. Her voice sounds stretched, tight. Then she smiles at me, and she says, “I blame you.” I think that she’s joking. Katherine asks if she should call an

ambulance, but Dale tells her there's no need, it will be all right. There's nothing a paramedic would do that he doesn't know how to do. Lola just needs to lie down and take it easy.

Dale picks her up in his arms, something I could never do, at least not the way he does it, and he carries her inside.

Cautiously, the wedding resumes. The DJ turns the music back on. Katherine and Jim take the dance floor; their first song is "Love Song" by The Cure, something they're too old for. They are good dancers, Katherine always was, and Jim keeps up. But the way Katherine holds him too tightly, and the way Jim holds her like she's made of glass, it tells me that their dance has been spoiled. They've been married for a few hours, and already they are scared for each other, and the ways it can end.

I watch the dancing couples. It's a slow number, and they're all close, hands on hips, breathing into each others' necks. Something about the reception has become hushed since Lola and Dale went inside. The young dancing couples dance too closely, and when they separate, they hold on until their arms aren't long enough anymore. And the old couples, some of them dance like the young couples, but some of them sit at the tables and watch and hold each others' hands. The others, the ones without someone else, they attach to the old spectators. Sometimes kids, sometimes widows or widowers. I can tell the ones who've lost someone from their faces. Solemn, like they're watching something bad happen but can't do a thing about it.

I hold up my champagne and peer through like it's a kaleidoscope, and on the other side are the bride and groom, swirling and bubbling streaks of white and black, slow dancing with heads dipped into one another, golden, bending across the curvature of the glass. Condensation is collecting on the champagne, and rivulets of sweat run down my cheeks, or trace around my brow and down the sides of my eyes.

I rotate the champagne glass, and the golden kaleidoscope vision explodes and rearranges: a nose here, a mouth there, the bride's teeth.

The table is a mess, a shell here, half a shrimp there. A total disaster. I put down my drink but I'm all thumbs and I spill it. So I take the bottle.

I realize that I am the only one alone at a table. But I won't join the kids and the widows and the widowers, attaching like parasites to the couples too old and eroded to dance. It's fucking depressing.

And then I realize that I am drunk and unheard and about to cause a scene. As though this could have ended any other way. The smiling server girl in the white blouse with the nice teeth brushes past, on her way to some other table, and I think of Katherine. If she's going to be married to this Jim guy, then I want her to know that this is what can happen. I want her to witness me.

I drink. Then I stand. I wade into the crowd of couples, chasing after the beautiful bride, ready to cause some damage.

THE ELIZABETH YEARS

The girl, Lizard the boy calls her, has just showered the sand out of her hair and is drying in the bathroom when the boy comes up behind her and puts ice-cold hands on her naked hips and he squeezes. She yelps and jumps and he tickles her and chases her, feet slapping linoleum, through his grandparents' empty house. The boy's grandparents are selling it and the furniture is all cleared out, all except for the TV in the living room and the air mattress they brought with them. It's all white walls and pearl carpets and the boy said earlier that day that it felt like living inside of a cloud, or mist.

So the boy chases the girl into a bright empty room with no curtains on its windows, and the girl's laughing turns to kissing and then it turns to petting and before they know it they're on the floor.

It was only a few days ago, at Lizard's place, some seven hundred miles away, that the boy spooned the girl on her couch, watching sitcom re-runs, when the girl got a phone call that her father had died. It wasn't her mother who called; it was the other woman. This other woman, she said that what they said was that they weren't saying that it was the GHB, that it was, really, at least technically, they said, his heart. The other woman said that she had found him face down on his apartment's kitchen floor after he hadn't called for a week. She said she couldn't afford a funeral, so she let the state have his body.

Lizard cried for a little while, and the boy didn't know what to say. He tried to hand her all the tissues she needed and keep his attention on her, but she didn't turn off the sitcom and it really was a very good episode.

The girl called her mother, and the boy could hear the mother's laughing response from his side of the couch: "Finally, the bastard," she said. Her digitized voice was positively gleeful.

That night the girl told the boy that she needed to drive down to Fort Lauderdale to collect her father's stuff. The boy said that they should take a few extra days off and keep driving all the way down to his grandparents' empty vacation house in the Keys. He thought that this would make things better. "It's only a little bit further," he said. She agreed, it was only a little bit further.

On the pearl carpet in the white bedroom, after they've finished and they're panting and sated and sedated, the boy tells Lizard that he loves her. He's been waiting to say this for days. On the trip down, Lizard piled blankets and a feather duvet in the back seat of his car and wrapped herself up like a chrysalis and she slept for ten hours to Fort Lauderdale, where they took her father's things from the other woman in an old cardboard box with a local beer logo stamped on it that the boy didn't recognize. Then she slept four more to Key West, the box of her father's things wedged in the crevice between the front passenger seat and the back, by her head. When the boy stopped the car at the tollbooths on the Florida Turnpike, the attendants would glance through the windows at his Lizard. She'd be all hair, blonde and wispy, because the boy kept the windows down instead of running the air conditioner, and her mouth parted just so.

They'd say things like "that's so cute," or "hey, sleepyhead." The boy decided then that this trip would be when he told her that he loved her.

Lizard blinks when he says it, as though she's trying to push away an eyelash. She smiles and shifts and the boy licks his lips, and after a little while she says that she loves him, too. Her smile is too quick, it's there and it's gone, and the boy knows that she's forcing it. She says she loves him with such a world-sadness that the boy wonders why she doesn't love him.

So when the boy brings in the stuff from their car, he wonders what about himself Lizard doesn't like. He snorts when he laughs sometimes, but she giggles when he does it. He's not as fit as he could be, he thinks, though he doesn't think he's hard to look at. Once, at Lizard's apartment, he had a large bowel movement and then she put on her makeup in the bathroom not long after. He wonders if she remembers that.

They pull the air mattress into the living room and inflate it there because nobody is there to tell them that the living room is the living room and the bedroom is the bedroom and that things have to go in certain places. They know that for these few days at least, for just a little longer, in this cloud-house, they can do what they want. And now, the weekend is ending, and they'll have to leave in a little more than a day, so they bought strawberries and a pineapple at the market and they eat in bed and don't bother to clean off when the juices run down their mouths and drip on the sheets or prune their fingers. The boy and the girl savor their freedom because they know that it is finite.

The girl puts her father's box on the mattress and she pulls this and that out of it. A rosary, she likes, and she puts it in one pile. Syringes, a Playboy deck of cards, audio

cassettes of bands like The Doors, and old wires and headphones and pieces of video and audio equipment that she can't make sense of, she throws in another pile. She finds a case of VHS cassettes, titled "The Elizabeth Years," and she says to the boy, we need a VHS player. The boy gets up and walks to the TV set and Lizard hoots at his bare behind. He blushes and kneels in what he thinks is the most complimentary way he can as he opens the TV cabinet and inside he finds a dusty black VHS player. He fiddles with it, and at first it doesn't work but then he figures out that he has to set the player to channel three and the TV also. "My hero," Lizard says, and the boy sets the first tape to play and lies down with her, resting his head on her breast.

The camera shakes with each footstep as it approaches a window in a fluorescent-lit, sterile tile hallway. A hand enters the frame from the side and closes into a fist, putting a knuckle up to the window and tapping it quietly, little whispered percussions. Past that portal, there is a little white room with no furniture and no beds. Instead, there are half a dozen little glass boxes. Inside, past the tubes and wires, there are a half-dozen little purplish human beings, all spider web veins and bug eyes.

"Elizabeth," the TV says in a soft, bearded voice. "Elizabeth."

The boy tries to pick out his Lizard from the incubating babies. They're the smallest ones, he thinks, the ones you could hold with two fingers, so tiny that even gravity seems to forget them. The boy picks one, with a big round head and wide, sad, half-closed eyes, and he says, "That's you."

The camera zooms in on the baby, and Lizard's father coos into the camera. "That is me," Lizard says. She seems in wonder of herself. The boy squeezes her hand and she

gives him the same world-sad, marble-eyed look and says, “I could have been anybody.” The boy is confused by this, and he offers her a tissue.

Lizard says that when she started college she went to dinner with her mother, who got drunk on cheap Olive Garden wine and told Lizard how she was born. Lizard’s father was, essentially though not really, passed out on GHB for two weeks while her mother cared for him. When her father finally woke up, he claimed that Lizard’s mother had saved him, or that he had been saved, she couldn’t remember which, and that he was a new man, reborn, like a Phoenix, or Jesus. He said that it was time for him to start fresh, to start a family. He cleaned out all his stashes and sold or flushed them and then he proposed to Lizard’s mother. Over soft shell crab, with a ring and everything. She said no, like she had many times before, and then Lizard’s father did what Lizard’s mother didn’t necessarily call rape, but it wasn’t friendly, and it didn’t involve contraception.

A few weeks later, Lizard’s mother was late. In a daze and throwing up in the mornings, she was slid into a white dress picked out by Lizard’s grandmother on her father’s side. The grandmother was so happy that she was finally getting a family—that the blood was continuing on. The ceremony was outdoors; it was windy, and there were orchids. None of Lizard’s mother’s relatives were invited. The thing Lizard’s mother remembered most about the ceremony was the way her heels sunk into the tough St. Augustine grass, crabgrass in any other state but Florida; it scraped her feet in such a painful, little way.

Lizard’s grandmother had planned it all, Lizard’s mother told her. Months in advance, she’d been demanding Lizard’s father make her a grandchild, a family. Lizard’s

father admitted it once, Lizard's mother said, one night, drunk and high enough to admit he hated that woman, and maybe regretting some or all of everything he had ever done. The grandmother had planned it all. The pregnancy, the wedding, even the orchids, her favorite.

"You're the last of them, now," Lizard's mother had said, smiling this tight smile, her teeth stained with wine. She drank her Yellowtail like it was water, red water. "You were planned," she said. "Don't ever forget that."

"That's an awful story," the boy says. "Why would your mother tell you that?" The boy maneuvers his shoulder under Lizard's head, and he strokes her cheeks, which are dry.

"I'm not really sad," Lizard says. "I saw him maybe a few times that I can remember." She holds the silhouette of her hand up against the TV's light and makes a semi-circular brushing motion, discarding. "Maybe I'm more sad about the knowing. Now I know that I'll never know him. He'll never turn things around, and now he's just a dead guy I never knew, in some videos I don't own a player for."

"Of course you're sad," the boy says. "He was your father."

"It's the worst," the girl says. "That someone can just drop dead like that. That's the worst of the whole thing. How can you trust anyone? To not die, I mean."

To this, the boy doesn't know what to say, so he's quiet for a while, and then decides to say "I love you," soft, and he's not even sure she hears it.

The VHS has been running on static for some time now, and Lizard replaces the tape with another. With the press of a button, she's a toddler, giggling on her father's

lap—he's wearing aviator glasses and a full beard. The camera dips and comes back up; they're on a small boat, waves sloshing against the bow, the sky bright and big.

Lizard lies back down with the boy, and the air mattress oscillates under her weight, lifting the two of them into the air, and back down again. The whiteness and blankness of the house creates a feeling like vertigo in the boy, like he's floating. He closes his eyes, and it's like he's in space, and he thinks, he could have been anybody, too. The mattress stabilizes, he opens his eyes, and they're on solid ground again. Lizard tucks a strand of hair behind her ear, and she stares ahead, to the TV.

The boy puts an arm around the girl, and he doesn't really see her as Lizard, the girl, he sees her as Lizard, the intersection of so many little things leading up to this moment. He feels so much for her particular, so particular, collection of bones and flesh and memories and life.

And then it occurs to him that she is so much older than him, in a way that's more than just a year. It occurs to him that a person grows from what they've lost, on how much less potential they have to be anybody.

The sunlight dims and neither one of them gets up to flip a light switch. The blank walls and ceilings and floors turn blue the way white things take on the color of the light around them. The boy and the girl lie together on their air mattress and they watch the rest of the videos all the way through, all night. Then Lizard rolls over into the boy and they sleep, uncovered, in the gray light of the static.

In the morning, the boy gets up early and he watches Lizard for some time. He loves the way her hair looks in the morning, all messy and knotted and full of character.

And he loves the way her mouth parts in her sleep, a couple teeth bared, glossy and bright. He doesn't bother to get dressed. The boy takes the half-eaten box of strawberries into the kitchen and he stirs them into a bowl of pancake batter and throws the mix onto a griddle he brought for this specific purpose. He thinks, there's no sadness that can't be cheered up by strawberry pancakes in bed.

He walks back to the living room with a platter and some syrup, but the air mattress is empty. The TV is off, and his clothes are strewn on the floor. The sheets are kicked down to the bottom of the bed, wrapped up in food crumbs and a few condom wrappers.

The boy checks the bathroom, and it's empty. Then he hears the wooden scrape of a door into its frame and the click of a lock. He goes to the bedroom. "Lizard," he calls, and he hears her past the doorway, a ruffling, but she doesn't answer. "I made pancakes," he says, but she doesn't answer. He asks if he did something wrong, and she says she's not coming out.

The boy goes back to the living room and sets down the pancakes. He paces for a little while, and then decides to watch some TV. He's only ever been in a couple of relationships, and he thinks that sometimes boys just can't expect to understand girls, and the best they can do is wait until things blow over.

He watches sitcom re-runs the rest of the day. The boy eats his pancakes and then the rest. It's the not-knowing that bothers him, the closed door more than anything. He finds himself pacing, chewing his fingernails and throwing the crescent shavings at the TV screen. He thinks that he would have liked to propose to her on a mountain, in the

cold, so that they'd be close for warmth, and he'd reach inside his coat and produce the ring like it was a secret. He thinks that the house they'd have would have an orange tree, and when it was in season they'd eat oranges every day, until they were sick of them, because they wouldn't want them to go to waste. He thinks that they'd die at the same time, in a plane crash or a tidal wave at the end of the world, and then he thinks that maybe this is naïve of him, that it never happens that way.

He sits by the door and asks if Lizard is still there. "Still here," she says, and he reminds her that they have to leave in the morning, he has to work tomorrow. "Go away," she says.

The windows turn from black to blue to orange to white and back to blue again. The boy cleans up, packs. The door is silent, and the boy waits until midnight. He wants to break down the door. He's tried, once, to break down a door, just to practice in case he'd ever need to. In case of a fire, or something else dangerous. He couldn't, and he hurt his shoulder, and this was when he was younger, so his father was angry. He sits by the frame. "Hey," he says, "we have to go." And he thinks that, if she doesn't answer, then she doesn't love him. She doesn't, and then he thinks, if he doesn't break down the door, then he doesn't love her.

The boy waits a minute, and then he goes.

The night is black. Lizard's chrysalis is a husk in the back seat. The boy wonders how Lizard will get home, but he has to remind himself that she's older than him, she's twenty-three, and she must know what she's doing.

He pictures Lizard in the bedroom, white walls, pearl carpets, so blank that it's like being in space. She's still naked, and she's in the middle of the room, knees to her chest. She knew, from the beginning, that they would end, one way or another. He decides that this way is perhaps the least painful of the many ways.

The single-lane road out of the Keys seems an extension to the boy's line of thinking. On the asphalt, a yellow painted line stretches into the night like a laser. The exits pass by invisibly in the dark, and this creates the illusion that there is only one possible direction, forward.

TEETH

The sun is bright and hazy and hot, so this young couple decides to put their feet in the waves. The water is warm, so they wade farther in. Past the shells and the gritty froth of the breaking waves, the sand is soft and slick between their toes, like velvet. It feels good, so they swim farther in. The other people, less courageous, become small; not quite dots, but blurs of colorful bathing suits and skin, one indistinguishable from the next. The young couple might as well be alone, so far out in the water.

Adele puts her legs around Nick, around his hips. She straddles him the way lovers do in tall water, and Nick jumps a little with each swell so that they stay above the waves. She kisses him, pulling his lower lip in her teeth with the ebb of the tide.

Their first Spring Break.

When she asked him to take her to the beach for some fun, he asked which beach, and she said New Smyrna. He looked it up, at 231 total documented shark attacks, more shark attacks per square mile than any other location in the world. If you are in the water at New Smyrna you are less than fifty feet from a shark. But none were fatal; most of the sharks at New Smyrna are small, or else young, though there's the occasional leg here, arm there. He informed her of these facts, and to that she said, "Definitely New Smyrna, then. I've always wanted to see a shark."

He was going to say no, that the aquarium was a better bet, but she showed him her bathing suit, this tight black two-piece, and he decided that this was his first time living away from home, his first college Spring Break, and this first girl, and that old things mattered less now.

About two hundred feet out: a white flare on the horizon, a sailboat. A fishing pole hangs off the back, like a tail. Still straddling him, Adele leans back, her hips pressing against Nick's, her belly going taut. She shades her eyes. "I bet they have beer," she says.

"I could buy us some beer," Nick says, though he knows he's missing the point. Two hundred feet is far. They'd be two warm bodies in the cold open ocean, with nothing beneath them. It's too far.

And then, over Adele's bright wet shoulder, he sees a shadow fluttering under the water, in a curving motion that makes him think of a flock of birds swirling and twisting across the sky, so fast that he doesn't think it's real. Before he can say anything, he feels his legs pelted by wriggling scales and fins and tails, more than he can count. Adele's eyes go wide and she shrieks, a single note that jumps an octave halfway through, and she grips Nick's shoulders so tight he feels her fingernails bend back a little, raising herself up until his mouth is in her navel and he loses balance and they both fall into the passing swarm of whatever-they-are's.

He’s above the water again in an instant. The water is empty, but swirling with leftover momentum. It takes a second, but Nick wipes the saltwater from his eyes, and Adele is there. She’s laughing.

“The look on your face,” she says. Adele puts her hand over his heart, and she smiles. She isn’t afraid, Nick thinks. She laughs, he laughs.

A single fish, an oily rainbow, flaps laterally along the surface before disappearing underneath.

“That has never happened to me before,” he says, and it’s true, it hasn’t.

She coos and holds out her arms. “Afraid?” She takes his hand, and they go out, further.

Nick hadn’t quite figured this thing of hers out yet, the not-being-afraid. She wasn’t just not afraid, she was desperately so. She was not afraid with gusto, with a quivering sort of intensity. A speeding-on-the-highway, eyes closed, picking-up-hitchhikers, dare-you-to-follow kind of restlessness. A kind of not-afraid that made Nick watch her with wonder sometimes, like when she ate a California Death Pepper, or when she let a stranger put a square of acid on her tongue at a Nine Inch Nails concert.

The more Nick thinks of it, yes, desperately not-afraid.

Adele, that’s her name, and when they met, Nick had never heard of that name before, at least not for a real person. She took him home to her bed, and started him off

easy, missionary, and later that night showed him doggystyle. Adele was his first. She had an appetite that surprised, then delighted him.

Though Nick has no point of reference, it's good. The best. He knows he wouldn't ever find better, as long as he lives. She reduces him to jelly, panting, heaving jelly, in the bed. And Adele, soft and sleepy beside him, satisfied in those moments in a way he never sees her any time else, as though some invisible, minor pain were temporarily removed, some unnamed but ever-present anxiety soothed. He loves it when she comes.

Nick has no illusions, it's the best, and it's all her. Adele knows every trick, things he has only heard whispers about, and she is fearless.

She's thin, but in a soft way. She likes to gesture with her hands and giggle and contradict herself and act embarrassed even though everyone knows she isn't. Her hair is long and glossy and he shudders it when she lets it sweep across his chest, then pull up along his jaw.

And her lips. Adele has full, Slavic lips. They're the type of lips that are always pink and feathery, and make Nick think of eating and sex. They don't curve upward or downward whether she frowns or smiles. She has a pretty face, with a sprinkling of freckles across her nose, but her lips are the most memorable thing. They are the type of lips that look best when smiling, the type he thinks for that reason create either very happy people or very unhappy ones.

So they're bobbing in the water, on their first Spring Break, this beautiful girl wrapped around this boy, so far from the shore that they only occasionally touch the

velvety sand beneath, so far out that that the chatter of the beach fades into the sloshing white noise of the waves, that whatever they do, they are just two distant lovers in tall water, a tangle of skin and fabric under a bright sky. He's breathless, and she's kissing him with teeth in this way he doesn't like.

He has not yet told her he loves her.

He's tried to tell Adele he loves her. He's taken her to nice restaurants, pressed his shirts and worn ties. He's made her cedar-planked tuna with asparagus and rice in her backyard, on a day she had to work late, and left strands of white Christmas tree lights to lead her there.

She fellated him in the parking lot outside of Seasons 52. And in her backyard, she finished the tuna but didn't touch the asparagus, and she showed him the reverse cowgirl in the lawn, right there on the grass, which was the stiff kind, and it prickled him through his shirt and made it not as he thought it would be. And afterward, lying in the grass, he thought about telling her. But she said that it was so good what they had, that it was nice and uncomplicated, and she hoped it stayed that way for a long time. There didn't seem to be anything he could say after that.

They were watching TV once, her lying on top of him, and he felt her palm circling his belly-button. "You have a cute paunch," she said. She says things like this. He doesn't remember the program, but he remembers this.

He tried to do it once, to say something nice about her like that, about one of those cute little unexpected things that make him smile, like how sometimes her hair after she's just woken up hangs in a tangle over her eyes like a helmet too big for her head, or how she purses her lips whenever she looks in the mirror, or how she leaves half-full cups everywhere until the cupboard runs out, or how, and this is what he said, how when she tans it makes her freckles come out, and how much he loves that.

"You're making fun of me," she said, and she locked herself in the bathroom, and wouldn't come out until he apologized and he said she didn't have freckles, which she said were ugly, and she went to bed turned away from him, with make-up on. It was, Nick thought, maybe their first fight.

He hasn't told her he's afraid of sharks, either. He knows it's an irrational fear; you're more likely to be struck by lightning or die in a plane crash or even be killed by a Christmas tree, he's looked it up. He is also afraid of lightning and plane crashes. And he wouldn't call his suspicion of Christmas trees irrational.

When he was a boy, his father taught him to swim by carrying him out to the deep water where the waves are smooth and throwing him in. Educational and hilarious, his father would say. It wasn't as bad as it sounds, and he learned. Once, there was a man fishing for sharks nearby, an old man with a hard face and sunburn so bad that it seemed hard and stiff, like clothing, or a second skin. He sat in a lawn chair and must have been there forever, because when Nick's father bought one of the caught little ones from him, still alive, sand sharks the old man called them, and the old man stood up to take his cash,

there were pale stripes across his belly where his skin folded over itself and hid from the sun. Nick's father carried the sand shark around on its fishing line, slapping its tail with his free hand so it spun around like a marionette.

Nick had never seen anything like the little shark, only about a foot long. He knows now, years later, that it was nothing that could have hurt anybody. But back then, it was leathery and hard and it was as though it was made of something tougher than muscle. It's face was pointed, and its mouth red with its own blood. And then the eyes, worse than a reptiles. Just as glassy and dark, but they moved and looked around. Aware and predatory and deeply, deeply frightening—even caught on a fishing line and asphyxiating in the open air.

So Nick's father had a few beers and carried Nick out into the deep water and tossed him in, and the shark after him. Nick, of course, became terrified, this little shark uncoiling like a spring the instant it entered the water, shooting between his legs and off into the somewhere. Nick flailed and swam back toward shore and somehow his head dipped below the waves into the grit and the next thing he knew he was floating in the air, his father's hairy forearms strong under his ribcage, the shallow tumbling surf passing below. And Nick's father, as he carried Nick out of the ocean, was saying "Sorry, I'm really sorry," and "Jesus, don't tell your mother, okay?"

Nick hasn't told this story to Adele, or that he's afraid of sharks. He worries what Adele might think, how she might judge his father, not knowing him, on the basis of this

one little thing.

A few months after they started dating, Nick learned that Adele smoked. Not regularly, but whenever she went out with her friends, who also smoked. He asked her to stop. She said no.

"It's killing you," he told her.

"I don't plan to live past thirty anyway," she said back. This hurt him.

So instead, Nick told her that the smell was awful, and it was yellowing her teeth, even though the smell wasn't all that bad, and her teeth were perfect. She quit. That was their second fight.

Adele and Nick wade out in the direction of the sailboat with the beer. Each swell lifts them up so that their feet hang suspended, and then in the shallowest gaps between they set down onto that soft sand again. It's like jumping, Nick thinks, and he imagines what it would look like without the waves, leaping impossibly high, with no regard for gravity.

And then, in between waves, there is no sand beneath Nick's feet. He dips lower than he expects and his toes touch an empty swirl of icy cold water, as though the bottom has vanished, so that his heart jumps and saltwater gushes over his face and he has to paddle his way back up. Adele squeals and laughs, and Nick realizes that they have hit the edge of the beach, that divide where the soft sandy shallows drop off like a cliff into

the dark open ocean. Nick spits out a mouthful of salt. The sailboat is a bit less than a hundred feet away, though now it seems much further out.

"We could swim for it," Adele says in between breaths. She doesn't make a move, and Nick is thankful.

They paddle in a little, so that they can bounce with the waves again. They are as far out as they can go. The sun temporarily dips behind some clouds, and the air relaxes. Nick looks around, and there is no one. The glare of the sun off the waves' crests erases the horizon, the shore, so they might as well be anywhere. Two warm bodies in the open, dark ocean. Nick thinks for a second that this may be a good moment. "Hey," he says.

Adele grabs him through his swimming trunks, and she flashes her teeth, first kissing, then biting his ears, neck, chest. Nick grabs her wrists in a low swell. "Hey," he says again, and she pushes forward anyway. It occurs to Nick that this is deliberate. She is silencing him. It occurs to him that her sexual appetite, all along, was a way to silence him. To keep him at a distance. Her hands and body cover him, and the ocean swells again, kneading them into a rhythm, egging them on.

And this is when he sees it, a flash of leathery gray hide, slick and reflective in the sunlight, breaking above the surface for just one fast-moving moment. A fin, a muscled flank. A swirl of eddies in the freshly vacant seawater.

"What's wrong?" she asks, and between the two things he says, "Shark."

Adele whips around. “Where?” she says, and then an underwater wake pushes through them. They are lifted and moved inches back. A displacement, an intimation that something strong passed through, fast. And then, in a gap between waves, the leather glides across the surface again. Adele jumps and is instantly closer to Nick, one hand gripping his bicep so tight it hurts. Nick has never seen Adele scared before, and yet here it is. Something new in her, something old in him.

A person learns things when they live under the weight of an imprecise fear. Lightning, tsunamis, planes plummeting from the sky in fiery wrecks. Sharks. If you are not being attacked, do not make quick movements. “Don’t move,” Nick says. Control your heart rate. Stay together. Try to look larger. Don’t let your arms and legs protrude. “Breathe,” he says, and he grips her shoulders and pulls her closer. “Get on my back,” he says.

Adele climbs on his back, and he can feel her shaking. He pulls her legs around him, and her arms to his chest, so that his palms cup her heels and lift her higher on his back, above the water. He begins to march toward shore, the colorful umbrellas and bikinis and skin scattered along the dunes. It’s a long march. The waves pull him back, then push him forward.

The shark again, behind him and to the right. He doesn’t see it, but he feels it in the water, it’s so close. Something big arcing through, circling around. The fine sand under his feet lifting up as if by wind, twisting around his ankles.

And Adele, above, sinewy and holding tight, her breast to the back of his head,

her heartbeat. This new fear. She has never needed Nick. He was convenient, comfortable, uncomplicated. But now.

He may have been hoping for this. He may have been thinking, New Smyrna, no fatalities, if you're going to get bit this is the place. If something's going to happen.

He may have been thinking, something needs to happen. Adele has had lots of men, he knows. A few weeks with this one, a month with that one. She's a beautiful woman, he knows, and she's smart, all her professors tell her she's the best student they've had, and he sees the faces of her male classmates fall when she touches his arm before leaving him outside a class, or when she kisses him hello. He tells her, I am different, but then he doesn't tell her he loves her.

She's out of his league. Next to her, he's a scrawny little boy, a shaggy-dog with a paunch.

He may have been thinking, what if she gets bit? If one of these little New Smyrna sharks takes a nibble off her calf and Nick picks her up and he carries her out of the sea and sets her down in a bed of sand and ties a towel into a tourniquet and he saves her life, or at least something heroic, or at least something good. If the lifeguard runs down from the watchtower and sees that her leg is wrapped up and tied down, and her hand is in his, and he's saying to her it's going to be okay, she's nodding and she's in only a little bit of pain, on account of the shock, and this lifeguard calls for an ambulance and says, it looks like you're going to be alright, this boy has saved your life, and by the

way, it looks like this boy is different, and also, it looks like he loves you.

Nick carries Adele on his back, and she's shouting "Shark!" as soon as they get close enough to shore to be heard. And this shark, as though in response, makes another pass, along Nick's left thigh, the whole length of it, its rough skin on his much smaller than he expected it to be but still bigger than he wants it to be. This is not a sand shark. And its dorsal fin catches behind his knee, and the shark twists its head back into his groin, and he can feel the shape of it, the pointed head, the ridge above the eye. No teeth, but it feels like he's been hit by a baseball bat. And then the shark uncoils off of Nick as though he's a springboard, shooting off into somewhere, and it's gone.

Adele screams as he stumbles, and then they're underwater. Nick takes in a gasp of water, and this is something he has never done. He's swallowed water before, little amounts of it, but never has he gasped water in a full, expanding diaphragm kind of way. The saltwater is heavy in his lungs, burning on the way in, and there is a jolt in his body, a total panic that in its extremity erases the daily fears that have plagued him his entire life. He gains strength. He pushes off the velvety bottom and he feels his own muscles that he never knew he had.

And then he's above the water, coughing and boring the water from his eyes with his thumbs. And Adele's arms wrap around his throat, and she says his name, over and over, and he loves the way she says it, because the way she says it he knows she is afraid, and because she is afraid he knows she loves him.

So maybe he regains himself, Adele on his back. He keeps on marching. But the way she says his name, the way she holds him, strokes his head, feels his skin for bites. What she almost said. Come back, he wills to the animal. Come back and take a little taste. He stops and swivels around on the balls of his feet, facing the open ocean. Adele tightens on him and she asks what he's doing. "It's gone," he says.

Maybe he thinks, come back, take a toe. A little bit of a calf. He thinks, maybe I dare you. Come back. You were so close. Make this real.

They make it back to shore. It feels like all the other times he has extricated himself from the ocean. The heaviness of the water and the sudden feeling of weightlessness as he breaks from it. He staggers without the viscosity of the water to support Adele's weight. A man, overweight in board shorts, runs to them and grips Nick's shoulder to steady him. The hairs on the man's forearm are supernaturally coarse, the sun supernaturally bright. He feels open—eyes dilated, breathing hard, blood pumping.

Adele, though, she jumps down from his back and kisses the wet sand. She wraps herself in a towel and she stares back at the sea, wet and wide-eyed.

The lifeguard comes. He asks them what happened, and Nick tells him. The lifeguard seems unimpressed. Adele is quiet, and he thinks that maybe something has gone wrong, that there is a new distance between them.

But then, after a little while, she says, “So now we’ve seen a shark.” And she holds his hand, the entire drive home, in this whole-handed, crushing, scared way that maybe he’s been wanting.

He thinks, today is the day.

SUBTRACTION

It was Mark Spaddon's height that got him killed. Mark was walking home with his sweetheart—that's what they called themselves, "sweethearts"—holding hands, on the gravel on the side of the road because there was no walking path, Mark closest to the road because he had recently discovered Southern manners and took them to heart. He wasn't what anyone would call tall, though—if he was taller then he would have played basketball for Potomac High, he loved basketball, and on the day he died he would have been struck in the shoulder. It would have been bloody, but not fatal. And if he had been shorter, he would have been slashed across the head, and it still would have been nasty, a concussion, bleeding, maybe even a fractured skull. Livable, really. But Mark was five feet and ten inches tall, and the stop sign that this fat lady found and stashed in the back of her pickup truck hung off to the right about five inches lower than that, neck-level, laid flat, cutting the air like a blade, while she drove past the high school, exactly five miles per hour above the speed limit, because five miles per hour over doesn't get you pulled over, eating pineapple yogurt and listening to ninety-two-point-nine FM country-music-all-the-time and humming along, speeding, but only slightly, toward the single greatest act of violence she would commit in her life.

Mark liked this girl. Her name was Patricia, but she told everyone to call her Trish that year because Pat was a boy's name, and she didn't want to spend her last year of high school with a boy's name. The sun was bright, and they stared straight ahead or

down and squinted until their cheeks hurt, and Mark talked about basketball, about how he could almost, almost touch the rim, while Trish pretended to listen and kicked gravel ahead of them, watching the rocks skip and bounce. The bright afternoon horizon was perfectly flat, the road a straight corridor of dry deciduous trees and shrubs, so that if they had turned around they would have seen the pickup truck for miles, as far back as traffic and the curvature of the Earth would allow. Trish's hand became sweaty, and she squeezed it from Mark's and wiped it on her pants and that's when this pickup truck passed them, whizzed by, and she noticed the What Would Jesus Do? bumper sticker, and she heard this grinding sound, like a zipper opening up, only wetter, and then she held her hand out for Mark's only to find vacant air.

She walked another few steps, searching with her fingers, pawing really, annoyed, and then she turned around and saw Mark on the ground, in a condition that a State Trooper would later call "technically not decapitated," and she didn't scream or cry out. She ran to him, and stopped before she stepped in the blood. There was a lot of blood. She stayed calm though, and she called nine-one-one on her cell phone and explained what happened, and when the responder asked her to check to see if Mark was still breathing, she said in an even voice that she was sure he was dead. Then she sat in the gravel, in the sun, squinting at the median while she waited for the ambulance. Her skin felt good under the sun's heat. Trish wasn't as distressed as she expected to be. She had only gone out with Mark for a couple weeks, and now that she thought about it she didn't even know what his favorite food was, or color. He liked to call her "sweetheart," with a drawled "heart," but she didn't call him anything.

She felt calm and grown up. Strong. She was more surprised, shocked at how suddenly so much could change. Every once in a while, she wiped the sweat off her hands onto her jeans. She had imagined things like this happening. Floods, tornadoes, home invasions. She had wondered how she would go on—how she would fare as the survivor.

A bird rustled in the tree branches above her. She would have to fake it at the funeral. She knew the ambulance would arrive soon. She bit her lip, hard. Eventually, a few tears squeezed out, and she was ready to meet them.

Q.[1]

"I had written about it[2] for a while, this was just my first novel-length treatment of boredom and tediousness and all that—how to make meaning out of mundanity. There's "The Soul Is Not a Smithy"[3] and a few others in *Oblivion.* Some bits in *Infinite Jest.* I suppose it's about the joy of being alive, and that experiencing boredom, absolute crushing boredom, is kind of like a monk giving away his personal belongings and taking a vow of celibacy and living in silence and isolation his whole life. You'd think it'd make you unhappy, but it shears away all the stuff that gets in the way, and then something small but new and wonderful happens, and you can really see it, and you realize that joy of being alive, and you are happy in the most true pure sense. I think so, anyway."

Q.

---

[1] This is purely fiction.

[2] *The Pale King* is set to be published in 2011. *The Pale King* being its title only in that it's what DFW called it up until the point of his suicide, which was by hanging, which was on his patio, which was on September 12th, 2008, which was a Friday, which was approximately half a year before I read my first DFW story, "Forever Overhead" from a used copy of *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men,* which I loved ("Forever Overhead"). Being a new MFA student, and not particularly well-read, I did not know of DFW or the suicide at that time.

[3] Not my favorite of the stories in *Oblivion*, but even of DFW's stories that were not my favorites, or that I didn't find fun to read (which DFW would be disappointed by, believing that avant-garde "smartness" and commercial fiction come from the same contempt for the reader—"The project that's worth trying is ... stuff that makes the reader confront things rather than ignore them, but to do that in such a way that it's also pleasurable to read" *Salon.com* interview, Laura Miller), I don't think I ever regretted reading any of them.

"Well, yeah. That's why I picked it for the main character's profession. It's the most boring thing I could think of. But I guess you're right, a person's life tends to be represented in their finances, and you learn a lot about a person dealing with their taxes. That was your experience? So you weren't actually bored?[4] Okay. I'd be more interested in, though, what gets left out of the taxes. You're getting their life through the filter of the tax code, so what does that filter leave out, that's what would interest me, if I were to look at it from that standpoint. But maybe you're an outlier. I think that for most people, being a tax examiner would be the most boring job just about ever."

Q.

"Oh, a bit of everything. I researched people who have boring jobs, I researched boredom as a neurological status, what chemicals and electrical activity is going on, how it starts and stops and what could be considered 'boring.' The word, the etymology of 'bore.' I got all the IRS pubs, all their rulings, spoke with accountants and tax examiners. No joke, there were stacks of notes, hundreds of pages, like this high, in the garage." [5]

---

[4] No, I wasn't.

[5] I have spent countless hours researching tsunamis, lightning, photographer James Balog, serial killers and mass murderers, brain injuries that result in changes in personality, phobias, bear attacks, David Foster Wallace, the Al Mutanabbi Street bombing in Baghdad in 2007, and the effect of water on objects and light waves entering it at an angle. I want to know: Did DFW get excited by the act of learning something new, however trivial, because this validated his humanity? Did he explain these trivialities in detail to people who didn't care, only satisfied when they became exasperated by the conversation, knowing that he had enough knowledge about the subject to literally tire someone out? Did he watch documentaries on television sometimes until 3 'o clock in the morning and fall asleep on the living room couch and when his girlfriend (or wife) would complain the next day that he didn't come to bed, he'd respond by describing, in comprehensive and precise detail, the travels of David Livingstone?

Q.

"Yeah, I wrote in the garage. Well, not always, but that was my 'place.' You're in an MFA program, right?[6] You've got to have a place,[7] even if you don't use it. I'd change it up. If I got stuck, I'd go somewhere else, and if I was still stuck, I'd go somewhere else again. I'm sure I was annoying, but Karen was sweet about it. Everywhere I went, you know, I'd mess it up, leave copies of the pub 504 from years 2000-2007 spread out all over, which I'm not even sure why because I didn't even really need to do that, but she was sweet about it.

"You should have a place, even if it's just so you know you have somewhere you can retreat to, and all it does is give you that thought and confidence, like what you're doing is a real job and you're not just playing at being a writer." [8]

---

[6] "One of the things you two will discover, in the years after you get out of school, is that managing to really be an alive human being, and also to do good work and be as obsessive as you have to be, is really tricky." *Whiskey Island Magazine*, Spring 1993.

[7] At home, I have a desk in the living room that is covered in mostly my girlfriend's CD's, coupons, and spare junk. On campus, I have an office that is shared with half a dozen other graduate students, and a library that is entirely full between 10 a.m. and about 9 p.m., and only stuffy, loud, and crowded before and after that time. I have learned to write longhand, in 5-10 minute increments between obligations, on a bench or at a restaurant or even sometimes stopped at a red light.

[8] How do you know when you're not playing at being a writer? Not all of us can be DFW, and have a novel published in our early 20's. I have a few student things, two small lit mag publications, and have yet to experience receiving money for something I've created. The other day someone asked me what I did, and I said I was a student, and realized that the first thing that came to my mind was not "writer." Sometimes I wonder if I'll run out of ideas, or, to be honest, if I already have, and what happens after that.[9]

[9] In a letter to Jonathan Franzen, author of *The Corrections* and a friend of DFW's, DFW wrote "Who knows?" He was considering stopping writing entirely, opening up a dog shelter. It must have been hard, to follow up *Infinite Jest*, to not know what happens next after something like that.

Q.

"Yeah, I suppose I am known for that a bit. I do have my bag of tricks, so to speak. I suppose the reason why I use them is because I think that all writing, on the whole, is one big bag of tricks, or a collection of many bags of tricks, so that all writing is tricky, and if all writing is tricky then my tricks, which are really very obvious and self-conscious, are the least tricky of them, as in I'm trying to make my writing be honest about it actually being writing, and not trying to trick you into thinking it isn't, which I think is the real lie here."[10]

Q.

"There's nothing intrinsically dishonest about tricks. So I'm using tricks, sure, but you know I'm using tricks, so are they really tricks? I'm being as upfront about it as I can. I honestly want to know. [11] What I'm trying to do, structuring the book like a pomo fictional memoir the way it is, is to show everyone that yes, it's a piece of writing, and

---

[10] Maybe clever or over-clever would be the better descriptor here. I mean, the "tricks" of writing aren't the reason that I would consider writers, at their cores, dishonest. Writers are dishonest less for the devices of writing (i.e. the tricks) and more for what they do than how they do it (i.e. trying to represent the whole of something by only a small part, being that you can't fit the whole of something on a written page). At least, that's my vague, oversimplifying, and baseless generalization, as somewhat of a neophyte insider.

[11] Is that the goal of writing in general, then, or just DFW as a writer? I'm actually curious here. I haven't given it much thought until it appeared on the page (just so you, the reader, know, DFW has not resurrected himself for the purposes of my own amusement, this is a fictional interview with a dead person whom I have mourned at least as far as it is possible for a person like me, not a very mournful or emotional person, at least as far as it is possible for a person like me to mourn someone whom I have never met). Is this what I am going for with my writing? Do you (the reader) think that I am writing this because I want to form some sort of connection with you, something intimate and close and maybe, as far as intimate and close things go, even loving? Do you feel like you *know* me? And does it go both ways? Do I *know* you?

yes, it's me talking to you, author to reader, so let's come to an understanding, and have as honest and real a conversation as we can.

"I mean, do you think I'm a dishonest person, then?" [12]

Q.

"I think that's one of the goals of writing, yes. I think that a connection, author to reader, is possible. If it wasn't, then what the hell am I, or any of us, doing? You have to believe it's possible, if for no other reason than the implications of what writing and writers become if it isn't possible.

"That's really the whole purpose of writing, is to form that connection. I want to have a conversation with Joey Shmoey in Los Angeles, California, and be like, hey, Illinois to the West Coast, man, let's sit down and talk, you and me, I have something to say to you, and I want you to feel something because of it. I've said that before, haven't I? I want people to feel stuff.[13] That sounds about right."

Q.

---

[12] Yes, but in an honest, good way.

[13] "Feel stuff." It always comes down to that. Vague but simple and true, and easy to see in something but hard to describe. The sharp tightness in my chest and the feeling of precipitous relief at the end of "The Depressed Person," as though I had finally been released from a story that was chaining me down to my seat, forcing me to slog through, and then the slight twinge when I realized the main character, however fictional, has to remain in those pages, because for me it's just a story, a window, but for her it's what she is, and she'll never be free of it, forever scared of what she is and the judgment that she is asking for. Or the sheer delight of "Consider the Lobster," a sort of mental tickling, the kind of over-complication that makes you unable to hold back that smile, this warmth, like a funny joke that goes on for way too long because you don't want to let it go, you don't want DFW to stop, because as much as it's too much, it makes you feel electrified, a part of someone else, inside DFW's odd head and not alone, and you don't want DFW to ever stop.

"Well I'm not really pomo.[14] Or at least, I try not to be just pomo. Right, the 'me' that I present in terms of the author of the stories, not the narrator, if we can avoid confusing the two, is the real 'me.'[15] That's why I'm so tricky, or rather that I show my reader that yes, *this* is writing, because if they know that it's writing, then they know I'm trying to be honest with them, and they stop reading like a reader, and I stop writing like a writer, and we cut through all the layers, and I hope we get as real as we can get, or as honest.

Q.[16]

---

[14] I think DFW is, in fact, very easily postmodern. Not because DFW is pomo, but because pomo is DFW. I think that DFW has defined pomo for someone like me—DFW, the master, defines the genre, not the other way around.

[15] I'm not sure that's really true. The narrator of a story is a fictional creation because the representation of himself or herself that the author puts down on the page is only that, a representation, frozen in time, as we are told in every beginner's writing workshop in college, and, as I mentioned earlier, a representation of a whole of something (i.e. the writer's personality) by only a small, infinitesimally small, part of that something, and thus can't be more than a tricky, clever signification of that whole, like the way artists will cross-hatch to represent shading, or slash a paintbrush across a canvas in a way that kind of looks like a palm tree, if you squint. So how can the 'me' that I'm portraying at this very moment, right here (no, here (no, *here* (∞))) possibly be the real 'me,' regardless of how you make the reader aware that they are reading, and if I can't be me then how could a reader possibly, really, form a connection with me? 'I' am no more real or complete a representation than the resurrected version of DFW that appears in this fictional interview (I don't have sufficient vocabulary or the ability to flash genius, so I can't really recreate his voice, though I doubt he talked the way he wrote—in fact I have, in my research, found confirmation of that). I have no answer, except that maybe all this is a farce, all of writing is one big trick, and the biggest dupe is the writer himself or herself, who deludes himself or herself into believing that such a connection is actually possible, that you really can be intimate and real with your reader, and strives for that connection in vain.

[16] "I think all good writing somehow addresses the concern of and acts as an anodyne against loneliness. We're all terribly terribly lonely" *Whiskey Island Magazine* Spring 1993. "Somebody at least for a moment feels about something or sees something the way that I do. It doesn't happen all the time. It's these brief flashes or flames, but I get that sometimes. I feel unalone—intellectually, emotionally, spiritually. I feel human and unalone and that I'm in a deep, significant conversation with another consciousness" *Salon.com* interview, Laura Miller. (continued on next page)

"It does go both ways, doesn't it? As a writer—and you should remember this, how long until you graduate and have to go into the real world and be a "writer" without everyone around you telling you that you are and holding your hand and encouraging you and all that?—as a writer, I think that the ultimate thing is that you be read. Because the connection runs both ways. What use is the 'reader'" if there is no real reader? We want to be read, because that means someone is listening, and if we did our job, not just listening but honestly truly listening, and that means that there is someone besides us who really cares.

"That's what everyone is after, and I don't just mean writers. How much more intimate can you get than to get inside somebody's head? If you want to talk about what love is, then what could be closer to it than being inside someone's brain and seeing and resonating with their most interior, honest thoughts?[17]

On second thought, maybe that (i.e. the connection) isn't what all writers are going for, in general. Maybe that's just what DFW, himself, was going for. Maybe that jittery desire to be unalone, maybe that was just him. Maybe that's why we either love him or we hate him, because he is wordy and complicated and *hard*, but for some of us, we have that too, we too are jittery and scared and alone, and every once and a while, just every once and a while, we break out of that, together.

[17] Okay, just for the sake of argument, let's say that this connection is possible. That when a reader reads what a writer has written, their minds are touching, at least in some capacity. Just for the sake of argument. What happens then, when a reader reads what a writer has written, and connects, he (i.e. the reader) really gets what the writer is writing and it touches him (i.e. the reader) in a way that stays with him, forever, and then, after the fact, he finds out that the writer is dead; not just dead, because that happens to everyone, but committed suicide. After the fact, the reader finds this out. What does the reader do with that? You can't go back and remind yourself as you're reading that the writer has killed himself and not let yourself get too close, not let "The Planet Trillaphon As It Stands In Relation To The Bad Thing" really get to you in this intimate, close, purely honest way that good writing can, you can't not let those ideas get too deep into the layers of your consciousness because they're tainted by that self-destruction. That connection is already there, and it's staying with you forever. And that connection is to a dead person, a person who killed himself, and you'll never be able to shake that subtle, jarring feeling of having touched an imploded mind, unguarded.

"Writers are exceedingly lucky in this regard. Movies, comics, commercials, MTV music videos, YouTube webcams, whatever, none of it can go inside someone's head, brain to brain, the way a good piece of writing can. Not even close. At least, not until we invent Mind Melds, and use them to beam Coke vs. Pepsi right into your synapses, right? Sorry, product of the '80s. But seriously, nobody but a writer can connect so closely, so honestly, and so truly with so many people;[18] nobody but a writer can say, with such confidence, that he or she is truly loved."[19]

Q.

"Okay."

Q.

"I don't really mind that it's being published posthumously. You know, I left it there, on top, bound up, so that Karen would find it."

Q.

---

[18] To connect so closely, so honestly, so truly with so many people, and then to leave them behind, to leave them utterly and completely behind. We would have followed DFW. We followed him through porn conventions, meditations on the dark humor of Franz Kafta, on the deck of the *Nadir*, thousands of pages and thoughts and feelings and we were there with you, DFW, through it all. Even your depression, your Planet Trillaphon, the depths of anxiety and fear and nameless blackness, we followed you there and we tried to feel it with you, we honestly truly tried, and maybe if you gave us just a little bit longer. But you left us behind.

[19] You are loved, David Foster Wallace.

"As long as they're honest in the presentation of it. That it's not finished. I can be insecure. I'd like people to know that it's not finished, and if they're going to take it, take it as it is.

"I talk about a relationship, author to reader, like being in love. Like being a widower. Think of it as a good-bye."

Q.

"I was severely depressed. Like you didn't know that already. 'The disease was life itself'—I have that on my wall. Rather, I had that on my wall.

"I left a note for Karen. I left about two thirds of a book for everyone else."

Q.

"Didn't you finish *Jest*? I suppose I'm not one for giving closure."[20]

Q.

Q.

Q, Q.

[20] And we may never forgive you for it.

THRESHOLD

The pilot turns around in his seat, leans back toward the cabin, and he shouts, "We're steady at eleven two-hundred. Nice long jump. Everybody ready to rock?" Someone whoops. You stand up. You are shaking. You strap in to your instructor, Jenny, this short athletic blonde woman, no older than you, twenty-five at most, and much too energetic. This is what she called a tandem jump, the safest thing for a newbie, where you are tethered to her and she does all the work. Her waist doesn't match up with yours, her legs strain to reach the ground. She makes you top-heavy. You tie up, buckle down, harness in.

This is not you. You skipped breakfast, because you didn't want to throw up. You didn't drink anything since yesterday, because you are afraid you might lose control and pee. Once, your best friend visited Florida, where you had moved after high school, and he took you on every roller-coaster in the state. You threw up after each one, though you managed to finish and get to the bathroom first almost every time. You didn't want him to know. You are afraid of moving fast, high, turning. All that. You are just afraid of moving.

Your girlfriend, too. She worries. She would be so upset if she knew you were here.

You were ready to propose to her—your girlfriend who worries—a few months ago. You had a ring picked out, nothing special but you could just barely afford it, and

you had a plan too. You were going on a trip with her to Peru, to see Macchu Picchu, an ancient Incan city in the mountains, grey stone terraces and old walls and pillars, which grow out of the mountain so naturally they're like teeth out of gums, at thirteen thousand feet, as high as this plane right now. You would have waited until the two of you had hiked all day and finally reached the ruins at the top of the mountain, and looked down through the misty tops of the clouds, and she was out of breath, and you would point at something to make her look away, and when she did you'd pull the ring out of your pocket, and when she turned around you'd tell her you loved her and she'd be breathless and lightheaded and in one of the most beautiful places on the planet and it would have been perfect.

Someone further down the cabin opens the door. The cabin brightens—you have to shield your eyes. The sun is white at this altitude. A rush of cool air. Your sweat evaporates, sucks the heat from your body and swirls it around the cabin. There are five people ahead of you. Two solo jumpers, blonde guys who like to stick out their tongues and make devil horns with their fingers. A solo instructor, this one a man. And one other tandem jump—one of the solo jumper's girlfriend, who hasn't jumped before either. She smiles a lot, but she doesn't seem afraid.

You had to take a class first. This Jenny, the instructor strapped to your back, she taught it. She said things like, "Don't panic," and "It's like floating, not falling," and just in case the instructor became incapacitated she told you which cords to pull and when—which, she said, was probably not necessary, because everyone has these little computers attached—AAD's—which automatically release the reserve chute if you fall too fast and

too far. They call the one they gave you a Vigil, for "vigilance." She said that that never happened.

You saw a story on the news once, about a first-time tandem skydiver whose instructor had a heart attack on the way down. The man had to pull the cords himself, you guess he didn't have a Vigil, and steer himself down safely, despite having the corpse of his instructor tied to his back, the instructor's head lolling against his shoulder in the wind, weighing him down.

You wondered how you would fare if that had happened to you. If Jenny lurched and died on your back midair, and you had to take control. If you would find the strength to survive, or panic and die. Now that Jenny is actually strapped to your back, and you can feel her breathing against your spine, her ribs expanding and contracting like wings, and tendrils of her hair brushing against your neck in the wind, you regret that fantasy.

This is not you. You do not take risks. But you know people who do. A friend of yours, a soldier, a month ago he took his girlfriend to France, and he proposed to her at breakfast under the shadow of the Eiffel Tower. He had pointed at the tower and said look at that, and when she turned around, he had pulled a ring out, one he had picked out long ago even though he couldn't afford it, and he said, "I love you, be my wife." They told you all about it on a double-date after your trip to Macchu Picchu with your girlfriend, and the whole time you couldn't stop watching your girlfriend's bare ring finger and feeling like an insect.

Not long after, he became a picture on Facebook, an occasional message in your inbox. He was in the desert, Afghanistan. There, he shot and was shot at. And his wife,

she waits for him. You helped her set up a webcam so that she could see him and they could exchange their *I love you*'s in real time.

Your soldier friend was wounded once. Now, when he talks, people listen because he has been marked as something more. He has faced the threat of death and been wizened by it. And that was when it occurred to you that when your soldier friend says "I love you," it means more than when you say "I love you." You are less than.

You could live with that. You are fine with being one of the unimportant masses, the ones who live out their lives comfortably and uninterestingly and serve as chaff for the ones who serve and fight and invent. You want to live a long life with this girl that you love, the one who worries, and grow old with her and get a house in the suburbs with an orange tree in the back, and work some throwaway job during the week and eat oranges straight from the branch and have sex and lie in bed with her for hours and hours on the weekends.

You were going to propose at Macchu Picchu, but school cost too much, and the trip cost too much, and the ring cost too much. You still went to Macchu Picchu, without the ring, and it was beautiful, but there was this moment that you knew could have been perfect, when this girl was looking out over this terrace and the whole of Macchu Picchu and the Andes Mountains and the clouds and the rivers and towns thousands of feet below, and her hair was flipping around in the wind, and she was smiling, and you had to kiss her and know that it wasn't perfect.

That was the same month that you found Skydive Orlando. You didn't tell anyone. Not your family, not your girlfriend. You didn't know if you'd be able to go

through with it—and you weren't sure if she'd let you. She'd say you were being stupid, a man. Like when you grew out your facial hair because you thought it was manly—you said rugged, she said prickly.

You wanted the first she'd hear of it to be the pictures of your landing. And then you'd tell her you love her and this time it would be different. It would mean more.

Your knees feel like they're made of jelly. There are black fabric rungs on each side of the cabin. Nylon, you think. You grab one on each side. Someone jumps out; the sound of the wind snapping against their clothes is like the pull of a zipper—loud and tearing and then gone. Jenny pats you to move forward. Your legs seem sluggish, unsteady, so you grab the next rung. First on the left then on the right, like monkey bars. You make your way forward.

Your heart speeds up. You realize now that you should have drunk something in the morning. You are dehydrated. You can feel your heartbeat in the veins in your forehead. Behind your eyes.

Three million jumps in a year, less than two dozen deaths, Jenny tells you. Her breath is a prickle on the back of your ears. Only a couple were students, and none on a first time dive, she says. This is safe. You feel a little better.

And then you immediately regret it. If this is safe, then it's worthless. It's posturing.

Another zipper pulls out the door and into the wind. "Yeah!" one of the blond guys shouts, and then he's out the door too, another zipper. You close your eyes. Left,

right, forward. Left, right, forward. You think it's not too late. You could stop, un-strap from Jenny, put your head between your knees, maybe make yourself throw up. You don't know these people. The shame would only last so long.

Jenny pats you on your side. "We're up," she says. You open your eyes and blink away the white brightness of the sun and the clouds and you're staring eleven thousand feet straight down, through a roaring threshold of moving, gnashing air. Clouds, at this distance barely more than mist, float by, almost stationary. Or at least more stationary than you would expect. And on the ground, mostly flat squares of green and other geometric shapes, some made up of trees, others neighborhoods or buildings, others blue water. It all looks very neat from this altitude, carved up into distinct segments by rivers or roads or other barriers.

It's impossibly far. You think you'd be in the air for hours. You think you'd suffocate in the thinness of the atmosphere. This has to be some kind of mistake; the other jumpers must already be dead by now. The pilot must have missed an extra zero on his altimeter or something. Your girlfriend will be so upset with you if you die like this. You feel nauseated. You won't be able to make it.

And then you feel Jenny's slim hands curve under your jaw and fit around your scalp. She tilts your head upward, level to the horizon, which is bright and blue and definitely better. It's a strange feeling to have another woman's hands on your scalp. You are instantly calmed. You are not sure why her hands have this effect. They give you strength.

This is what you think is missing from your life. This moment of courage. One moment you are worthless—a TV-watcher, a couch-sitter—and then a surge of adrenaline, a rush of air, and you will become something more.

Jenny says something, caught and carried away by the wind, something like "Go go!" or "Let's get going!" Something with two G's.

And now you stop again. You don't know how to continue. The air rushes past the door like a wall, twisting and roiling with eddies. It boils, it bites. You can't imagine going forward. You'd just bounce back, or be ripped apart. You realize that you don't have the will to do this. You realize that you are worthless.

Jenny begins to pull away, like she knows that you can't do it, and you become top-heavy, you think you'll fall backward. You panic. You grasp the sides of the door for balance, to steady yourself, and the aluminum edges press into your fingers, the air tears over your knuckles, and you get an idea. You tighten your grip until it hurts, and lean back, until your biceps stretch and fill with acid, and the tendons in your arms go taut like wires. You lean back until you feel like your arms will snap. You bend your knees into a runner's starting position.

Jenny, she gets it, she leans back with you, puts an arm around your shoulder, another on your waist. She counts.

"One!"

You are not brave.

"Two!"

You don't want to do this.

"Three!"

This is what gravity is for.

Forget will. Forget courage. You have momentum.

This is not you. You can't claim responsibility. You are a projectile. A missile. You break through the wall of boiling air, and it's like diving into a pool, crashing into something so much thicker. You hold your breath.

BULLET

You breach into the open sky outside the plane, and there is the same moment of confusion as a dive into deep water—spinning and tumbling, not knowing which way is up or down. There is a smear of brightness, blinding blue and white, and then an olive darkness, and then brightness again. You hold your breath.

Jenny, your tandem jump instructor, she evens you out. She spreads out her arms and legs and catches the air and flips you around and over, until you're face down underneath her, and the Earth fills your vision. It's segmented, geometric swaths of crops, trees, and blue lakes sectioned off by highways, strange in its orderliness. The shadows of clouds mottle the landscape. And it grows ever so slightly, so you almost can't notice, but you know it's inching closer. Inflating.

Organs you didn't know you could feel you can feel now, as they become weightless in your body. Now you know exactly where your kidneys are.

Jenny was right when she said that it wasn't like falling. But it's not like floating either. Not exactly. It's like sliding on something thick and heavy and viscous. It's like you're going so fast that you're not going so fast, that you've lost all perspective, and that the air has become something other than air, something more substantial and physical and present. Like you can actually touch it, like you're swimming in it.

This is something new. If you land, you will walk away as more than what you were before. You'll carry this with you forever.

You let the cushion of air push up against you. Hold you. Jenny grabs your shoulders, gives them a shake. You can feel her smile into the back of your head. You are not afraid. You thought you would be, but you are not. You finally let go of your breath, suck in the rushing air-that-is-not-air. You whoop. You stretch open your arms and open yourself to this inflating vision of the Earth beneath you.

This is what it feels like to surrender.

BRIGHT AND LOUD AND THEN GONE

The day I noticed the change in us was the day Harlan Hayes was doused in gasoline and lit on fire on the South Side of Chicago, and Melissa, my girlfriend, wrote the B3 metro story on it. B3, not B2 or B1, because the *Tribune* has to categorize these things as more or less important or horrific or newsworthy than one another. Not A1, because that was reserved for anthrax mail bombers, terrorist attacks, the economy, and the Presidential Election. Not B1, because that was reserved for mass recalls, human-interest stories for variety, and murders with multiple victims, or if only one victim, involving torture, rape, a child, or something else to make it special. Not some 77-year old black guy on the South Side, not unless there was something special about it.

August 19th, 2008. I had made Shepherd's Pie for dinner that day. I was working a temporary job at a doctor's office downtown, filling in for a guy on vacation, developing x-rays of mostly old people with broken ankles or hips. It was an early morning start, but I got off at four 'o clock, an hour earlier than Melissa, so I had time most days to make her dinner. The smile she would get after a long day, when I surprised her with chicken parmesan, salmon with rice and asparagus, or Shepherd's Pie, I loved that smile.

And anyway I liked cooking. It was nice to present something to Melissa, sure, but also I just liked the smell of cumin and the brightness of the kitchen. I spent eight hours a day in a dark room filled with developer and fixant and the metallic bitter fumes of each. If I got too stir-crazy I might sneak a look outside where the radiologists might

be humiliating some patient. Imagine a seventy-five-year-old woman, stark naked, in the middle of a cold room. The radiologists instructing her from behind their lead-lined barriers—both arms out, now one leg up, and one hand on top of your head, good, now the other on your stomach. Rub your stomach and pat your head. Now, touch your nose and cough. Then the whir and snap of the machine taking its pictures, and I'd retreat back to my dark room and wait for the ghostly bone-filled negatives.

So I had just made Shepherd's Pie, a sort of casserole—ground meat sautéed with sweet onions and baby bella mushrooms and cut green beans, layered with a generous piling of cheddar, and topped with another thick layer of garlic mashed potatoes. I would never tell Melissa when I was making it. Shepherd's Pie was her favorite meal, and I liked setting the table, and watching when she opened the door, and that smile.

Melissa had gotten the assignment for the burned man. It was one of her first major crime stories there, at her internship with the *Tribune*. Besides a story about a fourteen-year-old boy shot in the face by a younger boy during an argument, also on the South Side, where she interviewed some friends and family, but she hadn't gotten a byline, and it was just a dime-a-dozen generic shooting on the South Side, so she said it didn't really even count.

So while I was at work, getting a contact high from the chemicals in the dark room, and the radiologists were making an old man who barely knew who or where he was, Alzheimer's I think, dance The Robot—I'm making it sound too awful, I think—Harlan Hayes was having an argument with an evicted tenant who left in a rush and came back later to knock Hayes down, douse him in gasoline, and set him on fire.

When I put the Shepherd's Pie in the oven to bake the potatoes into a golden crust, Harlan Hayes burst from his home screaming for help, completely naked, and immolated in fire. A streak of orange brightness in the muted overcast air. Naked, because the fire was so intense that it burned all his clothes—his shirt, his pants, his shoes, everything—off of his body until he was a smoldering, smoking, completely exposed human being.

Most people know what a third degree burn is. The reticular dermis and the fat and tissue beneath boils, creating a bubbly effect on the skin, massive inflammation and maybe exposure of sub dermal tissue, a "wet" look. A fourth degree burn isn't something most people have experience with. It's not really any specific type of injury, really. It's when a person is burned to the point of being at least partially destroyed. When the skin and tissue peels off the bone like meat left in a barbeque for hours, when entire body parts crumble at a touch, barely held together by the threads of their physical existence.

The pain actually becomes merciful—it speeds shock and unconsciousness. Fourth degree burns cut straight through the nerves, denying even that.

When Melissa arrived at the street through which Harlan Hayes had run looking for help, she found ashes leading from his building to the next one down the street. She found flecks of scorched fabric floating across the pavement and collecting in something like lint in the gutters by the curb of the road. It was like he had shed his skin.

And when she interviewed the police, they said that the old man had made it further than he had any right to, given the extreme burns over every square centimeter of

his body, all the way down the street to the next building over, where he had collapsed against the front door and cried repeatedly for someone to help him, to put him out.

Melissa got home that day at around five. I heard her bounce up the stairs to our apartment like a teenager, her footfalls happy and full of energy. And when I opened the door, she grabbed me and hugged me and squeezed and picked me up—a reversal of our usual routine, and a rare thing; I have more than a few pounds on her. I had a *great* day, she said. Then she saw the Shepherd's Pie laid out across the table and she squealed.

Melissa had the biggest grin. I hadn't seen her this happy in weeks. She practically inhaled her Shepherd's Pie. It was like she wasn't even chewing. She told me all about it.

She told me that the front door of that apartment had a dark streak on it, a five-fingered pull downward, like a claw mark. Melissa said it looked fake—not the color she had expected blood to be. Brown, dark, and grimy, not bright or red. Not just blood, either. Pieces of skin. Like a horror movie, she said. It was awful, she said, and her voice took on a lower tone, and her eyes darkened. Then she took another bite of Shepherd's Pie, and she shook her head, and that dark look disappeared. She continued the story.

She stepped around the stains on the porch, and she knocked. An older woman, matronly and thick and black, answered. Kathy was her name. They fell into the old routine—introductions, account, personal questions and follow ups.

The woman said that when Harlan Hayes crawled up to her door and pounded and clawed, he cried for help, for someone to put him out. She said that she went to the

window, and looked at the naked, burning old man. By this time, he would have not been actively burning, at least not in a fiery sense. A black charred skeleton of a man, his skin peeling as the fat beneath it expanded and now cooled. I can't even imagine what it might have been like for him. The smell of his own flesh would have hung in the air, soaked into the porch and the doors and probably never completely able to be cleaned out. The woman looked around for whomever had done that to him, and she told him through the door that no, she wouldn't help him, and that he needed to go away.

The woman, Kathy, listened to his continued cries for help through her door, each one made with less and less breath, until finally they stopped, and some time later the police and an ambulance arrived and took the old man away, leaving only the stains on her wooden porch and the blood and skin that sheared off his palms onto her door.

Melissa talked in between bites. She ate with this tremendous appetite, and it was contagious. I couldn't help catching her smile either. This story was something else. I knew that I might write about it one day. We ate the entire dish, something like two pounds of meat, half a pound of cheese, half a pound of veggies, and a pound of potatoes. All of it was gone. We scraped up the melted cheese from the bottom of the dish with spoons and licked them clean.

Isn't that just awesome? she said when she finished. So freaking cool, she said. I couldn't have made that up if I tried. It's so Chicago. It's perfect.

It was so Chicago, I agreed. South Side. Once, at night, we were driving and saw a motorcyclist get hit. Several other men hovered nearby. I told her to pull over so I could

roll down the window and ask if he was okay. Are you crazy? she asked me. Looking back, I suppose it was stupid of me. South Side, at night no less.

She told me she might get a B1 with the burning man story, maybe even an A1. This might become one of her best clips, she said. She said, This is what I became a journalist for. She said, Finally, they're giving me the serious Cops & Courts stories.

The look in her eyes was so bright. She licked her spoon and looked away, and smiled to herself and shook her head. Man, she said under her breath, so I almost couldn't hear.

That was the middle of autumn. It was something that neither of us had seen in years, since both of us went to college in Florida. The trees going from green to orange and red and finally to these spidery, sharp, empty things reaching toward the sky with bony, rheumatoid fingers. And before the first snow or ice, which to me would have made the deadness of winter worthwhile, we left Chicago for Florida once again.

The story didn't get B1, or A1, it got B3. It was good anyway. It got her more assignments. But it was like most of those types of stories—a horrific flash in the pan, bright and loud and then gone. She didn't mention it again.

Or, at least, until I asked her a few months later what happened to the old man. The day her story ran, he was critical and comatose in the hospital, and the assailant was still unidentified.

I don't know, she said. Someone else had written about it, some little blurb way back on B5 or somewhere even further back, she said.

I didn't ask again. What I wanted I already had. The inside details of a horrifying story I could write about later. But still, I think that she probably should have known. I probably should have cared.

I think we were growing up.

I love the news. I still get excited by a traffic accident, or a spectacular murder, or a tsunami in Southeast Asia. I perk up. My heart quickens. I wonder what journalist or writer is having an exceptionally good day. I wish I was there and I'm jealous—someone's getting a story, something heart-wrenching, a widowed mother or an orphaned child, blood and glass on asphalt, something special.

I told this to Melissa once and she got this uncomfortable look on her face. A wince like a smile.

The other day, not long before I wrote this, maybe the reason I wrote this, I saw a bird get clipped by a truck on the highway. I-95, something like eighty miles per hour, going south because the Florida sun was hot on my left. The bird was big and white and slender, with a curved orange beak. The sun lit up its feathers, bright, like it was a white flare. It was a beautiful bird, I thought, and I'm not one to reserve the word "beautiful" for birds. A White Heron—I looked it up later, a few days later.

It spiraled up into the air, like it was doing a pirouette, and then corkscrewed back down into the pavement in this graceful, tragic way so that I couldn't take my eyes off of it. Not even for one second. It was only clipped, I'm sure it could have gotten back up and flown off again. There were no other cars on the road. I had plenty of time. But it was in my way and I didn't swerve.

I justified it seconds later. My father, who taught me to drive in Virginia, told me the law of the road: Don't swerve. If it's in your way and it's smaller than a child, kill it. Better it than you. The truth was, I didn't even think about swerving or not swerving.

Melissa would have swerved. She's seen worse things than the burning man since, but she still believes in a loving God and sometimes she talks about Karma. She prays every once and a while. I'm not sure how she manages that.

But I'm not so dramatic as to think that that makes me a bad person. I just wonder if we—Melissa and me—have become a little more merciless; or maybe I've been somewhat eroded. By what, I'm not sure yet. The world, with its pretty dying birds and its burning men, and its love of a good story.

When I was a boy, I would capture spiders and beetles in the basement of our house and carry them outside to save them from someone else's less caring boot. I wouldn't have laughed at an Alzheimer's patient made the brunt of a juvenile gag. I would have swerved.

The White Heron ground under my front passenger tire and then again under my rear passenger tire. I didn't even feel guilty. I shrugged it off. A bump, and then another

bump. Shit happens, I thought. Not my fault, I thought. And then a tangle of white feathers ejected from the rear of my car. Not even important enough to write about.

WHAT IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN LIKE IF WE HAD BEEN THERE

If you were there on the morning of March 5th, 2007, not too long before noon, in Baghdad, on Al Mutanabbi street, you would have noticed the car parked in front of the Al Kanunia bookstore. Al Kanunia was in the middle of the block, equidistant from the street corners—on one side, books and print shops and the noisy Al Rasheed Street with its convenience stores and markets, and on the other side, the Shahbandar café, smelling like smoke, tea and sweet apples. Book-readers lightly sweating under lazy ceiling fans.

You would have noticed the car because this was Old Baghdad; the buildings were made of stone, not concrete, and the roads were narrow—Al Mutanabbi was old and tight and energetic. A place for walking, not driving. For a vehicle to just stop there, in the middle of the crowds, was something you would have noticed, especially then, during a nasty stretch of the war.

So maybe you might have been born in nineteen fifty-four, and you had been around for a while, accumulated enough wealth and experience to go into business on your own. Maybe, all your life, you loved books, reading them, talking about them, and you eventually grew into buying and selling them. And that's why you came here, to Al Mutanabbi Street, the bookseller's district, the most famous of its kind in all the Middle Eastern world.

You set up in the open air—you could have bought a storefront years ago, but you prefer the bustle outside, in those narrow, stone streets—and you spread out your books

on long wooden tables under a canvas sunshade, or maybe under someone else's canvas sunshade. Who could tell? And you organized them neatly, in a diamond, with the brightest ones toward the front, because you were proud of your newly widened selection and eager to show them—at least, now that Saddam was gone. And, just before noon, you were haggling a price, because that's what you did at Al Mutanabbi, you haggled you even inflated your prices just so they could be bargained down, and this young man held the book he wanted, *Falsafatuna*, or *Our Philosophy* by Baqir al-Sadr, and you liked this young man, because he seemed smart, and he looked at the book with furrowed brows, thoughtful. He held the book up to the sun, felt its weight, the texture of its cover, even flipped through the pages—you swore that he sniffed them. And that's when you noticed the car, just over his shoulder, parked in the road in a way that it shouldn't be, blocking the exit of Al Kanunia. You might have said something, if you were there, if you had had more time, if the nearly-noon sun hadn't been so bright in your eyes, if the heat and dust and haggling hadn't made you so lethargic.

But the car was only stopped for a moment. The driver only wanted that long to watch the bustle of the crowds, the young people and the readers, and to think for a few seconds, or maybe say one last short prayer. Maybe he just wanted to listen to his own heartbeat for a little longer.

Maybe there's no need to go any further. Maybe the story has been told too many times already.

Brian Turner wrote a poem. He wrote it about a man who was written about in a well-known article for *The Washington Post*, which was written by Anthony Shadid.

Anthony Shadid wrote in the article, "The name of most Iraqi victims will never be published, consigned to the anonymity that death in the Iraqi capital brings these days. Hayawi was neither a politician nor a warlord. Few beyond Mutanabbi Street even knew his name. Yet his quiet life deserves more than a footnote, if for no other reason than to remember a man who embraced what Baghdad was and tried to make sense of a country that doesn't make sense anymore."

Shadid had interviewed Muhammed Hayawi earlier during the war, and when Shadid learned that Hayawi's shop, The Renaissance Bookstore, was struck in the Mutanabbi street bombing, and Hayawi himself was killed, Shadid wrote a brief article about him. There was a photo, a balding, soft, clean-cut fat man in a sweater, with his arms crossed, looking down and away, thoughtful, or maybe nonchalant because his dark eyebrows and moustache slightly hardened his face.

And then Brian Turner, who had served a tour of duty in Iraq in 2003 and was often described as a "warrior-poet," wrote a poem, which was a beautiful poem—part of it went:

"—to discover ourselves

lightly dusted in ash, with the poems of Sulma

and Sayyab in our hair, Sa'di on our eyebrows,

Hafiz and Rumi on our lips."

Which doesn't do the entirety of the poem justice. It's like taking the cherry off a sweet dessert—it's only a cherry unless it's on top of something. You need to have the whole picture to know why you're looking at it.

And then he ended it, *In Memory of Mohammed Hayawi*.

It was published and anthologized and read for multiple memorials and special events, which was how I found it.

"The Mutnabbi Street Bombing" rightfully won Brian Turner praise and until its last line my enjoyment was unproblematic. Hayawi himself, at least as far as he was portrayed in Shadid's article, would have probably been thrilled to have been named in a famous poem if he had been alive to see it. And that, I'm sure, makes it all right.

Al Mutanabbi Street was named after a classical Arab warrior-poet, killed not far from Baghdad by a gang of thieves. His poetry was brazen, boastful. He was a warrior-poet, like Brian Turner, one who entered combat and emerged as something more, the

weight of his words lent an extra power by the death that he had faced and overcome. When he wrote, it was as someone who had been there.

Or maybe you might have been a bit younger when it happened. You might have been born in the ‘80s. Your father would have whispered the Call to Prayer in your newborn ear and you would have been circumcised in a hospital, not a mosque.

You might have gone to Al Mutanabbi Street to buy a book. Maybe you had no intention of buying a book that day, you were on Al Rasheed, looking for a t-shirt, when you could hear the chatter, the haggling, from Al Mutanabbi a block away, tucked down this corner, and you remembered that yes, you were near the famous bookseller’s district, and you were drawn to it, the sound of people and energy and the exchange of knowledge, and you thought to yourself that you had the dinars anyway, why not buy a book? Stay a while, smoke, have a tea, maybe meet someone. You had the dinars anyway, and you were young, and it seemed like a good thing to do, something safe and honest and smart, like your father would have done, a tall man who wore glasses and had a chair he used for thinking, and not at all like the regular somethings a disillusioned young man with only a few dinars in a war zone would do.

You might have been smoking a cigarette outside one of the bookstores, Al Kanunia, this cramped little one squeezed underneath a print shop, when you noticed the car parked in the middle of the road, right in front of the doors. You would have been slightly annoyed, because you would have to walk around this car now when you wanted to leave, before you remembered that this old narrow stone street was a place for walking

and not driving, and that a car parking there like that didn't belong here, and your heart would have started to beat louder in your chest. You were young, but you were not naïve. You would have expected what came next, at least as much as any person could expect something like that.

People *died*. A whole street nearly erased. I need to get this right.

This story has been told before. But not once did it feel right, like it was for real. It was never enough. I look back on what is written here, and I know that I will disappoint myself. It won't be enough. I wasn't there, you weren't there, and a few words on the page won't change that. I'm not sure I'm good enough at this or that I've earned my right. I am ashamed.

And yet, I don't think I'll stop.

So do me a favor. Imagine this. We need to get this right, like it's for real.

You're smoking *nargila*, a water pipe, in the Shahbandar café, a two story corner building, stone and wood, and the smoke smells like apple and spice and curls in your mouth as you hold your breath, tickling your nose hairs. The café is cramped so tight that the back of your chair at one of the small round café tables touches the back of someone else's chair, and you're with this other man, who's older than you, who has read a book that you have just read, an alternate history of Iraq—you like it, he doesn't—and you are talking with him, an argument, yes, but one of those good smiling arguments, where you get to say your mind, and you feel warm and proud and like more than you are, as though

what you say are more than just words, and what you are saying has some sort of consequence on the world, even though they're just words, just words on a hot day in a smoky corner café in the bookseller's district.

And then this is what it might have been like if we had been there: a shock blasts through the building, and it seems like the whole street is lifted off its foundation, set inches aside. Windows shatter. There is no sound. Your ears ring, and they never stop ringing. You hold them and you shut your eyes tight just as a bath of sun-warmed dust washes over you like sharp water. There is no screaming at first, only a jolt, and a rain of little things that prickle your skin—rocks, little clear beads of glass, bits of something stone. It's like rushing through a waterfall, though if you were there, that may have been something you'd never done.

And then there's the moment after. A rush of cool air, and an intake of breath. You open your eyes and let go of your ears. The ringing doesn't stop. Your palms are bright red, blood caked in ashen white. You are on the floor, under a table. Now, there are voices. Moans, people's names. *Habbibi,* your man who doesn't like your book says, and at first you think he means you, but he's looking away, for someone else. But what you notice here on the ground, first, is that there is a bright clean "X" on the dusty floor. You are confused. It makes you think that something stranger than a car bomb has happened. But then you realize that that is where your table had been. It's an imprint.

The story has been told so many times. Early, especially on the first day, the counts weren't consistent. Sixteen dead. Twenty-six dead. Thirty-eight. Uniformly, the

blast was described as “massive,” with reports of a crater nine feet deep. Later, the counts settled somewhere in the mid-thirties, with more than a hundred wounded, though the simple words “a hundred wounded” don’t do justice to the severity of the wounds.

I suppose that they never do.

You would have wrapped your shirt around your mouth so you could breathe, the heat of your exhaled air heating your cheeks. You would have stayed there on the floor clutching your overturned coffee table for cover forever. But then the black smoke wafted in, the smell of burning rubber and gasoline and skin and wood and paper, and the upper floor turned orange with twisting flames.

You would have stumbled out of the café. Crawled out onto the street. Some part of you would have known, whispered the word “*bom*.” But the other parts of you would be too dazed and muted, like your mind was filled with cotton, to hear.

Blood ran down Al Mutanabbi street in streams, so much that you thought it might be your own blood, and there was screaming. Things that were once attached to a person and were no longer. You would have crawled into the road over mounds of debris, stone bricks, bodies or parts of bodies, pieces of wood, bits of cars, but mostly the pages of books torn from their bindings—several feet thick, so that it was impossible to tell that it was, in fact, a road. The words on the charred, torn pages catch your eye. But you don’t read them, you just notice them, because ripped and torn and bloodied and spread across the street like they are, they are only words.

And there would have been so much smoke and dust that it blotted out the sun, and made you alone. Shadows in the haze: people, standing in the midst of it, or sitting on small crates or pieces of the stone buildings loosened by the explosion, their clothing torn, their skin covered in powdered stone and concrete which has dried their blood. Their shirts tied around their mouths and noses like yours.

You would have crawled out into the road looking for help.

And in the sky, the sun would have diffused into a white blur. Out of it, shreds of paper would have floated down, scorched, some of them breaking into embers or sparks of orange, like the sun was falling from the sky.

Of course, the explosion was only the first part of it. These were small book shops bursting with merchandise. A shopper might have to move a pile of books to get at another pile. And it wasn't long before the fires spread, and all of Al Mutanabbi was burning, and the air turned black, and people blocks away, who had only heard the explosion, vomited from the intensity of the smoke.

This story has been told so many times before. And here we are, another writer and another reader, trying one more time, and failing again.

Here, on our side of the ocean, it struck close to home. It was also something that strikes close to home; it was something to write about. We don't want to use the word: spectacle.

From the San Francisco Main Library to the Katzen Museum in Washington, D.C., someone or another poured their heart out.

Twisted steel wreckage, once a car and other things blasted into the car until they were one thing, was pulled from the remains of Al Mutanabbi and sent on tour, around the world, all the way to the Netherlands, to be viewed by people who had heard about the bombing on CNN and thought it was so terrible that they should write poems and hold memorials and pay money to see the pieces of what was left.

There is a video of five high school students, dressed in black with thin red sashes on their waists, on a dark stage, reciting poetry in chorus about Al Mutanabbi. Young, fresh-faced, well-fed with color in their cheeks, and nervous, they stumbled over their words. At one point, they chanted, "Mutanabbi starts here!" An audience, probably mostly parents and teachers, applauded proudly.

Brian Turner wrote a poem, and ended it, *In Memory of Mohammed Hayawi*.

In 2008, the year that followed, Al Rasheed street was crumbling. One side overflowed with raw sewage, the other was sheeted in barbed wire. Gangs, selling drugs or religion or both, patrolled the corners, toting machineguns, rocket launchers, and other small arms. It was a place that the police and army did not go, because they were afraid.

And just around the bend, down Al Mutanabbi, those bookshops that hadn't disappeared had switched to selling generators—heavy and hard to steal and apolitical enough to probably not encourage as many further assassinations. Other former bookshops or cafés or tea and smoking lounges were empty, the merchandise long since

sold or looted, the owners long ago disappeared or killed. The storefronts on Mutanabbi street were still blackened husks, and on the corner the famous Shabandar café lay gutted to the open street still littered with stone fragments.

For the first time in hundreds of years, a person would not be able to find the book of their choice on Mutanabbi street.

I have trouble imagining the men and women I saw in photographs, picking through the remains of the wreckage in that choking cloud of smoke, their former jewel of Baghdad, in torn long sleeve shirts, still tucked into their jeans as was the fashion of intellectuals and readers there, covered in that fresh powder of stone and concrete, and then writing an essay about it. I have trouble imagining them on a dark stage in freshly ironed dresses and thin red sashes, nervous, shouting out "Mutanabbi starts here!" to proud applause.

I have trouble imagining their reaction should they learn of the publications, the awards, the critical praise, the year of activity and success that the destruction of their Mutanabbi street brought to our artistic communities. That their harbinger of death was our muse. Maybe the careful titles of the works, mournful things like "Memorial for Mutanabbi," or "Living Without Them," have drawn that fine line artists draw when they create art about something tragic and deadly, a fine line between exploitation and eulogy.

I just wonder which side of the line someone who was there, someone like Hayawi, would have put us on.

You might have gone back to Al Mutanabbi at the end of 2008, when the Prime Minister officially reopened it. For a while, the level of destruction had led you to believe that the street had been physically destroyed, lost forever. But Al Mutanabbi Street has been around for a thousand years, and it has seen targeted violence before. It will see violence again. Shoppers had begun to return to the area already. There were plans to re-tile the street to cover up the crater, the deep etches in the ground like scars. Part of the block was still a burned out husk, but Shahbandar was seeing significant repairs. You would not have gone in. Vehicles were no longer allowed onto the street, and concrete barricades and blast shields segmented the area, the way a submarine compartmentalizes damage with strategically placed hatches.

You would have stopped by another bookstore, a little one, which to you seemed safer. You would have picked up a book you were not interested in, and sat down in the front, and opened it up.

It would have been quiet and nobody would have bragged about a wide selection. There would be a bearded man in heavy clothes sitting alone at a table in the back, with no book, watching for someone to make a mistake, become a target.

A journalist, Philip Robertson, wrote about an anecdote he heard going around Baghdad in 2005 about one of those bearded men. The militant shoots an ice-seller on a

hot day because there was no ice during the Prophet Mohammed's time. It was a joke on Mutanabbi street, a snippet of dark humor. If you were there then, you might have laughed.

You would have caught the bearded man's eye. A reddened, harsh little thing. You would have put your book on the shelf. You would have left and never come back.

You would have thought, you are not your father. You would have saved your dinars for t-shirts, and decided that you should do the regular things that young men do in war zones from now on, because it would be safer.

In her 2008 exhibit "Living Without Them," in Washington, DC, artist Lilianne Milgrom shouted "Ideas cannot be killed!" She shouted, "Ideas will survive and even dance in the death wind of your violence, and in their dance they will spread and multiply."

Her work was a replica of a destroyed section of street, a pile of wood and cinderblock and burned books and ripped clothing. No dismembered bodies, of course. The walls and ceiling were off-white, with white light, in a way that seemed, to me anyway, inappropriately sterile. Maybe she was going for purity. Suspended from the ceiling were dozens of replica torn pages made of porcelain, some bloodstained, to create the illusion that they were floating down from the sky. On them were words, in English, things like "hope" or "love" or poems.

I thought of the old axiom that the pen is mightier than the sword. Maybe that was true. A sword is such an antiquated, inefficient thing. It is tiring to swing and requires years of training to become a killing tool. But a bomb, on the other hand, can snuff out scores of people, an entire street, an entire history, in an instant, in a rush of air and fire and a waterfall of sharp dust, only needing the press of a button and a person with enough hatred to press it. The completion of a circuit. Things have changed. I'm not sure that I believe that ideas can't be killed anymore, not in our age. I'm not sure that words have the power we think they have.

I see poets and artists and writers calling out to Mutanabbi street from across the world, claiming that we stand with them, that through the power of knowledge and words we will conquer violence and hatred and rise again. All I see are words. Mine, theirs. And I am ashamed by how little difference they have made.

$1,199,997.04 (NUMBER STORY)

Blood and bone are on the windshield. Specks of crushed shell, little chunks of gristle. Armadillos. They call them Florida's rats. As if Florida didn't have rats.

The driver stops at a Chevron, the closest one under $3.00, at $2.98 a gallon for regular gasoline. That's how he decides—he picks a cutoff number, something round like $3.00 or $2.90 depending on the day and his mood and the current level of bloodshed in the Middle East, and he doesn't stop until there's regular gas below that number.

He fills up using his VISA debit-card and then enters the station's mangy little store. Its windows are covered in cigarette advertisements. Newport Pleasure. Be a Marlboro Man. SURGEON GENERAL'S WARNING: SMOKING CAUSES LUNG CANCER, HEART DISEASE, EMPHYSEMA, AND MAY COMPLICATE PREGNANCY. You Can Go a Mile On a Camel.

The driver thinks of himself as Jeffrey, what his parents called him when he was a boy. But most people use Jeff, and that's what he writes down on important papers. So Jeff Conner returns to his car 4 minutes later with some Windex $4.19, Brawny paper towels (two-pack) $1.99, and a Snicker's bar, 69 cents. He rolls up his sleeves, takes a heap of paper towels, and cleans the armadillo off his Buick—2001 Park Avenue he

bought new the same year his daughter was born, $39,599.

Jeff Conner is careful. He uses lots of paper towels and wraps the used ones in more before he throws them away. He applies Windex on both the paper and the windshield. The bottle is empty by the time he's finished.

He doesn't stain his suit, a Calvin Klein three-button wool, $495.99. He finishes his Snickers and checks his watch, an Omega, and does a quick calculation—he's about 15 miles out, and the speed limit averages 45, which means 55, which means he is 20 minutes from work when he factors in red lights. He thought he would be late for work, because his wife left him this morning, and now this armadillo, but if nothing else happens he should still make it to the first meetings of the day.

This satisfies him, and he gets into his car and takes off onto Semoran Boulevard. Not long into it, though, he notices something tiny, maybe a tooth, stuck underneath his passenger-side windshield-wiper.

Jeff Conner has run over small animals before. A dog when he was younger, though he wasn't sure he killed it, because he kept driving. A badger or something, squat and dark, a few years after. A bird clipped a truck just ahead of him on the highway once, and it spiraled up into the air and then corkscrewed down into the asphalt in such a tragic way that he didn't think to swerve before it ground into feathers beneath his front tires.

Afterward, he reminded himself of the law of the highway—smaller than a child, you step on the gas, you don't swerve. Better them than you.

These small animals, they would always disappear under the car, a bump and then another bump, and then limp road kill ejects from the rear of the car. But this armadillo, it seemed to ignore the laws of physics, it somehow launched up over the bumper and hit the windshield like a piece of wet fruit. And what it left behind, bits of red and chips of shell or bone, he'd think wouldn't be recognizable. But they were, clearly, from an armadillo.

Immediately after hitting the armadillo Jeff Conner passed a billboard that caught his attention through his blood-speckled windshield. Hungry? Why wait? Grab a Snickers.

The sun has not yet risen. The eastern horizon has taken on that pregnant blue it does when the sun is about to appear, which darkens into a shadowy bruise toward the west. The dawn sky colors everything—the sharp geometric angles of downtown Orlando, the clean curves of the vehicles in traffic on either side of Jeff Conner's Buick, the early-morning joggers and dog-walkers—in a blue ambiance, a haze.

The only things that maintain their color are the neon storefronts, signs, flood-lighted billboards, which by virtue of their sovereign lighting exert a sort of psychological force—a person can't help but read them, all of them, all whispering in Jeff Conner's head, in his own voice, someone else's words.

Something grilled to warm your soul: New Chicken Tomesto sandwich at Panera's. The best therapy ever, Harley-Davidson. Get your ideal image, Ideal Image

Hair Removal. Each vehicle on the road reflects the reds, purples, greens, hot pinks. The neon ads mix into swirls of color and copyright that dance across each hood and trunk, like electricity. Laugh Louder, Universal Orlando. Izuzu Rodeo. It is bright and complex. But Conner is not sure he'd call it beautiful. A word occurs to him: captivating.

Things he can eat, own, do, followed by a number and a dollar sign. And always now. Buy now. Call now. Don't wait. Now, now. You can have it right now.

Volvo S40. Hyundai Accent. Why pay full price? Nike Factory Store. Conner's cell phone, a Cingular Razor, rings. Ford F-150. Toyota RAV4. The phone rings again. Get in your element: Bud Light. More ringing. Casual male—Big & Tall. Ringing. Leah Waste Management. Ringing.

Conner's Razor goes to voicemail. He flips it open and calls back.

"Fuck you," the phone says. Mary.

It occurs to Conner that before this morning, he would have been horrified to receive a call from her on his personal cell phone.

"Mary," he says.

The phone says, "So should I be telling you as your secretary or as your ex-girlfriend that you probably don't want to come to work today?"

6:08 AM.

"You don't get it," the phone says. "It's over. I'm not some defenseless little bitch you can smack around."

Yellow light. Gas. Red light.

"Do you realize what you've done?" Conner says.

The phone laughs at him. “So that’s how Laura took it.”

Mary. She’d been his secretary since Conner and his wife, Laura, moved to Orlando a few months before Caroline was born. The first time he saw her, she was reading *The 7 Habits of Highly Successful People*. Her legs were crossed, and her skirt pulled halfway up a rock-solid, tanned thigh. They had had a perfectly professional relationship for years, most of Caroline’s lifetime, if Conner thought about it.

They had had sex at the office, something they’d never done, but Jeff had always wanted. It made him feel like they were actors in a movie, maybe a porn, doing something that real people didn’t do because it was too risky or impractical or had too many consequences. It was really, really good.

Not long afterward they had started to fight, which had been happening more often lately. He tried to avoid the fights, give Mary whatever she wanted—nice dates, gifts, raises when he could swing them—because she fought like no woman he had known before. Hard, and dirty. He didn’t quite remember what this one was about, but it was about him, and the way that things ought to be, or more precisely the difference between the way he thought things ought to be and the way she thought things ought to be.

The phone exhales. Conner doesn’t hang up. The phone says, “I mean it, we’re over now.” Another pause. “I wanted to tell you something before we ended it, though. I couldn’t figure out how to say it, but then I read this book by Dr. Sandy.”

Conner wants her to get mad. He wants her usual fighting words, more fuck you’s and you miserable bastard’s and I hate you’s, and then the make-up sex later. The tone of

her voice isn't right, it's like she's practiced this. He realizes this is for real and he wonders why she's breaking it off with him.

The phone says, "I tried to feel guilty about the whole thing a few times, usually after Laura visited the office, I really tried and I just couldn't."

Conner doesn't know what had got into him. He was never a physical person: bad knees made sure of that. He was always calm, controlled. There was a switch inside his head; he could turn it all off.

The phone says, "You said it first, you said 'Don't worry about anything but how this feels right now,' and I thought it was a cheesy pick-up line, something from a movie. But then I read Dr. Sandy's book and she talks about that. We're worse than self-centered. We're self-and-now-centered."

Back in the office, he felt numb, didn't even remember doing it, just standing over Mary, reddened skin on his palm. She didn't seem hurt, but she looked at him in this way, the whites of her eyes were so big, like an animal cornered by a predator or about to be struck by a car. It made something in him drop straight down. Conner put on his clothes and left the office immediately.

In his car that night, Connor looked at himself in the mirror. He didn't think he looked like a man who would hit a woman. He touched his jaw, rubbed the facial hair that sprouted since morning. He hadn't hit anyone before, not even as a kid. It scared him that he was capable of it. But he was also fascinated by the damage that he could cause—the impact he could have on the world with only one sharp, quick expense of energy.

By the time he got home, Mary had called Laura. And Laura, who he'd never had a big fight with before, surprised him by what she was capable of. She shouted herself hoarse, woke Caroline out of bed, a wide pair of eyes in the dark behind the staircase's railing. It occurs to Connor that it was probably the last fight of their marriage.

The phone says, "I'm going to try to get on Dr. Sandy's show. I think that she'll help me change. But I know you won't—that's what I wanted to tell you. You are and always will be a piece of shit. Whatever happens next, you deserve it."

6:14 AM.

Teddy bear, sandy brown hair, blue bow tie, marble eyes. Caroline named him Scribbles. $14.99. Connor bought it for her in Seattle on a business trip. Mary came on that business trip.

Caroline will take Scribbles with her, wherever Laura takes her.

The phone says, "Jeff, say something. Did you hear what I said?"

A billboard emerges from the skyline. Floodlights beneath it throw up bright yellow light, bright and clear against the blue horizon. The Holy Land Experience: An Ancient Adventure. $29.75 for adults, $17.00 for children, no charge for five years of age and younger.

Connor clicks off his Razor.

Nissan Pathfinder XEV6. Buckle up: It's the law. Honda Odyssey. E-Pass. Exact coins. Receipts.

75 cent toll. 1 dollar. A quarter in change. Thanks. Smile. Gas.

It comes down to that, Connor decides. One curled fist, one moment of impulse, and so much destroyed. Mary, Laura, Caroline.

When Connor was a boy, some teenagers tried to rob his father at a gas station. His father fought them off, got a tire iron out of his trunk and probably would have killed them if they hadn't been so quick on their feet. It stayed with Connor. He never quite felt like he could have done that.

But now, Connor feels dangerous.

6:28 AM. There is traffic. Conner has miscalculated. He will be late.

Connor had pancakes for breakfast, buttermilk with blueberry syrup and melted Land O Lakes Butter. $3.89. Laura had kept him up, and Caroline, shouting all night. She screamed, cried, pushed, provoked him. The whole time, he concentrated hard on nothing, absolutely nothing. She could do whatever she wanted, he would feel nothing at all. He knew that this was making things worse.

You think I didn't always suspect? she said. You think you're so fucking smart. You don't deserve shit. Caroline is coming with me. I'll take everything from you.

Conner turns up the radio, letting the station's morning talk-show, the "Fiesta," chatter over his thoughts.

The radio is saying, "And now time for news views. A woman committed suicide last week after her sister was rejected from *Extreme Makeover*—"

Finally, the sky had begun to brighten. Caroline snuck into the kitchen, quieter than Conner ever remembered her being, and asked if she still had to go to school. Laura

said no, and Connor told her to shut the fuck up, and then he told Caroline of course, and he would make her pancakes.

The radio is saying, "Her sister had a deformed jaw, misaligned teeth, droopy eyes and tiny breasts—tiny breasts!— however she was rejected by the show for being too ugly—For being too ugly? You mean the doctors were actually like '*Damn*, screw this?'—I guess there's only so much modern science can do—"

His wife grabbed the first plate of blueberry pancakes and pitched them through the kitchen door and into the living room's far wall. Noritake "White Palace" Dinner-ware set. $326.95.

I hate you! I hate you, I hate you, I hate you. That was what she said. Connor turns up the radio. Noise. He wants more noise.

The radio is saying, "But before the woman's sister was rejected by the show, during preliminary filming, the ugly sister's family was encouraged to trash her looks on film, I guess for dramatic effect—"

Caroline began to cry then. Even crying, her blonde hair sticking to her round little face, she was his beautiful little daughter. Laura, he knew, was already gone. But Caroline, she would always be his daughter. There was something there that he could save for himself.

75 cent toll. 1 dollar bill. A quarter in change. Thanks. Smile.

He has early meetings today on financial trends and he needs to organize his materials. He wants to get to the office and do some work. He just wants to get to work.

Connor had spent 25 minutes making new blueberry pancakes—with butter and microwave-warmed maple syrup—for Caroline. The first batch was strewn across the living room floor, and a few sticky ones still clung pathetically to the wall. Laura could clean that up. Caroline cried the entire time, the sound of it triggering a sharp feeling in his chest, something he hadn't known before becoming a father.

The radio is saying, "So when the ugly chick got rejected, *Extreme Makeover* showed her the filmed things her family said about her—Are they supposed to do that?—No, they did it just for kicks—That's awesome!—That's horrible!"

Another 75 cent toll. This time exact change. Do you know about SunPass? Yes, thanks. Smile. Gas.

The road is only lights now. Crimson taillights, golden headlights, floodlit billboards, gaudy neon store signs. Bursts of street-lamp illuminated road interrupted by gaps of darkness pass over the Buick. A synchronized rhythm: Conner's heart, his breathing, his thoughts. Breathe. You want this. Breathe. No, you want this.

The radio is saying, "So anyway, the sister, the one who wasn't on the show and who trashed the ugly one's looks, well she felt so bad about it that she wound up committing suicide with a combination of pills, alcohol and cocaine—"

Exit. Mills Street. Right on South Street.

An old woman is crossing the street. She walks slowly, curled forward as though there are weights on her shoulders, staring straight ahead. She carries a large purse, and in one hand a large keyring.

Red light. Brake.

Target: Expect more, pay less. Volkswagon GTI. The clock reads 6:34 AM. East Orlando Sun: The Sun Rises Weekly 2005. Blueberry pancakes.

The radio is saying, “Is she suing the show?—I don’t know—You know, she never got the makeover. She’s still an ugly bitch. Can you imagine the jury?—Maybe they’ll give her tons of money so she can get plastic surgery and they won’t have to look at her anymore—”

Green light. Gas. Circle.

McDonalds. Badabapbabaap, I’m lovin’ it. Caroline. I hate you, I hate you, I hate you. Chrysler Caruso 300. Gas. No More Wimpy Chips, Kruncher’s Original! Windex costs $4.19, cleans dust, grime, armadillo blood. 6:34 AM. Cancer of the lungs, throat, gums, prostate, liver. Brain tumors. VISA Signature, rewards are just the beginning. Speeding fines doubled when workers present.

The old woman stops in the median. Cars pass on either side. She waits, and then she goes.

Turn. Caroline. You don’t have any options, Jeff. I hate you, I hate you, I hate you Killed an armadillo Windex is 419 Get it and go Auntie Annie’s Pretzel Dogs 75 cent toll no I’m not feeling all right just give me my god damn change Just say no to altered chicken Sanderson Farms Halloween horror Nights tales of terrorbankruptcydontforget foodRaceTrakDasaniWaterPureAndEssentialEnhancedWithMagnesiumsulfatepotassiumchloridesaltwakeupwiththekingburgerkingpublixwhereshoppingisapleasurewhenyourhereyourfamilyolivegardnshootluderunivsalolandbluburypcakarmllocarlinehate

thewhitesofhereyesarelikelightning.stop.

The old woman in the middle looks up, her eyes wide like an animal's. She screams and pulls her bag to her chest. Connor peels hard to the right and slams on the brakes, and his seatbelt bruises his chest, and he is pulled into the frame of his door by the centrifugal force of the turn. For just a moment, he is sure the car will tumble, but it doesn't. The car stops and bounces on its suspension as its weight redistributes. A cloud of white smoke rises in his rearview mirror.

Conner catches his breath. He looks around. His car is perpendicular to the flow of traffic, blocking 2 of 3 lanes. He sees the woman still in the crosswalk, still standing. She is looking at him, and they make eye contact. He wonders if his thoughts are as inscrutable to her as hers are to him. He catches his breath.

"Maniac!" she yells. "Are you trying to kill somebody?" She continues to the other side of the road.

A red Honda Civic, windows tinted, waiting for him to move, honks its horn. Conner pulls to the side and lets the traffic pass. Then it's there, clicking against his passenger-side windshield-wiper, that tooth.

He feels like he isn't in control of himself. Like he wouldn't know if he was or wasn't trying to kill somebody. He is some kind of vessel, less than a person. Dangerous, like a rabid dog. He thinks that this is how murder happens.

And then he notices that the sun has risen. The blue haze has been burned away by the low rays of the sun. Orange and fiery. Connor's hands are shaking. He thinks, his entire life is crumbling and the part of him that would have cared went first.

Jeff Conner turns his car around. He is going home.

He is not sure why he started it with Mary. Laura is a beautiful woman. The sex is great, really great, and frequent. She raises Caroline better than Jeff could ever want. She insists they have date nights every other week, and he buys her flowers and takes her to Norman's, or Le Coq Au Vin, or The Melting Pot. He still smiles when she laughs. He has no complaints.

A few times, Jeff has wondered how he could explain himself, if given the chance. He thinks, he could love chicken, it could be his favorite food in the world, but there's only so many flavors of chicken. Lemon chicken, barbeque chicken, rotisserie chicken, sweet-and-sour chicken, and maybe they're all great, really great, but some days a person just wants to have some steak.

He would never say this to Laura. She would say that he doesn't see her as a person. He is not sure what it means to see someone as a person.

He supposes that this means that he's not happy with Laura. He supposes that he hasn't ever really been happy with what he has or where he is. He has never done something, had something, been with someone, and thought that it was enough. Not once, not once in his life has he been satisfied. Not even once. He realizes this, and he knows

that he never will. On his resume, he had written that he is ambitious, "driven." Always reaching for more.

On his way back: Halloween Horror Nights, $56 general admission. Nike Factory Store, Why pay full price? Hungry? Why wait? Grab a Snickers.

He doesn't want any of these things. He is empty, spent.

The house is empty. Caroline is gone. Jeff can only suppose that Laura has followed through already, immediately after he left for work. He wonders how long until he is contacted by a lawyer.

He knows the law. He wronged her. Mary will make sure that that is well-known. Laura will keep Caroline. Laura will claim that he doesn't care about hurting her or their daughter, and he knows that any judge will favor Laura. He decides that it is not his place to doubt the truth or justice of that. Whatever happens next, he will deserve.

On the countertop, an Orlando Sentinel, Florida's 1 read newspaper, 40 cents a day. The headline has something to do with the Tsunami in India.

Jeff takes off his shoes, and he goes into the kitchen. He opens the fridge, which is full, and then he closes it. He finds a bag of pecan halves in the pantry, Publix brand, $7.99, and he eats a couple handfuls. He feels better after eating the pecans.

He takes a bath, and then he shaves. He puts on fresh clothes. He takes his time choosing; his nice loafers, silk tie, his good boxers. He can't remember, for the life of him, what they cost.

Then he wanders around the house for a little while, looking for a good way to kill himself.

It was the pecans. Jeff shouldn't have felt better for eating the pecans. If he were any kind of a decent person he'd be an inconsolable emotional wreck, but he had some pecans and he felt better and there it is. Mary had it right. He wonders what it is that he deserves for being what it is that he is.

He worries about Caroline. He tells himself that she'll be okay, and then he decides that maybe that's not right either. She won't be okay, or rather, she'll find an equilibrium like everyone does, and people will call that "being okay." The fact that he's going through with this is even further proof of the type of man he is.

He finds some Weed Eater Monofilament Trimmer Line in the garage. 80 ft. x 0.80 in., $2.96 on the sticker tag on the back. He becomes tired of making value judgments about the way things are or the way things will be. This is how they are supposed to be.

Friday, September 16th, 2005.

He ties the line to a light fixture on the ceiling.

Today, he spent 62 dollars and 11 cents.

1 foot, 6 inches clearance.

Polder 2-step stool, $29.99.

Loop. Throat.

Small service, he can think of 8 potential attendees. $13,000.

Step.

Life insurance: 1.2 million dollars.

Step.

2-year suicide clause, beginning at purchase date of the plan, 1997. He grits his teeth. This will hurt. Like ripping off a bandage; pain, and then release.

Kick.

A rush of cool air.

Drop.

THE COUPLE IN 202B

The couple in 202B come through the mail room's ceiling in rhythmic thumps and moans. It's soft, just barely audible, if Clark closes his eyes and slows his breathing and really listens. There's an oh god, some I love yous. Quieter, some yes, yes, yeses. They're a loud couple, at least louder than what Clark assumes is the average, or maybe the ceiling is thin. It is eight-thirty in the morning. He taps his foot to their beat and sifts through his mail, looking for his divorce.

The air conditioner is broken in the mail room. The standing area is so cramped that Clark's gut rests on the counter underneath the slots. Fifty-six years of carbohydrates hang around his waist. He swears that the mail room is just a converted walk-in closet. There are sloppy re-plastered screw holes on the walls where shelves would have been mounted.

Clark imagines himself with his soon-to-be second ex-wife in the bedroom or on the living room table. Or in his old car, the Mustang, when he was younger, set up in the garage because they wouldn't risk it outside. That was before they took his license.

His second wife was the attractive one, tall and thin and sharp, and confident in the way that made her challenging, so she'd look a person in the eyes and wouldn't ever be the first to look away. Challenging in the way that was sexy.

Above, the clap of skin on tile or countertop. The rhythm of it: clap, ah! clap, yes! clap, ah!

Not that he would say he wasn't attracted to his first wife, it's just his second was intrinsically attractive—as in, she was attractive before he fell in love with her. She was the one who turned the heads of strangers.

That's the reason he doesn't feel too bad about the divorce. She is smart, beautiful, social, with lots of friends. Lots of people to talk to. Clark can't imagine she'd ever be alone for long. She'll be just fine, he thinks. Perfectly, perfectly fine.

"Hey, Clark," Jean says, and Clark's heart jumps. She's standing in the doorway—Jean, 301A, across from his B, the only bearable conversation in Lakeview Apartments, which contrary to the name doesn't have a view of a lake.

Clark sucks in his gut as she sidles over to her mailbox next to him. Her thighs and butt radiate heat and vanilla perfume.

Jean has aged gracefully. Clark figures she's about fifty-five, though he bets someone less observant would assume forty-ish. She has that hourglass figure, still the body of a woman, not an old woman. Her face, though, is hard with half a century of worry, and crow's feet edge out from the sides of her eyes. Clark knows that she knows it won't last much longer. They have that much in common, at least.

"Afternoon, Jean," Clark says.

"Right," Jean says. She arches her eyebrows. Clark likes it when she arches her eyebrows. "What's that noise?" she says.

"202B. They're right above us."

"The new couple?" Jean says. "Didn't they just move in today? I saw furniture in the hallway."

"No, yesterday. They've been going at it for hours." Clark smiles and rolls his eyes. "Newlyweds."

"Newlyweds," Jean says. She rolls her eyes, and they share a look. They both know what it's like to not wait for the furniture, Clark thinks. He wonders if she also knows what it's like for that to pass.

Jean gathers her mail. She doesn't leave right away. She stands and stares at the stack of papers, and they are both quiet. A large thud, and then the ceiling thumps at a steady beat. The newlywed couple is on the floor. They're talking up there, they're saying something he can't make out. Something fast, ending in "much." Then the same phrase, again.

It's lovers' talk, Clark thinks. He tries to remember what it was he would say to his soon-to-be ex-wife, or what she would say to him. For the life of him, he can't remember.

All at once, Jean puts her mail under her arm and edges out of the mail room. She pauses at the door. "You said 'hours.' Clark, have you been listening to them?"

For the second time, Clark jumps. "Hey," he says, and then he realizes that that isn't an answer. "No," he lies.

"You're too nice for that, Clark," Jean says, but the corners of her mouth curve upward when she says it. She closes the door, leaving him alone, and he closes his eyes.

He tries harder to make out what they're saying up there.

Lakeview Apartments is a two building apartment complex, but one of the buildings is locked and dark and isn't rented out. Clark has been waiting to ask his landlord in person why that is, but Clark has yet to see his landlord in person. He's lived at Lakeview for four and a half months, since a few weeks after Clark and his second wife first separated with no intention of reuniting.

In the building he lives in, there are three floors, the top two of which have four small apartments each. A 201A, 201B, and then a 202A and 202B, and so on. Clark in 301B, at the top. Half are vacant. The newlyweds, after they arrived, set the population to an even six.

Before the newlyweds, Wendy in 201A had the entire second floor to herself. Clark felt sorry for her. She must have been lonely.

The divorce papers didn't come in the morning, so Clark checks the mail room again that evening. And again, Jean, 301A, is there, and one of the four other tenants at Lakeview Apartments, Tommy, 201B. The type of guy who's in his mid-twenties but still says "dude." He wears a ratty UPS driver's uniform and a swath of acne across his forehead.

With half a dozen tenants, Clark knows each person's comings and goings. He knows Tommy works until four 'o clock. Jean, she gets off at five, except on

Wednesdays, today, when she's also done at four. Clark isn't sure when it became a habit, to check his mail only when they're checking theirs.

Clark exhales, sucks in his gut, and edges in as best he can. His box is all the way in the back, and both Tommy and Jean lean forward to let him in.

The mail room is so small a person can't help but notice how another person smells. Tommy smokes, it's on his clothes, and his breath is stale, like he's just eaten meat and not much else. And he bounces, he taps, his knees shake; he is a young person with too much energy in an enclosed space.

Clark feels his breath catch as he squeezes past Jean. He knows she smokes, but she never smells like it. Her skin is soft and clean, like she must soak in the tub every once in a while. He thinks she's a tub person, not a shower person. He's never been with a tub person.

He opens his mail box, checks the two letters inside. One, an AARP thing—he doesn't belong to AARP and feels somewhat insulted. Then he does the math, but still feels insulted. The other, GEICO. Both are trash. It takes about four seconds. He looks over, and Jean and Tommy still sift their mail. It occurs to him that they look guilty.

He listens. There is a soft thump, then another, then another. The same pace as before. It's like it never stopped. "Again?" he asks.

"Again," Jean says.

Tommy exhales as though he's dropped some kind of weight, something heavy. "Oh my god, dude, thank you for saying something," he says.

Jean continues sifting, and Clark recognizes the next letter to come to the front of her stack. He realizes this is not its first rotation. “How long have you been here?” he asks.

“A long time.” Both Jean and Tommy respond in unison. Then Tommy says, “Shit! You’re listening to them too?”

“I’m just organizing my mail,” Jean says. Her answer is evenly toned, but her eyes are bright.

Clark says, “Somebody should tell them how thin the walls are.”

“It’s not all the walls. It’s just the mail room,” Jean says. “You can only hear them in the mail room.” She says it as though she has checked.

“That’s the new couple?” Tommy says. “I saw them move in the day before yesterday. They seemed nice. The girl is hot,” he sucks air through his nose, “but they leave their garbage out in the hallway. They must think somebody takes it here.”

They stop sifting their mail, there’s no need for an excuse now. They listen. It’s like a drum beat. Regular and rhythmic, no sign of fatigue. It’s almost not even attached to the idea of sex. At least, Clark can’t visualize it. The voices are soft, disembodied. It’s like porn on a scrambled cable channel—a vague flash of skin-or-maybe-not-skin through the distortion, there and gone so fast that it’s barely real, leaving Clark alone and disappointed in that dim glow with an erection and a quickened heartbeat but no fantasy.

It’s like the idea of his ex-wife, the second, intrinsically attractive one, who he knows was attractive but now, only four and a half months later, can’t place exactly why.

"I talked with the girl this afternoon," Jean says. "She was all 'my husband this' and 'my husband that.' Like she's not even a person. And then he came out, and they were all over each other. Totally forgot I was there. Makes me sick."

"I guess they must be in love," Clark says. The way he says it, he has to realize he's said it.

Jean snorts. "How do you know they're in love?"

"Why wouldn't they be?" he says. He wants to defend it.

"Maybe the guy is cheating on that poor girl," Jean says. She laughs a little, in this high-pitched unattractive way Clark hasn't heard before. "Maybe that's not even his only wife. That's happened before, you know, men having whole separate lives, children, wives, and then everybody finds out when there are two wills trying to give away the same house as inheritance."

"How do you figure that? You don't know anything about them. How do you know the girl isn't cheating on the guy?" Tommy asks.

Clark looks at the newlyweds' box. There isn't anything on the brass fixture yet, just a slip of paper labeled 202B, in loopy hot pink lettering. "Look," he says. And they look. Little hearts, x's and o's are scribbled on the corners, some in hot pink, others in blue. It's taped on like someone just used one piece of tape vertically across the center—the boy, Clark assumes for some reason—and someone else, the girl, took it off, folded the tape over, and then re-taped it properly along the edges.

"I guess they could be happy," Tommy says.

"Oh, come on," Jean says

Then, there's an ah! The newlywed's voice, the woman, halting and breathy and much louder, accelerates—oh, yes, oh, oh ohohoh—into something less than words.

Tommy mouths "Wow," and he grins. "Sound happy to me," he says.

Jean flushes red, and Clark feels blood in his cheeks. It's too much. Jean pushes on Tommy's shoulder, and they shuffle out. Clark watches them, and then he gathers his mail. He knows he can't stay if they leave. Clark takes one last look at the newlyweds' mailbox and he peels their label off of the brass. He folds it and puts it in his pocket.

In the hallway, Clark watches Jean walk away. The kid intercepts Clark's stare and grins. Always grinning, with teeth, like everything is a joke. Even though Clark has nothing against Tommy personally, right now, at this moment, he hates that grin so much that it almost hurts, and he has to avert his eyes.

Jean is finishing a cigarette just outside the lobby's front doors, as she usually does on Thursday nights, and she waves at Clark as he exits the stairwell, like she usually does.

Tommy is in the hallway flirting with the pretty little blonde nurse technician, Wendy, 201A. Tommy nods his head and Wendy smiles, as they usually do. Clark stops by the mail room door. He goes in, and they go follow behind him.

They have to file in according to the order of their mailboxes—Clark, Jean, Tommy, and Wendy last—because there's no room to move around once inside.

Clark knows that they know that it's silly to stuff into this little converted closet excuse for a mail room all at once. They could wait for another time, better suited to

each, and have the entire room to themselves, checking their mail in silence, never seeing each other except for those quiet nods and hellos in the hallway as they would fumble with their deadbolts. The occasional echo of footsteps in the stairwell. But here they all are.

And above, there is—still—a rhythmic thumping. The lightbulb quivers with each pulse, its amber light vibrating across the old walls and brass mail fixtures. And its beaded pull-cord dangles and twitches, as though it has found life from the newlyweds' persistent activity.

"Is that what I think it is?" Wendy asks.

Tommy chortles. "*Again*? That guy is a freaking machine. Don't they have jobs? Favorite TV shows?"

"202B," Clark says.

Wendy's eyes go wide. She's 202A, Clark knows, and that means she must have seen them, talked to them. She must know what they look like.

"Wendy," he says, but Jean finishes for him. "Do you know them yet?" she asks.

It takes Wendy a minute. She looks up. Her face is bright red. "Sure," she says. "I talked with them when I got home from the hospital. They invited me for drinks later."

"For 'drinks' huh?" Tommy says. He mimes air quotes.

"Oh god," Wendy says. "This is going to be awkward," she says.

"Well, at least we know they do other things," Jean says.

"Wendy," Clark says again. "What are they like?"

“They’re really cute,” Wendy says. She smiles and looks at her hands. She fingers her keys. “They finish each others’ sentences and stuff. They hold hands, or they each put a hand in each other’s back pocket. They must be, like, twenty or something. They talk to each other so you can’t hear what they’re saying.”

“I could finish your sentences,” Tommy says.

Wendy ignores him.

Clark feels warm at her description. The way she said it is just what he wanted them to be like. He feels wise, vindicated. “I told you they were in love,” he says.

Jean stares.

“What?” Clark says.

“Have you ever been in love?” Jean asks.

“I don’t know,” Clark says. “Maybe with my second wife.”

“What makes you think so?” Jean asks.

Clark thinks about it. The beaded pull-cord of the light bulb twitches. The rhythm is steady, like a heartbeat. He’s not sure what it’s like. It’s like the building is alive, developed a pulse, like the newlywed couple has that much power.

He wonders if, all along, he was the stranger with the turned head. How can a person really know, he thinks. He isn’t sure. “I don’t know,” he says. Then, just to be safe, he says “I guess I wasn’t.”

“How can you not know?” Wendy says. “If you were in love then you’d know.”

“You can not know,” Tommy says. His voice is quieter when he says it.

“Love is different,” Wendy says. “It’s eternal.”

Jean laughs.

"No, really," Wendy says. Her voice is too high, Clark realizes that she must actually believe what she's saying. Wendy says, "It's just, like, a spiritual connection, like your souls are drawn together, and you want to be intimate and together and tear him apart and eat him up because you just want to be *that* close."

"Like *Silence of the Lambs* meets *Sleepless in Seattle*," Tommy says. Jean laughs in a way that Clark sees as intentionally cruel. There is a moan. The banging, the thrusting—though again Clark can't imagine it as anything but disembodied, only the idea of thrusting—quickens.

"Yeah, laugh," Wendy says. "If you ever loved anyone you'd know what I'm talking about."

Clark figures Wendy must be twenty-five, or a fresh thirty. Her skin is soft and clear and firm, and her hair comes down over her neck in waves. She's wearing perfume, and it smells cheap and young. Clark can't help but think of her as a child. Nothing really bad has had a chance to happen to her yet. She's only almost a person.

"All that soul mate crap is lame," Tommy says. "It's for little girls."

Wendy gives Tommy a hurt look. Not just hurt, but a little shocked. Clark isn't sure he likes Tommy any better, either. Kids.

Clark examines the newlyweds' box again. There is a new label—same as before with cute little doodles and hearts in pink pen. He checks that nobody is looking. Then he puts the label in his pocket. He gives the mailbox a slight tap and it swings open.

"Whatever," Wendy says. "Call me romantic; I still believe in falling in love."

"You don't 'fall' in love or any of that back-of-a-Hallmark-card-bullshit," Tommy says. "You choose who you love."

"That's not love," Wendy says. "Love is like, it's like you want a person more than anything in the world, you just want to share everything with them, your life, your future and—" she nods at the ceiling.

Clark sifts through the newlyweds' mail. He handles the letters reverently, as though the envelopes could disintegrate at any moment: Victoria's Secret and Best Buy magazines and real estate ads and 7% APR credit cards and a few Look! You've Been Selected For's. There is a paycheck—odd for a Wednesday—and a few bills and a letter addressed in deliberate, rounded feminine handwriting. He feels the heat of Jean's arm on his. She has leaned over. He looks at her, and she makes eye contact. He shrugs, she smiles. He can't read her.

"Dude, that's just puppy love," Tommy is saying. "That's not real love. That lasts you a few months, maybe a year or two at most. It wears off and then all you Hallmark girls who think that's what love is, you think that's *all* there is and that you've fallen out of love. You can't be happy. And then you leave a perfectly decent guy and go off with the next dude and the next and the next."

Jean looks at Tommy. Her jaw clenches. Clark takes his chance and slips the newlyweds' letter into his pocket.

The thumping in the walls quickens into one continuous shudder, there is a climactic yelp, and then it subsides. The amber light bulb quivers still, its pull-cord limp.

Tommy grins. "Go out with me," he says. "We'll have the best break-up ever."

Wendy pauses. For a second, Clark thinks that she could go either way. He finds himself rooting for Tommy. He wants to see them holding hands, talking to each other in low voices. But then she says, “You’re a jerk,” and since she’s the closest to the door she gathers her mail and leaves.

Tommy follows her as far as the frame of the door. He looks back in. He shrugs. “Next time,” he says. He starts in one direction, pauses, then goes in the other. His footfalls are energetic.

“What about you?” Clark asks. “Ever been in love?”

Jean touches her hair. “Never,” she says.

“Never?” he says.

“Never,” she says. She repeats herself in this hollow way that makes Clark wonder why she’s lying.

Clark watches her walk to the elevator. He feels the newlyweds’ letter in his pocket.

Clark takes the stairs to his apartment. He stops at 202B but he can’t hear anything from inside. Then at the top he stops at Jean’s door but doesn’t hear anything from her either. At home, Clark checks his fridge for food and doesn’t find any. He thinks about doing the crusty dishes in the sink but finds a bottle of champagne instead. Left over from New Year’s, he thinks. It’s room temperature, so when he pops the cork he has to inhale the misty froth and drink straight from the bottle to catch the excess.

While he drinks, a steady network of red fire ants spider-web across the sink and the dishes, dragging back crumbled chunks of old food—donuts, microwave dinners, and two old pizza crusts under a layer of food-mottled plates. He watches the ants until the bottle is halfway lighter. Then Clark runs the faucet, blasting them from the food and down the drain. It must be something else, he thinks, on their scale. Pairs or trios grapple together, forming little balls of segmented legs and antennae, looking for something to hold onto before oblivion. Or maybe, Clark thinks, they're trying to eat each other.

Clark finds a bag of walnuts in the couch, under some cushions. He flips on the scrambled porn channel. Then he changes to The History Channel, which is playing something about David Livingstone. There are waterfalls.

He goes to his bedroom and lays himself down. He drinks from the bottle. Zoom out far enough, he thinks, and champagne and walnuts for dinner is nothing in the long run. Stealing someone's mail is a drop in the bucket. Clark takes the two mailbox labels from his pocket. The first one is just scribbled little x's and o's. But the second one is more deliberate, with drawings. Both the newlyweds—their caricatures—are thin. The guy wears glasses and is tall and the girl is short and has crazy, purple hair. Clark smoothes out the labels and puts them on his nightstand. He finishes off the bottle of champagne and sets it on the carpet. Without getting up, he fishes some Jack from under the bed. It's not as soft as the champagne; he can't drink it as fast. He's not a marathon drinker. He winces at first. Then he has more.

He opens the letter and reads it. It has no first names: the letter is addressed Dear Sweetie and asks how your man is doing and whether you need more money. The letter is

glad and so proud that you're finishing school. And the letter says that there's this awesome person on 45th and Dixie that does hair just the way the letter knows you like, and dyes it too. The letter knows you'll love this person. At the very end, the letter says, Heart you, Mom. There are little hearts there, too.

Clark finishes the second bottle. He props the letter up on his chest and reads it over and over. He imagines his second wife with crazy purple hair. In his mind, he is happy with her, and she is attractive because he finds her attractive, not because she is. Then, he tries Jean with purple hair. He masturbates twice and then reseals the letter. He feels that it should have been more satisfying than it was.

He turns off the lights. He flips on The History Channel, and the Livingstone thing is ending. Next up is something on JFK. Then he has to pee.

Clark checks his mail at the usual time. Jean is smoking a cigarette outside the lobby and puts it out and waves as he comes through the door. She smells like vanilla and nicotine which makes Clark think of eating.

He's carrying groceries. He's proud of them—all meats, veggies, juice. Things a person cooks. No alcohol. He wants her to notice.

"Hi," Jean says. She touches her ponytail. "Did you dye your hair?" she asks. "That doesn't seem like you."

"Yeah," Clark says. With his free hand, he touches his hair just above his ear. "It's supposed to be brown but they made it too dark. The person wasn't as good as I heard."

"I liked it before. Just a little gray is nice. It's distinguished."

"Oh," Clark says.

Jean holds the elevator. "Heading up?"

"Yeah," Clark says. "In a minute. I have to check my mail."

"Still?"

"Uh huh. Go ahead."

"It's okay," Jean says. She follows him to the mail room. Jean leans in the doorway and lights another smoke. Clark is so aware of the newlyweds' letter in his pocket that it hurts.

Clark pulls another letter out of his mailbox. It's a standard envelope and Clark's name and address are written in loose, feminine handwriting. It looks a lot like the newlyweds' envelope but Clark doesn't expect a "heart you" from his soon-to-be ex-wife.

Jean raises her eyebrows. "Was that what you were waiting for?"

"Yeah," Clark says.

Jean hesitates. Then she says, "What is it?"

"My divorce," Clark says, as though all of it, its essence, is contained in those few pages. As though he could burn it and make it all go away. Clark puts it in his pocket. He glances Jean over. Tight jeans and a tank top, which she fills in nicely. He tries to decide if she is the type of person who turns the heads of strangers, or if she is attractive because he finds her attractive.

Jean touches his shoulder, and Clark jumps. “Hey,” she says. “Why did you think that you weren’t in love?”

Clark plays with the letters in his pocket. He exhales. Something occurs to him. He doesn’t think he’ll understand it unless he says it out loud to another person. “Last night,” he says, “I was watching The History Channel. Really late. Something about Kennedy, no, the Zapbruder film. You know, back and to the left. I didn’t know they were allowed to do that, but I guess it’s because it’s cable. I think everyone watches President Kennedy’s head explode and they miss the end. After the last shot, before the Secret Service guys pin her down, Mrs. Kennedy shoves over to the back of the car. It looks like she’s trying to escape but I don’t think she is. I TiVo’d it. If you watch, she’s trying to pick up all the little pieces of John. To put them back in.”

Clark looks up from his letter. Jean is still listening. He feels a catch in his throat, which makes his eyes burn a little, which makes him look away.

“Jesus,” Jean says. Her eyes widen, and Clark sees how he must look to her. He can see that she doesn’t know how to respond. He can see that she doesn’t get it.

“That’s love,” he says. He tries to explain it as best he can. “I would never have done that for my wife, and she wouldn’t have done that for me.”

“That’s not what love is. That’s just crazy.”

Clark wants to say that that’s exactly what love is. That if it’s anything less than that, it’s worthless, it’s this bright pretty thing that erodes and withers until it’s gone, and leaves two strangers entangled, choking each other, and the only way out is to hurt the other, and yourself by extension, so that there is no escape undamaged.

Clark wants to say that she needs to understand this. He wants her to understand it. Instead, he plays it safe, and he asks her, “Well then, what is it?” He still has hope for her answer.

“Well it’s not that,” Jean says. Then she smirks. The brightness in her eyes is back. “We’re too old for that anyway. We just need something warm and agreeable to hold on to that doesn’t annoy us too much. You know, before we die.”

“I guess you could just get a cat,” Clark says. He exhales and looks away. And then he immediately thinks he shouldn’t have said that.

Jean touches the newlyweds’ mailbox. She wears blue nail polish. “They keep losing their label,” she says. “Hey,” she says, “Do you hear that?”

Clark listens.

“They’re quiet,” she says.

Clark and Jean leave the mail room and walk to the elevator. She walks close to him. He feels the sleeve of her jacket press against his. They get in and both reach for the button to the second floor. Clark withdraws and Jean presses it.

“Are you hungry?” Jean plays with her hair. “I have some dinner made—”

Clark shakes his head. He feels old. His groceries are heavy in his arms. Clark feels like there is no difference that Jean can make. Maybe it would be good for a while. Maybe he would even care about her, to some degree. But what she wants is easy, and it wouldn’t ever be what he wanted it to be. He would be a stranger with his head turned.

“Thanks,” he says. “But,” he says.

“Oh,” Jean says. “Right,” she says, like she knows.

When the doors open again, Clark walks Jean to her apartment. He wants to say good-bye but doesn’t. She closes her door. Clark steps away from the peephole and listens to the click slide click of the deadbolt. He thinks, so this is how it’s going to be. People will move in, people will move out, and he’ll remain the old man at the top of the building. He’ll leave his apartment less and less, and drink musty old champagne and eat bags of walnuts and watch The History Channel on mute and wish, every goddamn night, that he was someone else. And then, he’ll die, and they’ll carry him out after he stinks up the place enough for the neighbors, if he has any neighbors by then, to notice.

He wants to look at his divorce. He thinks he’ll feel better if he looks at his divorce. Clark takes the letter out of his pocket, reads the return address, and is confused. It’s not right. It’s still the newlyweds’. Clark accidentally put his divorce in their mailbox, and kept their letter. The two looked so similar.

Clark goes home and spends an hour on his last Jack. He tries to watch some History Channel, but it’s garbage, worthless. At some point, when the bottle is most of the way lighter, he realizes that he’ll see Jean again the next day. Always, she’ll be there, down the hall. And he realizes that he has made a mistake. He has screwed up.

He could go down the hall. Knock on her door. Or he could leave. He could take everything important he has, put it in a bag, and be gone tomorrow. Find someplace else. He makes lists in his head, things he needs.

He needs his divorce. So he goes to room 202B and he stops and listens outside the newlyweds' door. Without the papers, his divorce isn't even real, it's just an idea. This is his divorce. He needs it. He still has the Jack and he keeps drinking, he tilts it all the way back. Things could have so easily turned out different. He wants to never stop drinking. There's no sound on the other side. Not even a rustle or a TV. Clark can't hear anything but he knows they're there. He knows they're in there somewhere, together.

NIGHTVISION

Green is everywhere. It's the lava lamp. Tangled limbs and bare flesh heave on the bed in the corner. The ceiling fan pulses and shadows flutter across the room.

Lola guides Danny's movements. They shift up and down slowly, dreamily. Her hands caress his sides and core, but Danny is stiff, awkward. His eyes move to all the wrong places—he's blind and not quite used to it yet.

They could be moving or standing still and he wouldn't know the difference. Then, in the dark green emptiness, he sees little flecks of light glimmering like diamonds. He could almost reach out and pluck them from the void. His hands leave Lola's breasts, and it's like he's floating. He could be anywhere.

They're streetlights, not diamonds. There's sand in his boots, in his collar, his teeth. He crouches on a rooftop with three other Marines, hip-level concrete parapets on either side. Here in the city, Danny has learned to love concrete.

It's dark, but Danny isn't blind anymore. He can see because of his night vision goggles. They're expensive. Danny's Sergeant told him not to lose them. They're heavy.

The other Marines, Laidlaw, Ryan, and Sergeant Sloan, don't have NVGs. They wouldn't have a set at all, because Laidlaw lost them, but Sloan picked these up at a market—maybe even the same ones, found by a scavenger and sold back to them for some dollars and MREs.

Laidlaw pats Danny's shoulder. Anything yet? he says. He used to wear the NVGs.

Danny peeks over the parapet. He pans left and right. Through the grainy green haze he sees shapes, buildings. No, he says, nothing yet.

Lola doesn't notice Danny was gone. Her hips curve around Danny's, and he strokes the gentle concave slope of her abdomen. She pushes up against his palm with each thrust. She is a ghost, painted green and smooth. He can see just a little, a tease, like he's on the other side of a curtain of gauze. There is a swirl of a shadow curling into her navel, and he squints, hoping for a little more. They're going faster.

Lola cups Danny's cheek. He wonders how she can do this. He's had surgeries, reconstruction. In the mornings, he feels his face and it's open, raw. Someone once told him he looks like an Otto Dix painting.

She breathes in Danny's ear, licks, bites. She has almond eyes, he remembers. Laidlaw eyes. The acne-faced kid, Ryan, talks. They stay low.

Maybe they bugged out, Ryan says.

I'm more worried they wised up, Laidlaw says. Sloan, we should get out of here, he says.

Look for stashed mortars, Sgt. Sloan says.

Guys, shut up, Danny says. Let me check the other side.

More green, quiet.

See? Ryan says. Nothing.

Danny starts to say something, but doesn't. There is a glimmer in the green several blocks away. Danny can almost feel the bullet, the way it bends the air to his right. Then, a pop. His head snaps down and to his left, as though an invisible hand grabs his NVGs and pulls, hard. He can't see—there's only color, so bright it burns. Only green, mist and shadows and green, forever.

This is a very rare condition, the doctor says.

Will it get better? Lola says. She is green, a shadow, and she squeezes Danny's hand.

This is a very rare condition, the doctor says. I've never seen anything like it.

Danny falls. He falls back and Lola catches him in her crotch and they're gaining momentum, they're going so fast he can't breathe.

Oh god, she says. Don't stop, she says.

Danny stops.

Are you all right? she says.

Danny puts his arm against the wall.

Sniper, someone shouts. Shit, someone says. Danny's hit, someone says.

Danny moans and breathes, he breathes.

Stay down, someone shouts. Laidlaw, get the SAW, someone says. Suppress, then move, someone says.

Danny's face is hot, and he thinks to touch his cheeks, but he doesn't. He thinks, am I blushing?

Where am I shooting? someone says. I don't know, someone says. Tall building, there, top floor, someone says.

Someone fires a rifle. Someone scratches a bipod across concrete, opens up with the Squad Automatic Weapon, the machinegun. There is a delicate, tonal dripping, like a wind chime—brass cartridges, falling.

Sloan turns Danny over. Danny feels Sloan's fingers on his cheeks, soft. Lucky son of a bitch, Danny hears, your NVGs took the hit.

The NVGs make a sucking sound as Sloan peels them off, and they pull something hot and sticky with them. There is a warm liquid, like ear-water after a swim. Sloan throws the goggles off the rooftop. Some seconds later, a thud, something weighty cushioned by sand.

Shit, Sloan says. His soft fingers quake on Danny's face. They can fix it, Sloan says. Hold on, man, Sloan says. Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck. Then he shouts: Keep shooting! Keep shooting! Keep fucking shooting!

Sgt. Sloan drags Danny by the shoulders. The Marines keep firing at ghosts. Against the darkness their gunfire seems small, lonely.

Danny, it's okay. I'm here with you, Lola says and she touches his neck. Danny punches the wall. He punches it and punches it and punches it. Powdered drywall covers his hand. He closes his fingers onto the grit. He gets up.

Please, Lola says. Don't do this, Danny.

She touches him. He takes a swing at the green. Lola screams. Nothing connects, and the momentum of the swing carries Danny in a stumbling pirouette onto the floor. Lola starts to put on her clothes. She talks.

I can't do this anymore, she says.

I know.

I'm leaving, she says.

I know.

It's not really your fault, she says.

I know.

I'll call to make sure you're okay, she say. She tosses a cordless phone to Danny's lap. Call someone, she says.

Who?

Your mother.

Danny leans his head against the bed post. He follows her sound. She walks toward the door. There were other ways for this to end, he thinks. This is not the worst of them.

I love you, Lola.

I love you too, hon, she says. She stops. Then she goes. From inside, Danny hears the deadbolt lock. Click slide click. Just like the bolt-action of a rifle snapping shut, readying another round for its long, brief journey.

SLIDE

James Balog[1] sleeps under a crystalline arctic night sky when a rumble and a snap ricochet through the air. He awakes with the panicked feeling that he is falling, that the ice has burst up from the ground and thrown him like a rag doll into the sky. Balog rolls out of his cot and does fall, or tumble at least, and it's all he can do to pace his breathing, to tell himself that it's okay, it's nothing.

It takes Balog a moment to recover. Icequake is what they call these. Through his sleeping bag, through his gloves and the tent and all the ice beneath him, he feels the ground oscillate slower and slower, as though the whole of the glacier is a colossal waterbed. As though the glacier is revealing its secret, in that moment of pain and shock, that it is not, in fact, truly solid—and if something like a glacier isn't truly solid, nothing really is.

Then Balog thinks about his team. He stumbles out of his tent into the dark on unsolid knees. The survey team is awake, all of them huddling bleary-eyed in the center of camp, some without coats, shivering, legs bent against the still shaking ground. Everyone okay? Balog says. He counts heads. Everyone's okay, he says. The crew stare

---

[1] Works include *Survivors: A New Vision of Endangered Wildlife*, *Wildlife Requiem*, and more recently the *Extreme Ice Now* project. A photographer and alpinist; recipient of the Leica Medal of Excellence. A husband, with two daughters named Simone and Emily. From New Jersey.

at one another, and they rub their palms and breathe frosty breath between hooked thumbs.

Icequake, Balog says. And then he understands that it's the meltwater lake they photographed during the day, that it has tapped out, as they call it. Get the cameras, he says. The pilot has already started warming the helicopter.

Under the heat of the sun, glacial ice formations melt into rivers and streams that carve across miles of the glacial sheet, coalescing into larger bodies of water. And then, after weeks or months or years of pristine quiet and stillness, these meltwater lakes crack the entire glacier as though it was an icecube in warm scotch. And these lakes, their millions of gallons of water, drain instantaneously into dark crevices that open up beneath them, straight through the bottom of the three-thousand-foot-thick glacial shelf and into the ocean, leaving nothing but clear, polished ice behind. Balog has been waiting for this.

Balog returns to his tent and he throws his bags on his cot. He changes into steel-cleated boots. Gloves, parka. Camera. He is trembling.

Thirty years. Balog has photographed the African savannah, climbed the redwood canopies, and tasted the invisible moisture of clouds on the peaks of the Himalayas. He feels that he is doing good in this world.[2] His daughters are half that world away. He has

---

[2] Using time-lapse photography, the *Extreme Ice Survey* project has captured the retreat of glaciers from Alaska to Greenland to the Alps since 2006. Entire walls of ice, miles long, crumbling into the ocean. Thousands of years of glacial formations, melting in months. The survey has become oft-referenced in the worldwide dialogue on global warming. From their website, often "seeing is believing."

missed first days of school, first boyfriends. And his wife. Thirty years. Balog closes his eyes, opens them. This is it. Balog reaches for his camera with newly steady hands.

The helicopter is in the air when the sun rises. When it breaks over the horizon, the shadows of towers and canyons of ice blast across the landscape and then shorten with every degree the sun takes itself into the sky. Rivers and lakes of bright opal blue meltwater dot the valleys and canyons, glittering in the sun, their impossible blueness a property of their purity, and stillness.

The pilot, who usually likes to inform his passengers of every detail of every flight, remains silent, as does the team. Balog has seen no sunrise on Earth that compares. The African plains were something, with their huge, red, boiling sun. But here, it's like a world made of frosted glass. Each rock becomes a diamond, and each tower a prism. The formations are created in the same way they are on solid earth, through the erosion of flowing water, or meltwater. Only here, what would take a millennia for stone could take only months. Every expedition is different.

The glacier is dying. Balog undertook his documentary venture, *Extreme Ice*, to photograph, film, and chronicle the glaciers' retreat from warming temperatures. Quickly, they discovered that many glaciers were not retreating as in past cycles, but vanishing.

Balog knows that he may be one of the last men to see them like this, that his photographs may be the last images of these places before they melt away forever.[3]

The freshly emptied lakebed is a couple of football-fields wide, and the helicopter circles twice. A crevice, like a black snake, splits the bed in two—crooked and, at one end, spiraling into a downward funnel, at least thirty feet across, black and deep, like it goes down forever.

There is no talk of where the helicopter should land; the pilot sets it down a hundred feet from the hole. The ice crackles and groans under the helicopter skids, and Balog jumps out of the cabin before the rotors have stopped spinning. He crouches and touches his gloved fingers to the ground. They come back wet.

The survey team sets out as a group, Balog at the lead. The millions of gallons of rushing meltwater have polished the ice here so smooth, so slick, that Balog can barely walk, barely stand. It's worse than glass, polished glass, covered in baby oil. And the wind buffets against Balog's coat, flapping the heavy orange material like tissue paper. He pauses at his next step, and his boots slide inches, whole inches, to the side, their steel cleats grinding white powdery streaks in the lakebed.

---

[3] The *Extreme Ice Now* photography collection and the *NOVA: Extreme Ice* documentary DVD are available from *National Geographic*.

When they are about fifty feet away, there is an aftershock. Balog takes his camera and sets out alone. He can't ask anyone else to come any closer to the edge. The ice shelf is three thousand feet thick, and he knows that the lake has tunneled straight through, all the way down. One bad aftershock, one stray footstep, and it's over.

When he gets within five steps or so, Balog crouches low. They left camp in such a rush that nobody thought to bring climbing gear or ropes. He is unanchored. The edge is only fifteen feet away, and past that, a sheer drop into that vast void, into the depths of the ice shelf and further, past that, into the ocean, where his corpse would mix with the saltwater and the meltwater and the cold. Balog tries to shuffle forward and he slips. His knee comes down hard onto the ice and pain shoots up through everything, and he wavers, balancing the camera with one arm and finally coming down onto his other palm. Balog hesitates, and looks back to the orange parkas of the survey team, who call out to him to come back. He realizes that he has slid an impressive distance; he is at least five feet from where he lost his footing. "I'm all right," Balog shouts back to them. He waves, gives a gloved thumbs up.

And then Balog lies down on his belly, wedging his camera—a ten-pounder with the lens, flash, and body all accounted for—over his shoulder, between his bicep and neck, and he slides himself forward, scissor-kicking his legs and flopping like a seal, until he is right up to the precipice.

Balog looks over the edge. The hole looks drilled, almost too round to be natural, too smooth. Then he realizes that what gives the impression of the threads of a drill are

actually layers in the ice, say a few years to an inch—three thousand feet's worth; some hundred million years. As far down as the eye can see, radiant blue ice, so bright it hurts his eyes. Further down, darkness.

There was an old-world belief in a hollow Earth, that at the north and south poles the crust of the Earth opens up into air, the interior of the planet. And there, heaven, or hell. People believed this, even into the nineteenth century. Not even two hundred years ago, someone could have seen this very vision and thought they were looking over the edge of the world into the realm of God.

Balog spreads his legs and digs his toes into the ice for support, and then he lifts his camera with both arms and suspends it over the void, pointed straight down. His shoulders burn at the strain, his tendons pulling like taut wires against his bones, his stomach clenched and hurting, and he breathes, hard. It's a three thousand foot fall. I'm so stupid, he thinks, I'm so stupid. Don't screw up, he thinks, don't die. Little streams of melting water trickle past him and drip down, droplets fading into the black like shooting stars. He squeezes his fingers, and there is a click, and he squeezes again and again. He knows it's good. It's beyond *National Geographic*; he has lived his entire life for this shot.

Balog hears a deep, hurt rasping. His own breathing. The crew calls to him. Balog realizes that he is sweating, and his sweat is freezing, putting him at risk for hypothermia.

The ground shakes a little, and Balog feels that waterbed feeling—this feeling that there is no such thing as a solid form, that perhaps it would be better to think of everything physical as a liquid, like water. This glacier, eventually, will dissolve into a

contribution to the global sea level, and, maybe sooner than that, or maybe later, Balog will die, too. He has taken his photograph, and before he has seen it, he is already disappointed. He already knows that it's not enough.

He'll have the picture and he'll hold it in his hands and he'll look at it and it won't take him back to this moment, when he was James God-Damn Balog and he looked into the heart of the Earth. It'll just be another piece of paper, not even really solid, just the watery pulp of dead trees barely held together by dead fibers, folding between his fingers.

Balog pulls the camera back onto solid ground. He lingers his gaze over the edge for one last second, just a little bit longer. With every movement, brush of wind, his body slides a little across the ice, in one direction, then the other. He is a photographer. This he is sure of. Balog cradles his camera in the nook of his arm like it's a child, this vision he'll bring back with him from the top of the world. Then he brings his legs together and reverse scissor-kicks his way back, and away.

EULOGY TO MARIA MAMANI, FIRE EATER

Before she died, she had thrown her head back and laughed, and the crow's feet around her eyes crinkled as though her hard, sun-blasted skin was papier-mâché. Life had been hard on my sister, on her lungs, really, on her everything, and she coughed and gasped and the marijuana joint disappeared into her black, gap-toothed mouth. Like a bird's, her throat bulged as she swallowed it whole. Her eyes widened and rolled at me sidelong and her oxygen tubes glowed and spewed light, nebulous bright yellow and orange light, into her face, a pair of petite blowtorches tied to her nose.

My sister's oxygen tank went up with a *whoosh*! and a hot orange flash. When I looked back, blinking the purple-green after-image from my vision, there were some flames, a puff of white smoke, and with that, Maria was gone, forever.

But Maria would want to be remembered more gently.

This is my sister, Maria: I'm not even ten and my baby sister teeters over the edge of a rocky precipice, the sharp end to Sugarloaf Mountain's gentle trails, and my mother howls this hollow, motherly howl: "James, get her back!" She means my father of the same name, who lost track of Maria while he was trying to name one of the deciduous trees that, from a distance, fluffed the mountain like the top of a broccoli stalk. I'm sure

she's going to drop silently out of sight and out of our lives, and I think, well, that was unexpected.

She doesn't drop. My father leaps from rock to rock, sways over the hundred foot precipice, and stoops to sweep her to safety. But Maria withdraws from the edge—she just giggles and scampers back to the trail, where my mother picks her up and presses her cheek to Maria's round forehead and regresses to her native Spanish: bubbling, elegant strings of sound that neither I nor my father understand but we know are declarations of unconditional, singular love.

And before we know what hit us, she's twenty-five, and all of four feet tall. She's taller than that, really, but when I look at her, I see an energetic gremlin with a pixie cut and red highlights, flagging down our waiter for a fourth White Russian. "James," she says, "hermano." She has kept her Spanish, not like me, and sometimes she tells me she wishes she grew up somewhere else, in another world, with swirling olive-skinned dancers and mountains, real Andes Mountains, and ruins bursting with ghosts and ancient spirits. She wants those clichés. She drinks and she says, "I could do this forever." And then she waves at the waiter and asks for más, más.

Maria would have found this, this ritual, ridiculous. All these people, she would have said. She would not have been able to remember your names.

It can't be such a horrible thing for her to have found something that made her happy, something that made her so, so happy, and to pursue it hard and reckless and

unrelenting. When we asked her why, why—and she said that she was happy, what was it that made her answer illegitimate?

So when she asked for something to dull the pain and the boredom, I relented. I gave her the joint. For this, I do not apologize. I only pray that I someday find the same passion for a thing.

Sometimes I think of learning Spanish again and taking Maria's trip to Macchu Picchu. Of grinding my toes into the chilled mountain soil, the tough roots of the grass snapping against my effort. I would touch the ruined stone remnants of the Incas, our ancestors. The stone walls and terraces that rise from the rocky mountainsides so elegantly that they might as well have been grown, as natural as a nail on a finger.

I do not apologize. Maria died drunk and laughing and floating in that chemical ether just slightly outside of reality, where pain and hatred are illusions, and she went out just as she would have wanted, evaporated, in a bright cloud of smoke.

APPENDIX A: READING LIST

Almond, Steve. *Candyfreak*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: Algonquin Books, 2004.

Almond, Steve. *My Life in Heavy Metal*. New York: Grove Press, 2002.

Almond, Steve. *This Won't Take But A Minute, Honey*. Self-published & printed, 2009

Barthelme, Donald. *Sixty Stories*. New York: Penguin, 1993.

Bartkevicius, Jocelyn. Editor. *The Florida Review*. Issue 33.2. Orlando, FL: The University of Central Florida, 2008.

Bartkevicius, Jocelyn. Editor. *The Florida Review*. Issue 34.1. Orlando, FL: University of Central Florida, 2009.

Butler, Robert Owen. *Intercourse*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2008.

Butler, Robert Owen. *Tabloid Dreams*. New York: Holt, 1997.

Carver, Raymond. *Cathedral: Stories*. New York: Knopf, 1983.

Carver, Raymond. *Fires: Essays, Poems, Stories*. New York: Vintage Books, 1989.

Carver, Raymond. *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love: Stories*. New York : Knopf, 1981.

Carver, Raymond. *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976.

DeLillo, Don. *Underworld*. New York: Scribner, 2003.

DeLillo, Don. *White Noise*. New York: Penguin, 1986.

Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *The Brothers Karamazov.* New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2002.

Eggers, Dave. *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*. New York: Simon & Shuster, 2000.

Eggers, Dave. *You Shall Know Our Velocity!*. San Francisco: McSweeney's Publishing, 2002.

Eggers, Dave. Editor. *The Better of McSweeney's*. Volume 1. San Francisco: McSweeney's Publishing, 2005.

Eggers, Dave. Editor. *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*. Issue 21. San Francisco: McSweeney's Publishing, 2006.

Eggers, Dave. Editor. *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*. Issue 23. San Francisco: McSweeney's Publishing, 2007.

Eggers, Dave. Editor. *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*. Issue 24. San Francisco: McSweeney's Publishing, 2007.

Eggers, Dave. Editor. *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*. Issue 25. San Francisco: McSweeney's Publishing, 2007.

Eggers, Dave. Editor. *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*. Issue 26. San Francisco: McSweeney's Publishing, 2008.

Erdrich, Louise. *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*. New York: HarperCollins, 2002.

Erdrich, Louise. *Love Medicine*. New York: Harper Flamingo, 1998.

Franzen, Jonathan. *The Corrections*. New York: Picador USA, 2001.

Franzen, Jonathan. *How To Be Alone*. New York: Picador USA, 2002.

Hrbeck, Greg. *The Hindenburg Crashes Nightly*. New York: Harper Perennial Classics, 2000.

Kafka, Franz. *The Metamorphasis*. West Valley City, UT: Waking Lion Press, 2006.

Kafka, Franz. *The Trial*. New York: Schocken Books, 1998.

King, Stephen. *Nightmares and Dreamscapes*. New York: Pocket Books, 2009.

King, Stephen. *On Writing*. New York: Scribner, 2000.

Leiby, Jeanne. Editor. *The Florida Review*. Issue 32.1. Orlando, FL: University of Central Florida, 2007.

Leiby, Jeanne. Editor. *The Florida Review*. Issue 32.2. Orlando, FL: University of Central Florida, 2007.

Leiby, Jeanne. Editor. *The Florida Review*. Issue 33.1. Orlando, FL: University of Central Florida, 2008.

Lightman, Alan. *Dance for Two*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1996.

Lightman, Alan. *Einstein's Dreams*. New York: First Warner Books, 1994.

Lightman, Alan. *Ghost*. New York: Vintage Books, 2007.

McCarthy, Cormac. *No Country for Old Men*. New York: Knopf, 2005.

Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. New York: Knopf, 1987.

Morrison, Toni. *Jazz*. New York: Knopf, 1992.

O'Brien, Tim. *Going After Cacciato*. New York: Broadway Books, 1999.

O'Brien, Tim. *The Things They Carried*. Boston: Houghten Mifflin, 1990.

O'Connor, Flannery. *A Good Man Is Hard To Find*. Mariner Books, 1977.

O'Connor, Flannery. *Everything That Rises Must Converge*. New York: HarperCollins 2000.

Turner, Brian. *Phantom Noise*. Alice James Books, 2010.

Turner, Brian. *Here, Bullet*. Alice James Books, 2005.

Wallace, David Foster. *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*. New York: Little, Brown, 1997.

Wallace, David Foster. *Consider The Lobster*. New York: Little, Brown, 2005.

Wallace, David Foster. *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men*. Boston : Little, Brown, 1999.

Wallace, David Foster. *The Broom of the System*. New York: Penguin, 1987.

Wallace, David Foster. *Everything And More*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2003.

Wallace, David Foster. *Girl With Curious Hair*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1989.

Wallace, David Foster. *Infinite Jest*. New York: Little, Brown, 1996.

Wallace, David Foster. *Oblivion*. New York: Little, Brown, 2004.