Juked

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They loved the little girl Bernadette with the big feet and her endless, stumbling misadventures.

Paul Griner

The Caricaturist's Daughter

Bernadette lay still in the blue light of morning, her face a shallow pool, resisting the ancient daily temptation to run her hand over her absent features. Coffee was brewing in the kitchen, so it wouldn't be long now; still, it was a pain to wait for her father to draw her face every morning before school, especially now that he was drinking again. But Bernadette had learned over time not to let her impatience show. If she did, he'd exaggerate her frowns, or make her head narrow and pointy with a wisp of smoke over it, and all day kids would make fun of her.

That had started early on. When she was four, she and her father were out for their nightly after-dinner walk, and Bernadette told her father she was going to run into the street.

No you won't he said. It's dangerous.

I'm going to, she said, standing on the soft green grass between street and sidewalk, tempted by the smooth gray ribbon unspooling before her that smelled of tar.

If you do, you'll regret it.

She touched her toe to the pavement and her father picked her up and carried her all the way home, ignoring her howls of sadness, her promises to never do it again, and in the morning she woke to the indignity of gigantic oversized clown feet, which made it impossible to run or ride her tricycle. In the end, she suffered through it for six months, even though she begged him every day to change them back.

And every day, he looked at her over the top of his glasses, pencil poised in his elegant left hand, and said, I want you to remember that lesson.

As she got older, she suspected he hadn't wanted to disappoint his

readers, since they told him in long letters that they loved the little girl Bernadette with the big feet and her endless, stumbling misadventures; he would read to her from them now and then, and every year at the anniversary of her toe-in-the-street debacle she had to put up with the clown feet for twenty-four hours.

It came not to bother her, as she learned to get her schoolwork done ahead of time and would simply call in sick; she could do a great imitation of her mother's English accent (which was occasional and never pronounced) though she began to wonder why she couldn't draw, not even a straight line with a ruler. What use was mimicry?

At seven, she'd thought it might even be dangerous, after she heard her parents having sex—though at the time she didn't know that's what it was—and asked at breakfast if they were all right.

Her father said, Why?

I heard you both last night, she said, and I thought you were sick. Then she imitated each of them moaning to perfection.

Her mother turned bright red and her father said, You know, your ears are too big.

Dad! she said, at the same time her mother said, Hugh! but he didn't listen to either of them and drew her as Dumbo. We all have things to learn, he told her when she stood in the door, sobbing and not wanting to go to school, and you've got to learn when not to listen.

That lasted a week, until she fell and scraped her knees during a windstorm and her mother put her foot down and told her father he had to stop.

But it carried over into his work. In addition to his caricatures he drew two weekly comic strips—*The Barking Dog* and *It's About Time*. In the first, a nice father had a feckless daughter Belinda, who found her ears growing each time she walked the dog (who barked endlessly and in every panel) and in the second, the girl Bernice was always late for school. In order to cure that, her father gave her an oversized paper watch that weighed down her arm.

At twelve, Bernadette got her first period, and she was irritable and bloated and had terrible cramps. Her mother made her tea with lots of sugar and kept her in bed with a hot water bottle, and her father asked from out in the hallway, as if she might be contagious, What's wrong?

She's like me, her mother said, pressing a cool washcloth to Bernadette's forehead.

Her father, smoothing his tie, said, How?

When it's soup, her mother said, using her favorite euphemism.

No kidding? her father said. God. The goddamn moon. How did I ever get so lucky? Dragon lady one and two, he said. He shook his head and turned around and said, It would have been easier if I'd had a son.

Which Bernadette thought was almost funny, because she'd always thought it would have been easier if she'd had a sister, or even a brother, someone else on whom her father could take out his frustrations.

All afternoon the house was filled with the sound of his pencil scratching over the page and Bernadette's head began to hurt, but she assumed it was just part of the fun stuff her body was doing to her; she was horrified the next morning when she awoke with grossly swollen feet covered in saddle shoes and enormous balloon-like hands in white gloves, but worst of all was when she discovered her dragon head in the mirror.

That was a figure he returned to one week out of every four for a year, until she learned to keep her mood swings to herself, no matter how pronounced.

But now he'd started drinking, and some mornings it was nearly impossible to get him to draw much of anything. Day after day she went off as a smiley face, and she was getting tired of it; without a nose she couldn't tell if she had on too much perfume until people started making comments in the hallways, and on the morning of her French oral final he forgot her mouth altogether.

Even the letter he wrote, explaining it, didn't stop her from getting detention, and in response, he began drawing caricatures of Berna-

dette's French teacher in *It's About Time*.

Her real name was Madame Aimée Hinault, but in the strip he called her Mademoiselle Ample Hindquarters, drew her with a gigantic ass, and mangled her English, in small degrees. She had trouble with certain sounds, the voiced dental fricatives especially (just like her father) and yet Mademoiselle A. Hindquarters loved one book above all others and talked about it ceaselessly: *I Am Third*, by Gale Sayers. Of course, since she struggled with "Th," whenever she spoke about the book she said, I am turd! which became her tagline, spoken at least once every day.

Madame Hinault was mortified, more by her newly giant rear end than by her problems with English, since her massive hindquarters were hard to cover up and trying to do so cost her a bundle in new clothes, but instead of being nice to Bernadette she grew meaner, and it seemed to drive her crazy that she couldn't get the smiley-faced Bernadette to frown. Eventually, Bernadette and her principal agreed she should switch to Spanish, where, it turned out, her teacher was worse—nearly deaf, he weighed over three hundred pounds and spent the morning dropping chips and popcorn on his sweatered belly, the afternoon plucking crumbs from the wool, her entire class period sleeping—but she was smart enough not to say anything to her father. She didn't want the whole school to turn against her.

The fan letters kept arriving, by the hundreds and the thousands—her father had been voted the world's favorite cartoonist six years running (an honor he first campaigned for and now dreaded)—and he continued to read aloud from them, his gravelly baritone flooding with butterscotch as he repeated their praise, or turning bitter as old onions when those same fans asked what was next for Belinda and Bernice and Mrs. Ample Hindquarters.

Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow, he shouted, the quotation gladdening her mother, despite his yelling (she had some English blood, she said, though she was never very precise about it). But those

tomorrows did not make her father happy; the weight of them pouched his eyes and filled the pouches with liquid. The bourbon didn't help.

You don't help either, he said to her, when Bernadette pointed that out to him.

Me? What do *I* have to do with it?

He leaned toward her. He'd missed a patch on his cheek that morning, shaving, and the misaligned gray and black bristles looked like a mouthful of rotting teeth open and about to bite her. She resisted flinching.

Drawing you every day? he said. Your face? He stared at her, daring her to lower her eyes. She didn't.

He said, You think that's easy? You think that's *fun*? Even God had to do it only once. Then his voice calmed and he sat back and said, You'd be surprised how much a face weighs.

Which was strange to her, since her body had long felt weighted and heavy, stolid and imperturbable, whereas her face had always seemed as light as meringue. Perhaps that was because he had less and less power over her body as she aged. Her feet, yes, he could change those, and did, though she suspected that was due to his having done so when she was younger, yet the rest of it rarely seemed under his sway now, while he altered her face at will. She was just beginning to enjoy inhabiting her body (the times she didn't hate it), and for the first time, after his admission, it felt almost weightless.

This spurred her to recklessness the next morning when she came down to the kitchen to find it, once again, shiny with new things: famous oil paintings on the walls, a row of gleaming copper pots, huge ceramic bowls piled high with fruit (she especially loved the dusky pears). Her mother was putting away a new set of silverware and now they lay in their ordered ranks in the drawer, and yet both her parents seemed morose. Bernadette realized that these new things, which appeared at her father's behest, were the hinge on which her parents' marriage was based and that the hinge no longer worked.

You fill your lives with these new things, she said, but they don't

make you feel happy, do they? They don't make you feel less small.

Her mother and father blanched, which meant she'd struck home, and she felt good, even as anger overtook her father and she knew she was going to pay for it, good until she saw her mother's hurt face, which crushed her. But she forgot about both that day at lunch, because her own features were so small she had to break her lunch into crumbs to eat it, though when she thought about it later in study hall (where she'd put her books aside because it was too much of an effort to read with such tiny eyes) she realized that her miniature features only proved her point. They were small, small people. And someday, she would be bigger than them.

Sophomore year a day came when her father wouldn't get out of bed. Bernadette didn't understand why he was always so unhappy; if he drew things, they happened, and what could be better than that? So Bernadette banged two copper pots together over his head to wake him. He looked at her through one puffy eye, muttered something indecipherable into the pillow, and told her to leave him alone. She banged the pots together again before leaving, which felt gloriously transgressive, like sticking her tongue to metal pole outdoors on a cold winter's day, the pain to come worth the intense present pleasure. (Or so she told herself.)

After fifteen minutes he came downstairs, but he just sat at the breakfast table in his bathrobe, hair sticking up as if he'd been electrocuted, and wouldn't pick up his pencil. He looked as though he'd been assaulted while sleeping, and Bernadette thought, Old age is peeking over his horizon.

The night before, her mother had been to the bakery, and now there were doughnuts on the table, chocolate with rainbow sprinkles, Bernadette's favorite, and she really wanted one.

I want a doughnut, she said. One of the odd things about it was she could talk without a mouth and see without eyes, though only around the house. She'd never figured out how that worked, but right now she

didn't care; she wanted a doughnut and she needed a mouth to eat it.

Immediately, when his eyes went from her blank face to the doughnut and back, she wished she hadn't said a thing, hadn't clanged those pots together a second time, and as soon as he began drawing she felt her lips forming on her face and knew what he'd done without even looking.

You can't do this! she said, unable to keep her tongue from circling her thick, chocolate-frosted lips.

I already did, he said, and stomped back upstairs to bed.

Mom! she said, but her mother shook her head. She was looking rather vague these days and smelled kind of peaty, like whiskey. You know your father, she said, and lighted a cigarette, an old habit she'd begun again. I can't do anything with him once he's made up his mind, and besides. You look cute with a doughnut on your face. Not everyone could carry off that look.

So of course during homeroom, Brian Anderson, whom she'd had a crush on for three years (and who had failed to speak to her for the previous 1,147 days) said, Wow. That thing looks perfect for blowjobs, which made her burst into tears and run into the bathroom. Not even her best friend Cindy could get her to come out, and she got detention for a full week for missing all her classes. She felt especially bad that she almost liked that Brian had been cruel to her, because it meant she wasn't invisible.

The school had called, evidently, because her father was waiting for her when she came home, pencil at the ready, and before she even got a chance to speak he drew a big scarlet letter on the page, then a caricature of her around it, and she felt the D forming on her forehead.

It's not my fault, dad, she said, and burst into tears, and for the first time she could remember, her father seemed surprised.

What happened?

She told him, and he erased the D (a little roughly, she thought, since she felt her skin burning, but she didn't think it wise to tell him), turned the page on his drawing tablet, and said, Who was the boy?

She couldn't bear the thought of Brian Anderson being made to look freakish, so she said, Gordy Cooper, who was a dorky boy in her class about to move. That week, in fact, since his mother had accepted a new job in Chicago.

What's he look like? her father asked, This Cooper kid?

I don't know, she said, shrugging. Like a pear.

All night she felt guilty, but she was relieved when Gordy wasn't in school the next day, or the day after.

But really, she didn't have much time to think about him, because her father had changed her mouth completely. That morning at breakfast her mother was whispering to her father about it, and as usual he was stubborn. No way, Bernadette overheard him say. I'm giving her a mouth that no boy will ever think about sticking a cock in. When her mother continued to object, he said, Think how much she'll save on lipstick, and for some reason that quieted her.

For a year and a half Bernadette lived with it. And in some ways, it wasn't all bad: the fangs didn't really come together when she chewed, which was uncomfortable, so she ate less and lost fifteen pounds and fit into clothes she never could have worn before. Cindy, who suddenly seemed able to gain weight just by breathing, gave Bernadette all the clothes she was growing out of, and now boys looked at Bernadette in a different way, as long as they got past her lack of lips. The only really bad part was that Bernadette had to unfriend Gordy Cooper, because on his Facebook page his picture was pretty much the same as always except his head, which was now a pear, sometimes with a single serrated green leaf sprouting from the stem. It made her feel guilty to look at it.

When she finally got her lips back and lost the fangs, it was by mistake. She needed money to buy a new hair band and her allowance was in the bank and her paycheck from the ice cream store wasn't for another week, so she was fishing for quarters under the seat cushions in the study when she found her father's stash of *Playboys*.

That night at dinner her father had had a few scotches and she realized it might be dangerous to speak up, but she was tired of stuffing her anger.

Why are you always so unhappy? she said to her father.

He finished another scotch, rattled the ice cubes in the empty glass, and let out a long, theatrical sigh. Because I don't like to draw anymore.

Why not? she said. And if it's so bad, why do you do it?

He popped an ice cube in his mouth and sucked it for a long time while she waited for an answer. At last he said, Because the world exists to be drawn, and because you and your mother are expensive to maintain.

Having maneuvered him where she wanted, she said, Then draw me like this, and flipped open a *Playboy* to a picture of a brunette in jodhpurs with a pair of full breasts straining at her pink sweater.

Instead, the next morning he drew her with a big nose, long and pointed, like a sharpened broomstick.

Don't go sticking it in other people's business, he said, and sent her off. Her mother wasn't even coming out of her room any more, so Bernadette didn't bother asking for her help.

He'd forgotten her left hand, but because he gave her a normal mouth and teeth by mistake, she didn't complain, though it hurt when she closed her nose in her locker and she was red-faced for half an hour after Brian Anderson said, Wow, you look like the Pinocchio and prostitute joke. When others stopped to listen he said, Lie to me! Lie to me!

That doesn't make any sense, Brian, she said, not liking that he was the same mistake at seventeen that he had been at fourteen and fifteen and sixteen, liking less that she kept making it.

Who cares? he said. All I want is for you to lie to me!

With such a big nose, his cologne (which she'd never liked) smelled like a cleaning product, and she'd finally had enough, so she said, All right. Turn around and I will.

When he realized what she meant, he paled and pushed past her,

and she poked him in the back with her nose as he reached the corner, drawing laughs. It felt good not to let him get at her, and she wondered why she'd ever protected him in the first place, and vowed to tell her father about Gordy Cooper that afternoon when she got home.

All day her nose kept getting in her way—it was really hard to eat with—so she went to the library at lunch time and wandered through the stacks, pushing her nose against the spines of interesting books, eventually finding herself in front of the art section. At one point she stopped (she thought later it must have been fortuitous) because when she paid attention she was looking at the spine of a book on drawing caricatures; it took her several minutes, but she managed to pry it free with her nose and it dropped open on the floor to the very first page of instructions.

Why not? she decided, and got a paper and pencil and began to draw.

Start with the eyes, it said, not with the shape of the head, as that can be restrictive, and outline the nostrils with thick lines. It cautioned her to leave enough room below the nose for the mouth and to make the mouth lines thick (except for the bow of the top lip, which was to be very light) and offered tips on chins and cheeks and jaws, which were to be drawn in that order. The last sections showed her how to use squiggles, curves, and v's, and how to shade and exaggerate the obvious.

Brian had a widow's peak, so the first person she drew, and for an hour the only, was Brian with a dormer on top of his head, but no matter how many times she tried, erasing, re-drawing, shading lines lighter or darker, nothing happened to him as he sat across from her in History class, playing with his pen or snapping Cindy's bra. Still, she felt elated. Somehow, being forced to use her off hand—her right hand—made drawing easier. She drew Gordy Cooper as himself from memory, only with fewer freckles, on the off chance it would help.

For the rest of her classes she sat at her desk, ignoring Cindy's

looks (at first pleading, and then angry), drawing everyone she could, convinced she was doing a good job: Mr. Hortmueller's huge jaw, Mrs. Strathmore's droopy ear lobes, Ms. Villanueva's tiny hands. Nothing, even when she gave Ms. Villanueva two extra pinkies. On Madame Hinault's big rear end it seemed to work—the seat of her pants suddenly expanded—but when she erased it and redrew it twice the size, nothing changed; it must have been her father, busy in his office, which made sense. Two o'clock: he'd be up at last, rushing to beat the syndication deadline.

Finally she gave up and put the book away.

That night at dinner, her father looked terrible, and when her mother asked what was wrong, he rubbed his forehead like he was sanding it with his palm and said, I don't know. A terrible headache. All afternoon, my head seemed to get larger and smaller.

It's not a stroke, is it dear?

I don't think so. Just a headache. And with that he went up to bed.

In her room, Bernadette drew with the door open as the evening light faded to darkness and then brightened again, in the brilliant silver bloom of the moon. No matter whom she drew, she heard her father toss and turn. Big ears, a massive chin, a nose in the shape of a menorah. Once she went in to check on him after she'd altered a drawing of Brian Anderson and her father had huge clown feet, almost up to the ceiling, a flaccid face that sagged over the side of the bed.

Maybe it was just that she was young, she thought, and her power wasn't very general. Or maybe it was all she could ever hope for. Either way, it made her happy. She studied the last image—her father, older—turned out the light and went to bed.

In the morning, he was up surprisingly early.

I didn't want to stay in bed, he said.

Restless?

Headaches and bad dreams, he said. Most about the Barking Dog. I'd had enough of both of them. The skin on his face sagged, but it

could have just been the way he was leaning on his slender fingers, she told herself; it wasn't necessarily the power of her pencil, though his newly swarthy skin she attributed to a bit of amateurishness on her part in terms of cross-hatching. Too heavy; she'd have to use a lighter pencil next time round.

Bernadette made him breakfast, serving him tea instead of coffee. Dangerous, since he hadn't yet drawn her, yet she explained that it was supposed to increase blood flow through constricted vessels, which would relieve headaches, and he thanked her and quickly sketched her in. Almost normal, except for a vague patch on her jawline and a slightly lopsided left ear. She looked at herself in the mirror and thought, This'll do, especially when she smelled his lemony cologne and realized her nose worked perfectly.

The wind outside was enormous. Stoplights swung parallel to the ground, the speed limit sign banged on its metal pole, and all the windows rattled in their frames. Perhaps that kept him up too, she thought, though really she'd been so involved with her drawing that she hadn't heard a thing.

Her father left the house and began his long daily walk, to clear his head, he claimed, leaning into the wind, and immediately she took out paper and pencil and drew his slanting, surging figure, exactly as it appeared. He paused, flickered, and moved on, and then she erased his ears.

He dropped his hat and began frantically patting his head until his hands were pushed away by huge, flowering ears, ears bigger than Dumbo's, bigger than billboards. They billowed in the gusting wind, stretched taut as she drew them, lifted him up and sent him sailing away over all the houses, feet kicking as if he was swimming toward the low full moon. The goddamn moon, she thought. It was the last she ever saw of him. And of her mother, who, it turned out, existed only in her father's imagination and through the machinations of his pencil. Which, she decided, meant she was half a figment too, and that explained why she could exist (partially) without him.

After college, in his old notebooks and sketchpads, Bernadette sometimes drew her father wandering through various familiar neighborhoods, but when she went there herself she never found him. Everything else was exactly as she and he had drawn it, lemon trees and striped children, slanting houses, blocks of pastel apartments and expanses of purple lawn, even sprinklers with miniature rainbows on summer evenings complete with barking dogs chasing their own tails, but her father was present only in his absence, no matter how many times she sketched him in; she simply couldn't conjure him. Mademoiselle Ample Hindquarters remained amply rumped, Bernadette herself suffered through once-yearly gigantic feet, but her father wasn't even a shadow beneath an awning. And as a result, she couldn't recover her mother, either.

Eventually Bernadette began using her father's pencils (a little harder than she liked, a little darker) and his paper only to change her look from the one her father had left her (a different hairstyle, fuller lips, smaller or larger curves) and at first she loved sitting at the breakfast table and trying on one face after another, drawing herself from memory or from the mirror. If she forgot, she couldn't have her coffee, so her mouth always came first, and on Sundays, of course, she let herself go faceless until noon.

But finally the need for constant invention grew wearying, so she settled on a basic face that she altered when the mood took her or on special days or anniversaries. When she had a cold she made her nose a trumpet so all the neighbors would hear her blow it, when she had a date, she spent extra time on her eyes and lips, and in the middle of a bad or boring one, she'd go to the bathroom and take out a pencil and sketch paper and make her nose bigger or her eyes lopsided. One especially unendurable date (an hour's disquisition on salt and the body) caused her to draw her left ear in the shape of a salt cellar and to weigh down both wrists with enormous paper watches; it was a delicious pleasure to return to the table and watch her date struggle to understand what had happened. And when she really wanted to

tease, she'd use a much harder or darker pencil in the bathroom, as those dented the paper, giving her jawline odd contours, and darkened her skin.

On her father's birthday, she would alter her face to look like something he'd once drawn for her, the big ears the time she wasn't supposed to be listening, a can-opener chin the time she had trouble with a soda bottle, the various buttons that had been her nose. Brass, pewter, tortoiseshell, fabric, shell and bone. Most were round, though some were oval, a few rectangular or square, one was shaped like a parenthesis, and now and then she mixed in the single star or the maple leaf or the miniature silver squirrel. On her seventh date with the man she was falling in love with, she switched her circular ivory nose to an oval ceramic one, to see if he would notice. He did, and rubbed it with his thumb as soon as she sat back down, making her shiver. That night in bed she fell back on her old skill at mimicry, saying her name in his voice over and over again until she at last fell asleep.

And of course she had her work. Her best-selling strip became *The Adventures of Miss Minnie B*, whose heroine was forever in search of her lost family (she'd become separated from them in a time of great struggle, left purposely vague). Like all such strips, Bernadette realized, it depended on Miss Minnie's endless striving and never arriving: readers would remain interested in her only as long as she never got what she wanted.

So, both Bernadette and her heroine would go on endlessly searching, thanks to her father. That was all right, Bernadette decided one morning as she sketched Miss Minnie B sitting at the very same breakfast table she herself sat at with Ribeiro, her love, her life, sitting beside her. Miss Minnie's B's day-to-day life was a mirror in which to view both her unchangeable past and her uncertain future, a strange gift from the closest strangers of all, her parents. And each day she awoke wondering what it would bring. ■

Ron Carlson

The Chance

All right, we agree, a snowball gets to hell.

We don't know how, we just know it is there,
in hell. Maybe some sinner died skiing
with a snowball in his pocket and there it is,
assuming that your clothes go to hell with you
which is a huge discussion in itself, some bad
guy's bad heart quits while he's at the symphony
and he gets to show up in hell in a tux,
while the rest of us appear in cut off levis
and the upper half of a football jersey.

Regardless though, the snowball is in hell.
What could happen to it? A tender globe
of snow? There we are blinking in the inferno,
suddenly burning the way we knew we would,
none of us is surprised by this hot place,
the fire everywhere as promised,
and the stinging smoke almost familiar.
Forged in the instant is a certainty
that we will feed these flames forever.
Now we understand the strange phenomena—
the snowball.
It still has a chance.

Anne Doran

I Could Watch Movies

till my eyes burn out—alone,
where the midday dims,

and a soft seat springs open
to receive me. The society of

watchers, face forward,
eyes wide. A cheesy brand

of solitude, but a relief
not to share an armrest.

On a good day, when most
of the others stay home,

I put my feet up, torture
soda till it rattles, swab

butter on a napkin
with an inconsiderate rustle.

Movie pain is always
another's, the bodies

are perfect; stories
build to a bearable tension,

though the credits always
end it, and even if the movie

stays sad, it's not
about me. I remind

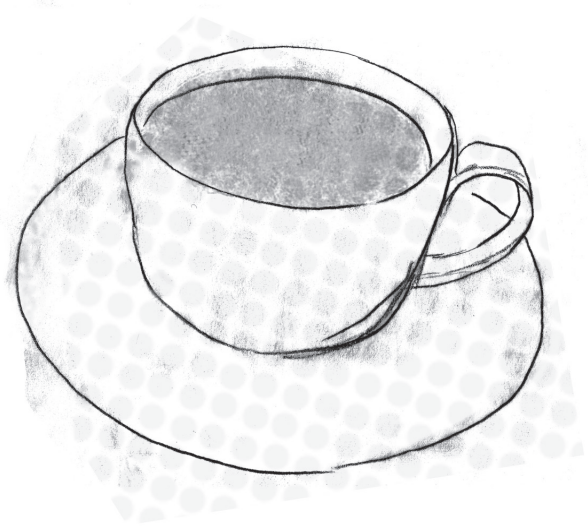
you of this today as I
breeze out for another

afternoon of quietude,
a few more hours of not

wondering what I am doing
now that my life's work

is over. In the cool
anesthetizing darkness,

where the seats face one way
and someone else
has written the end.



"We should go out sometime, maybe get some sushi."

Jenn Scott

Narrative Time

A day passed, and another day.[1] ■

[1] Morning coffee. The girl with the green scarf wrapped too tightly around her head drinks her coffee black. She wears the green scarf because she wakes each morning looking superficially like Einstein: electric hair, shock of white skin, dilated pupils. She wakes looking like a replica of herself in a grainy black and white photograph with sharp distinctions of shade; like a cardboard cutout in a store window, hovering against a pane of glass while children knock their fists against her two-dimensional knees.

In the cafe, she drinks her coffee black. She reads, glancing up between sentences, breaks of words, letters. She wonders why it's necessary, these breaks, such space. It is too easy to escape into the emptiness between things. She imagines herself crouched into the fat hollow of an *O*; imagines her back pressed against the rounded stomach of a *D* as if it is the glistening hood of a car, her pale chest beckoning the sun. She stares at Murray Avenue in the bright morning light, towards the dark interior of the as-yet unopened liquor store. She stares at the crazy woman, ostrich neck straining, letting the dog out of the illegally parked car while its owner leans into the cafe's granite

counter, purchases a pound of whole bean Sumatra. Beside him, Stripper Lawyer with his chest like Ken's holds the tiny handle of an espresso cup before bending over the girl with the green scarf's notes. He exclaims over her penmanship: "Such tiny, beautiful writing! Look at the way you fit two written lines inside each printed line. You should get that analyzed. Then again, maybe you shouldn't!" He laughs with closed lips, tilts his head back to suggest something uproariously funny.

"I'll refrain," the girl with the green scarf says.

"Back when I was in law school, stripping to pay my way through, I would have killed for writing like that!"

Behind Stripper Lawyer, the woman from the real estate office is suddenly interrupting, nudging the shoulder of Stripper Lawyer who has abandoned his espresso cup to tug at his slick ponytail. As if in response, the woman from the real estate office smoothes her own hair, so forcibly blonde the girl in the green scarf waits for it to scatter like dandelion, abandon her scalp in a single gentle explosion. Brother Floyd, the crazed black man with his red bow tie and too-small suit, yells to the barista above the whir of foam materializing. "I need money for deodorant! For the smell, Danielle, for the smell!"

The woman who wears the winter coat in summer heat sits in the girl with the green scarf's favorite seat (third seat from the door, closest to the counter and its pitchers of free tap water with swollen floating lemons). The woman who wears the winter coat in summer heat circles her hands around the warm comfort of a coffee cup, stares for hours at nothing in particular. Her winter coat resembles the floatation device found beneath the seat of a plane. She alternates her palms between the comfort of her coffee cup and

the squatness of her purse. Occasionally, lifting her hands from the sweaty brown leather, she glances at the girl with the green scarf triumphantly and this glance says plainly: *I am sitting in your seat.*

In the morning, coffee. The girl with the green scarf reads sentences twice, three times over. She flips to see how many pages are left in the chapter (thirteen), listens politely as people stop to speak to her. They bend over her table, her book, her coffee growing ever cooler. On the sound system, the *Braveheart* soundtrack begins anew.

Stripper Lawyer smoothes the slickness of his ponytail, tells the girl with the green scarf about his experience with a psychic last week. "She said I had thirteen year old son! I thought she was crazy, until I remembered the woman from college who told me she'd had an abortion."

"Whoa," the girl with the green scarf forces herself to say.

"I'm serious," Stripper Lawyer says.

"Me, too," the girl with the green scarf says. "Whoa."

"We should go out sometime, maybe get some sushi."

"We should, except I'm really busy lately."

Stripper Lawyer swipes a renegade hair. "Aren't you unemployed?"

The woman who wears the turban slides too closely in the seat beside the girl with the green scarf. Her breath smells intensely of garlic. "Please, come over tonight! I make a lovely dish with fava beans!"

The girl with the green scarf says, "It's fall. Fava beans have been out of season for months, now."

The woman who wears the turban says, "I'm very handy with beets. Also, with potatoes. I make a very delicious apple and barley salad."

"I have a hard time, digesting grain."

"I've seen you," the woman who wears the turban says. "You eat far too much sugar. You have a pallor, like you're not getting enough B12."

The Philosophy PhD candidate with the yellow teeth says, "I'll mark these seventy papers today if it kills me. It will probably kill me. I stand a better chance against polio. Not sure what you people in the English Department are doing over there. These students can't construct sentences to save their lives. What have you been teaching them, besides nothing?"

"I am no longer actually, specifically, part of the English Department. Your insults no longer apply to me."

"And anyway, why are you reading that book? His ideas are vague, useless." The Philosophy PhD candidate's arms flutter up and away in a demonstration of uselessness.

The woman from Library Science drinks her third mocha. Her hair explodes like a nuclear burst above her head. She says, "I can't fight a two-front war. I can't fight a war at home and a war at work. I can't have a husband like that and a boss like this." She clacks a spoon inside her glass before standing to emphasize her point. "Do you understand?" she asks the girl with the green scarf, pounding the table to emphasize her words. "I can't have a husband like that and a boss like this!"

The insane mumbling man at the table beside them, drawing maps across an endless supply of napkins, stops drawing mid-line to say, "Woman! Stop complaining and get your body out of my face!"

Coffee. Cream and then sugar, raw, poured any way but carefully from the dispenser. The girl with the green scarf needs comfort, cream's fat rounding

coffee's sharpness to curves. She has found solace in the most startling allies: Leeza and the never-ending investigation into murder and rape. Montel and his obsession with paternity testing. ("This is ninety-nine percent accurate and admissible in a court of law.") The news. ("Traffic and weather together.") Sports with the sportscaster her gay friend had sex with.

"Terrible, absolutely terrible in bed!" her friend said. "Beer cans scattered everywhere, and the entire house smelled like piss!"

Now, when the sportscaster recounts football news, it all sounds curiously sexual: *going deep, tight end, penetration in the back field*. The girl with the green scarf believes the sportscaster squints his left eye at her. He knows that she knows that he's poor in bed, drinks too much alcohol. He knows that she knows the length of his afternoons, all that exhausted endlessness. She knows that he has sat across from a lover, wanting only to touch a strand of his hair, an earlobe. He has thought, mistakenly, that an earlobe could be enough. His lover has said to him, "You're too fragile," and the sportscaster slept with him anyway, knowing the comfort of this single night was something he might draw out like taffy. She considers telling his face projected in the television screen, his neck gawking, the pimple on his chin, his tie slightly askew: nights like that are akin to glass, too delicate and easy to break, moments containing nothing but the clarity of themselves.

The woman who wears the turban drinks tea and says, "Personally, I think it's easier to abstain from sex. Think of the trauma the vagina undergoes every time!"

The girl with the green scarf says, "No, please, I'd rather not."

Stripper Lawyer drinks espresso, stands laughing with the woman from

the real estate office. His laugh is too loud, the laugh of a crow. This morning, his ponytail is drawn back so tightly it gives his face the impression of a facelift.

"He has a line for everyone," the woman who wears the turban says, with a nod towards Stripper Lawyer. "He had a line for me, if you can believe it."

"He constantly wants to have sex," the woman from Library Science says.

"Your boss?" the girl with the green scarf asks.

"No," the woman from Library Science says. "My husband."

At home, the girl with the green scarf watches the newscaster bumble the Steelers' coverage. She suspects that he, too, eats peanut butter out of the jar for dinner because this is all he can muster. He, too, calls his mother who tells him, "I tell you all the time, not to call during *Dallas*. I can't talk during *Dallas*."

"*Dallas* ended years ago. It was a dream."

"I'm watching it now. Only one season was a dream. The rest was real. So don't call me."

The girl with the green scarf suspects the sportscaster's mother has heard him crying over the phone and asked, "And what is it you expect me to do?"

Morning coffee. The girl with the green scarf counts six pages until the end of the novel. She imagines what happens in the white spaces, those decided narrative pauses. She imagines the protagonist bored. She imagines her, watching too much television, eating too many donuts without brushing her teeth afterwards. Running the vacuum, taking baths with salts, visualizing success. The girl with the green scarf understands no one cares what happens to the protagonist in the white spaces. She understands that she is jealous of her, trapped inside her narrative with its convenient elision of time, its smoothing over of days and weeks and months to the decisive moment,

the place where the action unfolds.

"Lucky bitch!" the girl with the green scarf says to no one in particular, perhaps to the woman from Library Science, perhaps to Brother Floyd, perhaps to the woman who wears the turban whose turban she helps fold on the cafe's frozen patio with the tables and chairs piled high for winter. They fold the turban corner to corner, corner to corner, until it is a square the woman who wears the turban can shove inside her bag. The girl with the green scarf is not sure why they have folded the turban; the woman who wears the turban's shaved head stares up at her, demanding to be covered. There is snow.

The woman who wears the turban says, "Please don't say the word *bitch*. No woman deserves to be called a bitch."

Or maybe the girl with the green scarf says these words to Stripper Lawyer, standing beside her in a new suit with a dizzying array of pinstripes, a newspaper tucked into his armpit: *Lucky bitch!*

"Did you strip for that suit?" she asks, and is trying to make a joke. "Or litigate for it?"

"You used to be so attractive, even with the scarf. Now what? Too many books?"

The girl with the green scarf tries to discern: he is making a joke, he is not making a joke. Stripper lawyer steps closer, touches a finger to the hollow, dark spaces beneath her eyes that have come to resemble craters on a distant moon: first one, and then the other. She does not have the energy to tell him no, don't do that.

"Oh," she says, and it occurs to her: how long ago was it, that she might have said something different? How long ago was it, when she might have

chiseled out the sharpness of a response, hurled it at him like a discus?

Standing above the table third from the door, closest to the counter, Stripper Lawyer touches her lips. He smoothes their roughness with fingers that smell curiously of sardines and she believes, in this strange, startling moment, that he will kiss her. She lifts her chin towards him. Behind them, the *Braveheart* soundtrack crashes out a shrill crescendo. She imagines Stripper Lawyer pressing her against his ironed slacks and suit jacket and kissing her, right inside the café like a scene from some golden Hollywood movie. Some terrible and distant part of herself wills this. Some small and quivering part of her thinks, *please*.

"Hmm," he says, turning from her, before choosing instead espresso, the steady and dependable print of this morning's paper.

Follow the Girl in the Red Boots

This place is weird, sexless, and white.
This is the place that I came from.
This is the place from which I came.
Plenty of people have.

I am tired of "Du bist wunderbar."
I am smart as snow on Valentine's night.
I am a place of silt and lonely anecdotes.
Plenty of people are.

Forget what the head waiter told you.
Forget every plate you forgot to lick.
Forget dessert and disconsolate girlfriends.
Plenty of people do.

I have tried to redress December.
I have softly unbuttoned my Cacharel.
I have circled the dawns with erasable ink.
Plenty of people will.

Follow the girl in the swollen shoes.
Follow the map that she made you.
Follow the soar of her certain song.
Plenty of people won't.

Rachel Dacus

Smiling Back

I meet my father for breakfast.
He dwells in some life after
Alzheimer's, yet smiles: *Are you still*
my daughter? The first sick joke
from the afterlife begins on the phone.
I admit, regrettably, that I am. His skull

knobs out; I can imagine the skin
the color of a car's undercarriage, the sun
catching the mica flecks in his eyes.
His thoughts float on the surface, torn
out of context. He's dying, he says:
ninety-two and a ragpile wreck.

He throws down the paper.
Still all assholes! he proclaims and asks
the word for forgetfulness.
I remind him: CRS syndrome:
Can't Remember Shit. His favorite joke
lives on in my memory. I leave him
in his black leather chair, feeling
the question pelting my back.

Still your daughter,
I say on the phone from the airport.
Now I'm on a plane and as far
as he's concerned, I might as well be
in the afterlife. But I'm just mulching him
over, planting him, sure that whatever
comes up is him, an irrepressible weed.

Howie Good

Scenes from a Marriage

1
We were children together
licked by the dog

with the black tongue

scattered rows
of lighted windows
looking away

a bloody ax
at any given moment

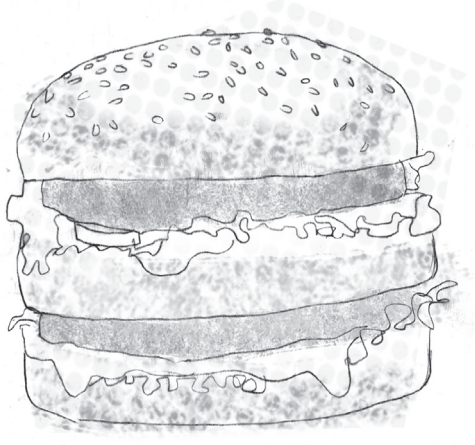
among the tools
in the backyard shed

2
We went to live quietly
except for hunters

and church bells
in one of the rectangle states

a necklace of red berries
discovered around her neck

what I'd been doing until just now
between tiny heart attack



Mutt finally stops at the Main Street McDonald's and buys it a couple of Big Macs, at which point it finally chills the fuck out.

Matthew Baker

The House of Jenny, Jen, and Mrs. G

You can't judge a man on the things he's done, only the things he's doing. Like the me I used to be—we don't share shit except a body. Maybe he rode around in this same thing I'm riding around in now, but the things he did, no way I'd do. You hand me a baseball bat, I'm gonna walk to the nearest ballpark. You hand him a baseball bat, he's gonna walk to the nearest mailbox. How's that the same man?

So if I talk about him, it's only with the understanding that you're not going to judge me if he, say, pawned his mother's class ring for gas money, or blew some snot out onto the half-eaten sandwich of some kid he didn't like. This isn't me saying I'm guilty of anything he did. It's gossip. And there's a lot of things I'm above, but I'm not above that.

So say he once broke into his own high school after hours. You going to judge him for that? Say his name was Mutt. Not his actual name, just what everyone called him. Say he had a best friend named The Big D, and say Mutt made D help him steal an $8,000 deskchair from the vice principal's office.

Well so he did. Because when this V.P. sat in this $8,000 deskchair, you could tell he thought it was his own personal throne. And here he was, getting ready to tell you whether you're playing ball this year or whether your jersey's going the way of your grades. When he's in this chair, you're his peasant. You're sitting in a plastic chair, can barely see over his desk, might as well be sitting at his feet. And him so proud of his chair that he's always making a point of telling you just how much it cost. And then he tells you: you don't have a chance at getting that jersey, even if you could bully each of your teachers

into tossing you that A.

And Mutt's had just about enough of getting fed that horseshit from someone sitting on a throne, so he tells Big D to borrow D's mother's van and together they haul the V.P.'s chair out of his office and through the gym and out the back door, which is about the point that Big D first hears that next they're driving it to Lubbock to sell it. But first they replace the V.P.'s throne with a portable toilet from Mutt's parents' RV.

But then they're only on 84 for about "Starman" through "Lady Stardust" before D's mother's piece-of-shit van starts hacking up smoke from under its hood like it's been a pack-a-day smoker since the day it was born. And now D's scared, because he does have that jersey, and if they get caught with the V.P.'s throne, then that's it for D, no jersey, maybe even no diploma. But Mutt tells D to take it easy, man, that this time of night, who the hell're they gonna run into?

And some headlights attached to an orange truck go buzzing past the van, and then another headlight attached to a motorcycle, and then they start feeling pretty good, and talking about how if they just let the engine cool down, maybe the van will be good enough to at least make it into Slaton. But then a towing truck with "Leroy's 24 Hour Wrecker" spraypainted onto its side in huge yellow letters goes clunking past, and business for Leroy must be bad, or at least it's bad enough that he hits the brakes instead of minding his own fucking business, and throws his wrecker into reverse, creeping back at them like some ugly monster that you know means well but's just about to send all of your plans scattering.

So out gets Leroy, with hair like Ziggy but three times the size of him, wearing a cutoff t-shirt that says he once played football for Post back when they were state champs, and shit, look at him now. Mutt tells The Big D to roll down the window, but D's losing his cool. No way, D says. He sees that chair, we're goners. D, roll down the window, Mutt says. Leroy's outside now, knocking on the window with a paw the size of a bear's, and D's just making everything worse.

D rolls it down. Ya'll need a tow? Leroy asks. D looks at Mutt. No, we're all right, Mutt says. You sure? Leroy says, and now he's looking at the hood, which is still smoking a little. Yeah, shit, we're fine, Mutt says, knowing he sounds like either an idiot or a liar. Leroy glances into the back of the van, probably thinking they've got a load of meth back there, or somebody tied up. We're fine, Mutt says again. Dunno, Leroy says, looking at Big D. It's pretty late—I'd feel bad leaving ya'll stranded. Jesus, Mutt says, I said we're fine. Fuck off.

All right, come on now, Leroy says, take it easy. Suit yourselves. And so Leroy goes toddling back to his wrecker, but as he's climbing in he pulls out a phone, and now he's calling somebody, maybe the police. He starts up his truck and clatters away, but that doesn't make them feel safer, just like something bad is leaving, and something worse is coming.

And when the next set of headlights pop up behind them, D's ready to forget the van and the chair and hike it to Oklahoma to start a new life. But that's when she pulls up, dark hair and hollow cheeks, a good twenty years older than the both of them, asking if they need help, and as soon as Mutt sees her, he knows he's moving out of his parents' house and straight into hers.

She's married, but the husband's long gone. She's got a kid, too, Carson Jr., and although her having a husband doesn't bother Mutt, her having a kid does maybe. Anytime they start getting friendly, Carson Jr. comes wandering in with a diaper full of shit, which means Gwenn's got to go spread him out on the changing table in the laundry room, leaving Mutt alone in the bedroom, tugging back on his underwear about the same time Carson Jr.'s diaper is coming off.

They live in her mother's house, which I remember as being about halfway between house-sized and mansion-sized, so I'm calling it a house—when in doubt, round down. Mutt lived by a different rule—when in doubt, round up—which is partly how I know we're different men. So Mutt thinks it's a mansion, even though it's a house, with a

swing on the front porch, and a fenced-in backyard that's more of an automobile graveyard, littered with the rusted husks of pickup trucks and VW campers, and copperheads nesting under the shells of them, and brown recluse stringing their webs in the cabs.

And the house may as well belong to him and Gwenn, as her mother's got dementia. Gwenn tries explaining dementia to Mutt, but he tells her not too bother. After a certain point in high school Mutt realized that he was just done learning. They kept introducing him to fact after fact until, shit, man, the party was full—go home, take your friends with you. And still they kept bringing facts to his door, math facts, Civil War facts, facts about the nesting habits of birds, and meanwhile the house in his head already so crowded that facts keep getting bumped into the pool, drowning on him, or trampled under the feet of the others.

All Mutt needs to know about dementia is that it means Gwenn's mother has no fucking clue what's going on, so they can do pretty much whatever they want. Sometimes he pretends to be her husband, the mother's. Jenny, he'll say, it's Earl. Sometimes she'll play along, sometimes not. Do you love me, Mutt'll say. Who're you? she'll say. Earl. Who? she'll say, feeling around on the table for the glasses she's already wearing. I'm Jenny, Mutt'll say, who are you?

As far as he can tell, she's all of the selves she used to be, sometimes Jen, sometimes Jenny, sometimes Mrs. G, and even Mrs. G is three or four different people. So Mutt doesn't feel bad for messing with her, because if you're six people at once, then you're nothing, nobody. Even if Mutt does something to her, by the time he's done doing it she's already somebody else.

This is all happening in Post, Texas, which you've never heard of, unless maybe you're from Lubbock, but even then, you've never heard of it. Post is at the bottom of that chimney coming off the roof of the state, at about the spot where Santa might stop to take a piss before coming out to dump all of his presents out onto Dallas and Austin.

Mutt's parents think he's still going to school, although he hasn't been once since moving into Gwenn's. They also think he's picked up a night shift on the oil rigs outside of town, and that he's renting a room up in Hackberry. Gwenn's house is on 14th, about twelve blocks from his parents', in a town only fifteen blocks long to begin with.

The problem if you're from Post is that you know you've got to get out before you die there, which'll be long before you're dead. But everything you've ever known is Post: canoes full of Shiner Bock down at Two Draw; free burgers from Holly's when Big D's working the front counter; your picture on the wall down at George's, a newspaper cutout of you catching a pass over two farmboys from Denver City. It's hard to get out when everything that's you is there. Who're you gonna be if you leave?

Gwenn's got six different types of pills she's supposed to be on, but instead Mutt helps her sell the lot. They also sell the pills Gwenn's supposed to be giving her mother, and between all of that, they've got enough cash to eat short loin and ribs seven days a week, and plenty leftover for Trojans, skunk, and Carson Jr.'s maraconi.

Sometimes Mutt doesn't mind Carson Jr., as Carson Jr. only knows how to say three words, yum, cat, and button, which means Mutt really isn't under any sort of obligation to actually talk to him, and as Carson Jr. does this weird little dance every time he gets out of the bathtub, wiggling his butt and waving his arms around before Gwenn can catch him and start toweling him off, which Mutt thinks is kind of funny. But most of the time Mutt minds Carson Jr. very much, for preferring cartoons to baseball, for waking up every couple of hours during the night, and for puking up meatloaf and fried okra onto the bedroom carpet, chunks of buttered toast onto the front porch, and creamed corn all over Mutt's only sweatshirt.

So Mutt drives to Close City and steals a dog off somebody's porch, half pit bull half boxer, which spends the entire drive home trying to bite off Mutt's arm, until Mutt finally stops at the Main Street McDonald's and buys it a couple of Big Macs, at which point

it finally chills the fuck out. He brings the dog back to Gwenn's, and Gwenn's sort of sold on the idea until they bring it inside and the dog starts snapping at Mrs. G, who loses it, screaming and crying and hobbling around the living room, trying to keep at least two pieces of furniture between her and the dog at all times. And of course Carson Jr. gets so upset that he throws up all over the umbrella stand. Then suddenly Gwenn's been against the idea from the start, and she calls Mutt a dumbshit and tells him to take the dog outside. So he does. He tosses it out into the automobile graveyard, and tells the dog, if you can survive a night with the copperheads, I'll give you a steak in the morning, and I'll have you living inside by tomorrow afternoon. Then he tells the dog, by the way, your new name is Carl.

So now they each have something in the house to spoil. When Gwenn's paying attention to Carson Jr., Mutt's paying attention to Carl the Dog, and they've each got someone more important to them than the other. And so everything's beautiful, and Mutt's set for life, as far as he's concerned. Except as far as Gwenn's husband is concerned, he's not.

Gwenn finally has to admit that Carl the Dog was a good idea, because the first night her husband comes snooping back around, Carl the Dog wakes everyone up, barking and snapping at the living room windows. When Mutt hits the porch lights, a huge motherfucker in a hooded sweatshirt bends back from the window he was peeking in and glances at the door, then hikes it back out to his truck, but taking his time though, making a point of that, okay, he's leaving, but only because he wants to. I can't even imagine what that guy'd been raised on—beef milkshakes instead of breast milk, Gerber's laced with chunks of bacon and bison. The husband's got legs the size of Mutt's chest, and a face that looks like it's been smashed against steel doors, telephone poles, the sides of dumpsters, and didn't feel a thing.

Gwenn says she's not scared, just pissed at the son of a bitch for coming back after running off with that slut from Pleasant Valley.

What do you think he wants? Mutt asks. Probably me, Gwenn says. Or you dead.

Mutt feels like he did when he first realized he might be losing his jersey, but hadn't quite lost it yet. In the morning Gwenn hauls Carson Jr. off to the pharmacy to help her pick up the latest shipment of meds she won't be taking. After they leave, a commercial on television gets Mrs. G all riled up, and now she's Jenny and she won't stop talking. She follows Mutt into the kitchen, telling him some story that doesn't make any sense, about someone named Twinnie carrying her into the cellar to get her out of a storm. But then there's no storm, and Twinnie's in bed, and she's telling Mutt about the medicine she has to remember to give Twinnie and the autobiographies she has to remember to order, but then Twinnie must not be in bed because now she says Twinnie's out working on a truck. Here, Mutt says, less Twinnie, more Twinkie, and he tosses a couple at Mrs. G, hoping some sugar will get her quiet again.

But it's impossible for Mutt to think about anything other than the husband. So he starts picking on Mrs. G to make himself feel better about maybe being dead soon. Hey, Jenny, he says, who're you rooting for, me or the ugly husband? She's working on the Twinkies, can't get one of them open, she's already forgotten him. Who're you? she says. I'm Earl, Mutt says, your husband. Who're you rooting for, Jenny, Earl or your son-of-a-bitch son-in-law? Sorry? Mrs. G says, looking like she means it. I don't understand. It's easy, Mutt says. You're rooting for me.

The husband shows back up later that night, and this time instead of creeping around like a runaway from the Garza County lockup, he knocks on the front door, making a sound like he's taking a baseball bat to it instead of just the knuckles on his hand. He's wearing a shirt with a collar, and Carl the Dog's snarling like he's ready to tear this well-dressed shithead to pieces.

Gwenn's dressed up too, wearing a shirt Mutt's never seen. Mutt thinks, what the hell, but doesn't say a thing. Mrs. G's got Carson Jr.

sitting on her lap in the television room, and they're watching a movie about cars, the both of them oblivious to just about everything.

So? Gwenn says when she opens the door. So, the husband says. You're not coming in, she says. I don't give a shit, he says. I'm not here for supper. So then? Gwenn says.

Mutt's leaning against the coat rack. He can't decide whether to look the husband in the eye or to just play it cool and pretend he's checking out some shit on the floor. He keeps trying to opt for the eye contact, but every time the husband sends it back his way Mutt ends up opting for the shit on the floor after all. Meanwhile Carl the Dog is sniffing the husband's hands. Then Carl the Dog starts licking him. The husband roughs up the fur on his head, then goes back to ignoring him. You gotta be kidding me, Mutt thinks. I should've stolen a smarter dog.

Just here for Carson Jr., the husband says. I've got a good place up in Lubbock. Some trees, a tire swing, Playstation 3.

This is the first Mutt's heard about a Playstation 3. Last he knew they were still on 1. That's the problem with Post. By the time you catch on to Ziggy, everyone up in Lubbock's listening to Biggie. Leaving town isn't just changing places—you're jumping decades.

Fuck no, Gwenn says. But now when Mutt looks at the husband, all he sees is no more cartoons, no more dirty diapers, and no more puddles of vomit—he's rounding all of this up to no more Carson Jr. So he says, hey, come on, maybe it'd be good for Jr. to be with his father for a while, you know? And Gwenn gives him a look that says, no, I don't know, and if you ask me again, I'll kill you.

I'll be back in the morning to pick him up, the husband says. Pack up a couple spare diapers, if you've got any. I said no, Gwenn says. Come back again and I'll sic Carl on you.

Now the husband's laughing, a deep thing, like bass thumping out of a six-foot speaker. Who the fuck's Carl? he says. Him? And he's pointing at Mutt. Carl's the dog, dickhead, Gwenn says. But the husband's still laughing, all the way down the driveway, and into

the road, and laughing still as he climbs back into his truck and shuts the door.

What the hell are you thinking? Gwenn says after he leaves. We can't give Carson Jr. to him. That man's out of his mind.

Well, Mutt says. But he's got a Playstation 3. Jr.'d love that.

What Carson Jr. wouldn't love, Gwenn says, is that slut from Pleasant Valley running a meth lab out of the basement, and Carson Sr. blowing Carson Jr.'s entire diaper budget on shitty poker hands. Not to mention Carson Sr.'s spending most weekends in Lubbock County for punching the wrong men in their faces, and occasionally probably that slut from Pleasant Valley.

Okay, Mutt says. So we keep Carson Jr.

Damn right, Gwenn says.

Then Gwenn goes into the kitchen and gets blitzed on skunk and rum. The movie about cars is over, so guess who's gotta put both Carson Jr. and Mrs. G to bed.

But Mrs. G doesn't want to, because now she's Jen, and all she wants to do is talk about overdue fines and how it's almost Twinnie's birthday, and how she's buying him something perfect, but that she can't tell Mutt what it is, because it's supposed to be a surprise. So Mutt says the hell with it, and just lets her be Jen and awake. Mutt takes over the television, and Carson Jr. falls asleep on the couch, and Mrs. G starts calling herself Jenny and talking about how they don't know what to name the baby, and then she wanders off to who knows where to do who knows what, which even she'll forget about sometime before morning.

The husband's back at dawn, wearing the same shirt but smelling like shit.

Morning, Carl, the husband says. Just here for Carson Jr.

Hold on, Mutt says, still rubbing his eyes, ignoring the bit about Carl. He goes upstairs to get Gwenn, but she won't wake up. He puts

his ear to her lips and listens for breathing. Still alive, just sleeping it off. Gwenn, he shouts, shaking her. But she's like something empty.

He goes back downstairs. Carson Jr.'s awake and off the couch and talking to the husband. The husband's got him saying a new word, truck.

Well, Carl, I think we're about ready to go, the husband says. Did you throw some diapers together?

Mutt's arms are a size S, which in his head he rounds up to M. But even then, Mutt knows both of his M's could fit inside one of the husband's XL's. Sorry, Mutt says, but you can't take him.

What do you mean, I can't take him? the husband says. I'm his father. Who the hell are you? Carson Jr.'s better off here, Mutt says. Where's Gwenn? the husband says. Mutt says, sleeping. Then that's that, the husband says. He's coming with me. Carl the Dog comes trotting in from the kitchen. The husband roughs up his fur, and then Carl goes slinking back off toward his water dish. I don't know, Mutt says.

Let me explain this to you, the husband says, since this might be a bit complicated for a kid still in high school. The husband palms the umbrella stand, shaking umbrellas out onto the floor. Either I take Carson Jr., the husband says, or I hit you with this, and then I take Carson Jr.

First of all, Mutt says, I don't go to high school. But second of all, I'd rather not take this up with the umbrella stand.

I ought to kill you anyway, the husband says, for sleeping with my wife.

When Gwenn finds out Mutt let the husband take Carson Jr., she spends a couple minutes hitting him, and then she takes off too. Where the hell're you going? Mutt shouts from the porch. Out, she shouts, not looking at him, and then driving away with their car.

This leaving Mutt alone with Mrs. G, about which he's none too thrilled.

He tugs on one of Carson Jr.'s diapers, hiking it up as far as it'll

go, then walks around the house for a while, trying to see if Mrs. G will notice anything different. But she doesn't—she's talking about Boris Karloff, Twinnie's heart problems, having to can some jam for a church drive that probably happened forty years ago. So Mutt gives up and calls up The Big D.

Hell yeah, Big D says. Where've you been?

They meet up at the empty bleachers and split a case of Shiner Bock at the field where Mutt's no longer allowed to play, not because he wasn't good enough, but because sin(x) and cos(x) were a language he didn't understand. Same for HBr + $KHCO_3$, for *I tried to match it, seam by seam, But could not make them fit*. We any good this year? Mutt asks. Nope, D says. And then: well, pretty good. Damn, Mutt says. I knew it. You ever coming back to school? D asks. Maybe, Mutt says. And then: well, probably not. Damn, D says, *I* knew *that*.

V.P. have a new chair yet? Mutt asks. No, D says, laughing. You should see him trying to talk down to you from a foldout. How're you gonna take him seriously when he's sitting on one of those? Almost wish I was still around, Mutt says, just to see it.

Then one of the Hollys calls up The Big D about driving over to Two Draw. You wanna come? D says. Yeah, Mutt says, but I can't. I better check in at home.

By home Mutt meant his parents', but instead he walks back to Gwenn's, and Gwenn's still gone. Mrs. G is carrying around a lightbulb, can't remember where she saw the one that needed replacing. Mutt tosses Carl the Dog some leftover ribs and then sits on the porch until it's dark and Gwenn is still somewhere else, and then he thinks, oh well, what the hell, and walks the twelve blocks across town to his parents' house.

Thought you had a car now? his dad says when he opens the door. I do, Mutt says. Then where is it? his dad says, looking up and down the empty street. Don't worry about it, Mutt says. I let someone borrow it. His dad's got his glasses on, a ballpoint and the newspaper bunched up in one hand, caught halfway through one of his crosswords.

Which, try having the one dad in town who does crosswords when the rest of the dads are watching high school football on television. See how far that gets you with the other dads, or their sons for that matter. Try having the one mom who posed for magazines that the other moms keep catching their sons with. See how many meals you'll make it through in the cafeteria without someone cracking a joke about that. Won't be many.

His dad's back at the kitchen table, filling in letters. His mom glances at him from the couch, says, well. Well, Mutt says. They called and said you haven't been going to school. Guess that's true, Mutt says. But only because they're letting me pick up extra shifts down at the rigs. You going to work out at the rigs forever? she says. It's good money, Mutt says. As long as your back holds, she says, and your knees. Your body gives out you, that's the end of that dream.

Which Mutt's used to hearing, her little speech she gives, like she's some sort of washed-up halfback whose knee blew out a week after she'd signed a deal with the NFL, instead of just a mom who left Post and drove to Houston to become a famous model and got a couple good gigs with a photographer from *Playboy* before they decided that her face wasn't quite what they were looking for after all. And who gave up after a couple more months of nothing in the way of modeling gigs and drove back to Post and hadn't left since. Which I've heard wasn't pretty—like watching a neighbor kid climb onto her roof with a homemade superhero cape, and jump, and get higher than you thought it was actually possible for anyone with legs that short to get, so high that at first you think maybe that's it, maybe she wasn't kidding, maybe she's about to just float off into the clouds—which is when you see the gravity kick in—first on the kid's face, then the rest of her body—and then as she snaps through the branches and bounces off the awning and faceplants into the driveway, you think, shit, kid, I could've told you that was going to happen.

Leave'm alone, his dad says. If he likes the rigs, let him work the rigs. Thanks, pops, Mutt says, feeling comfortable enough to take a

Coke from the fridge. But here's my question, his dad says, filling in more letters. I keep hearing you've been hanging out around the old librarian's house. Who? Mutt says. You mean Mrs. G? Exactly whom I mean, his dad says.

I don't like that woman, his mom shouts from the other room. The librarian? his dad shouts. No, her daughter, his mom shouts. Keep hearing things about that one.

Don't know anything about her, his dad says, crossing out one of his clues. But how do you have time to be hanging out around there if you're working overtime at the rigs? Well, I'm not down at Mrs. G's that much, Mutt says. And when I am, it's only because they hired me to help take care of Mrs. G, since sometimes she gets confused. So even when I am down there, at least I'm making money.

Mutt watches television for a while with his mom, then catches on that it's about bedtime for his parents, that they're getting ready to lock up the house and hit all the lights. Not wanting to get locked inside, Mutt says he ought to start heading back to his apartment. You have a ride? his dad asks. Yeah, Mutt says. I'm meeting them over at D's.

Then he walks the twelve blocks back to Mrs. G's and Gwenn's still gone, so he calls The Big D, but by now they've all left Two Draw and they're sleeping too, as they've got a game in the morning. And Mutt's sort of scared to be left alone with Mrs. G, because what if she wakes up thinking something weird, like maybe he needs a kidney transplant, and she's a surgeon, and all she's got to work with are those knives on the kitchen counter?

Gwenn comes back a week later, with blonde hair instead of brown, and a trunk full of stolen televisions, and Carson Jr. in tow. Carson Jr.'s learned a new word, slut, which Gwenn's in the middle of trying to unteach him. Mutt follows her around the house, kissing her on the neck and the shoulders every time she stops to unload another TV. Then once she's finished, she starts loving on him a little too, and then they make Carson Jr. some macaroni and then go upstairs and

everything's good again.

He wants to know how she got Carson Jr. back but Gwenn isn't saying. All she'll say is that Carson Sr. is a son of a bitch, and only wanted Carson Jr. to run some sort of scam. Then she says tomorrow they're selling the televisions. Then Mutt can't stop kissing her knees, because she's got everything figured out, and it doesn't matter if he's got a diploma or doesn't because they've got money and each other and he's starting to love her new hair.

But then later that night the husband calls and Mutt's dumb enough to be the one who picks up the phone.

"Have you got my boy?" the husband says. "Well, yeah," Mutt says. "Didn't you know?" The husband says, "I wasn't kidding when I said I ought to kill you. Let me talk to my wife."

Mutt hangs up the phone. Gwenn wants to know who it was. He tells her it was Big D. She wants to know who Big D is, so he tries to explain that D's the kid he was with when she met him. Gwenn tosses Carl the Dog into the backyard for trying to bite Carson Jr., and then they take Carson Jr. out on a walk. The phone's ringing as they step out the door, but Mutt says, leave it. It's ringing again when they walk back in later, but by the time Gwenn's got the door closed and Carson Jr. out of his muddy shoes, it's stopped, and that's the last they hear from it for the rest of the night.

Carson Jr.'s brought back a bunch of nasty habits from Pleasant Valley, including wearing his socks on his ears instead of his feet, making weird faces by shoving his fingers into his mouth and then pulling his lips apart as far as they'll go, and wanting maple syrup on his macaroni. He's also learned how to take the batteries out of the remote control.

When Gwenn's home, Mutt gives Carson Jr. his syrup. But when she's gone, hawking pills or buying diapers, Carson Jr. gets no syrup, and Carl the Dog gets Carson Jr.'s macaroni.

And Gwenn's getting weird, although Mutt doesn't really think

of it like that. When something starts going wrong, Mutt assumes it's him. It wasn't, that much I know. It never is—it's always the someone else. Mutt rounds up her getting weird to her just being in a funk. But the more he hangs from her, the more kisses he's dropping on her hipbones, the more rubbing he's giving to that spot on her neck where the skin turns to hair, the more she's needing to check on Mrs. G, or lie down for a nap, or see if Carson Jr.'s about done with his toast.

And then Gwenn catches him picking on Mrs. G. Mutt's got her on the porch, he's got on her dead husband's boots and her dead husband's Stetson. Jenny, Mutt's saying, you remember when we first met? I can't, Mrs. G says, sitting on her swing but not swinging. Mutt's leaning against the railing, arms folded. You remember me, don't you? Mutt says. I'm Earl, remember?

Then Gwenn comes around the side of the house carrying a couple jars of peaches from the cellar. Who the hell's Earl? she says. What do you mean, who's Earl? Mutt says. You said your dad's name was Earl.

It was, Gwenn says, but not once in fifty years did she call him that. As long as I was alive, she just called him Twin.

Oh, Mutt says. And Jesus, she says, what're you doing wearing his clothes? You're acting like you're about twelve. Which hits Mutt where he's sore, so he says, we probably all seem twelve to the middle-aged. Which hits Gwenn where she's sore, so she says, since when am I middle-aged? But she is, so she tells Mutt to go back to school and then bangs through the front door with the jam, leaving Mutt just sitting there with nothing to do except play his new game, the game he'd been trying to play all along, which is Pretend That You're Twinnie.

But then a truck pulls up across from the house, and out comes the husband, looking none too pleased. And Mutt's dumb enough to stand there and not do anything or run or even think of anything to say, he just keeps leaning against the railing with one hand on the brim of his hat, as the husband comes stomping across the front lawn, and up the steps of the porch, and, after giving a nod to Mrs. G, walks straight into the house, leaving the door wide open. Then still

before Mutt can think of anything smart to do, the husband comes straight out again, shaking the umbrellas out of the umbrella stand, the umbrellas clattering out onto the porch, and then he takes a swing at that sweet spot right under the brim of Mutt's hat, and damn if he doesn't connect with some forehead.

When Mutt wakes up at first he's not anyone. But then he's Mutt again, Mutt draped over the swing on the porch, watching Gwenn and the husband making out a couple feet away from him, the husband sitting on the railing, and Gwenn with her hand up his shirt, feeling around for whatever it is she hadn't found with Mutt.

The hell? Mutt mutters, touching the lump above one of his eyebrows. Shit, the husband says, Carl's awake. Oh, Gwenn says, looking at Mutt. Sorry. Then they take off inside, leaving Mutt on the porch with Mrs. G. Mutt looks at Mrs. G, but she's got nothing to say.

Mutt stands up but gets dizzy, ends up leaning against a post, wrapped around it the same way he's usually wrapped around Gwenn. Then Gwenn comes out carrying a box of her pills and the husband follows her with the one stolen television they still hadn't sold. The husband doesn't even look at Mutt, just hikes it out to his truck with the television.

He wanted to kill you, Gwenn says, stopping on the stairs. But I told him not to.

I thought you hated him, Mutt says. She says, well I did. You don't understand love—you're too young. What do you mean, I don't understand love? Mutt says. What do you think I'm doing here with you? Gwenn doesn't say anything. I thought he wanted Carson Jr.? Mutt says. No, just me, she says. He wanted me without Carson Jr. What he's always wanted. So that's what I'm going to give him.

Then she carries her box out to his truck and gets in and they're gone.

Mrs. G goes inside and Mutt follows her. Carson Jr.'s watching a

movie about superheroes. Mrs. G sits down next to him. Carson Jr. flops his head onto her lap, still watching the movie, and Carl the Dog trots in, growling a little, and then hops onto the couch between them, looking out the window at the place where the husband's truck used to be. Mutt thinks: an all-star lineup. And then he thinks: Carson Jr. is not your problem, so don't you even think about making him one.

So Mutt takes off the boots and the hat and leaves them on the stairs and puts on his sneakers and leaves. And he leaves not only Carson Jr., but also Carl the Dog, so that that way they're each leaving a problem behind, him and Gwenn, dumping them off onto Mrs. G, and it's not like she's going to remember their names long enough to do much dwelling on it. And Gwenn'll be back anyway, Mutt knows, sooner or later. He rounds up him getting left to him getting away—she won't find him sitting around waiting for her, he thinks, not this time.

So Mutt starts sleeping in Gwenn's car, parking it out at Two Draw. He was dumb enough not to take any food from Gwenn's when he left, and he refuses to go back, in case she's already there. So he steals a jar of peanut butter and a loaf of bread from Town & Country and starts living off that. Except a week later the bread's gone and so's the peanut butter and he's still in the car.

Mutt realizes he's going to have to choose between two futures: one where he goes back to Gwenn and keeps living off the pill money they collect, or one where he gets a job at Hotel Garza cleaning bathrooms or at Jackson Bros. Meat Packers skinning deer and boning hogs. Except he doesn't want Gwenn and he sure as hell doesn't want minimum wage. He doesn't see leaving Post as an option, not because he wouldn't want to, but because it just never occurs to him that leaving's even possible. So since each of his choices isn't actually a choice, Mutt decides he'll just go back to what he was doing before Gwenn ever happened.

So Mutt goes to see the V.P.

The V.P. keeps him waiting outside his office for almost an hour, then finally buzzes out front and tells them to send Mutt through. As soon as Mutt walks in, Mutt knows he's in trouble, because the V.P.'s got a new throne, instead of the foldout Big D had said he'd been sitting on. The V.P.'s new throne's got clawfoot legs, trunk-sized arms. The chair he's got Mutt sitting on has legs like twigs and no arms whatsoever. So, the V.P. says.

So, Mutt says. I'm thinking I'd like to give school another chance. *You're* going to give *school* another chance? V.P. says, rolling up one of his sleeves to his elbow. How about *school* giving *you* another chance? Do you think this school would *like* that? Or do you think it's possible this school might be opposed to that sort of thing?

Well, Mutt says, I don't know. I guess I hadn't thought of it that way. What makes you so eager to get back into the classroom all of a sudden? V.P. says, rolling up his other sleeve. Mainly that I'd like to be somebody someday, Mutt says. I mean somebody other than a shelfstocker or a gas station attendant. And you think another semester's worth of trig and American history is going to make you a big shot? V.P. says. Well, that and a diploma, Mutt says. But I never said I wanted to be a big shot. Just not a shelfstocker.

Your parents know you're in here? V.P. asks. No sir, Mutt says. They said you've been working out at the rigs, V.P. says, leaning back in his throne, making a face at Mutt like one of Carson Jr.'s. Rigs get too tough? You decide you're not cut out for a man's work after all?

Sure, Mutt says. Whatever you say. That's right, V.P. says. You take that attitude back into the classroom, too. When Ms. Casares tells you something about Edgar Allan Poe, you don't give her shit about him being boring and dead. You say, sure, Ms. Casares, and you remember what she told you. When Ms. Holly tells you something about isosceles triangles, you don't make a joke about anatomical features that may or may not resemble those triangles—not loud enough for other students to hear, not even just to yourself in your head. You say, sure, Ms. Holly, and you remember it. And when Mr. Saba tells you to

mix x amount of chemical A with x amount of chemical B, you don't throw in some extra chemical C just to see what'll happen. You say, sure, Mr. Saba, and you mix x of A with x of B and you watch what happens and you learn from it and set off absolutely zero fire alarms in the process. You got that?

Sure, Mutt says. Absolutely.

But that's if I were to actually take you back, V.P. says. Did you actually think there was a chance of that? Well, Mutt says, maybe. Why? V.P. says. Mutt says, just trying to be positive, I guess. You are one of the dumbest kids to ever have come out of Post, V.P. says, which is pretty sad, considering your dad was one of the smartest. And me calling you dumb isn't just me being mean—it's a fact, it's statistics, it's your GPA. So I'll let you back, V.P. says, but even with that diploma, I don't think you've got any chance of doing anything outside of stocking shelves.

So that's it? Mutt says. I'm back? That's it, V.P. says. You start tomorrow. In the meantime, get lost.

But instead of leaving, Mutt heads into the cafeteria to look for The Big D to tell him the news. And Mutt's excited, because he's going to become somebody after all, even if he'll never have that jersey. Mutt spots D and the rest of everyone at a different table than usual, along the back wall instead of at the table by the vending machines. D's mowing down on a basket of cheese fries, and telling a story while he does, losing bits of fry every time he gets to a good part. Mutt pulls up a chair, and D stops midsentence, between "ass on the counter" and whatever was coming next. Damn, The Big D says, swallowing some fries. You're back?

Mutt laughs. You better believe it, Mutt says. D says, and the jersey? No jersey, Mutt says, but I'm back. Damn, D keeps saying.

But then someone's telling D to finish, and someone else is asking a question, looking for particulars about some boss from the story. And no one's calling him Big D anymore, just Dean, and when did that happen?

And D's already forgotten Mutt, shoveling another handful of fries into his mouth and getting on with his story. And Mutt's seeing that his return isn't glory like he thought it'd be, just straight tail-between-the-legs. So Mutt gets up and says he's going to get some food, but when he gets to the end of the line he walks straight past it and down the hall and out the door, already hating the thought of coming back in the morning.

And then while Mutt's driving to his parents' house to beg back his room, he gets a seriously stupid idea, although he doesn't acknowledge it yet. The idea just sits there in the back of his head, keeping to itself, not saying much of anything. But later, when Mutt first notices it, and the idea starts talking, he'll realize that it's been there since just now, or maybe even before, maybe since he left Gwenn's in the first place.

So your car's back, his mom says when she opens the door. Mutt's dad is working on his computer at the kitchen table, running numbers. Mutt's mom sits down across from him, signing checks for the bills they've got to pay. So Mutt sits down too.

And Mutt tells them that he'd like to move back in, if that's alright, because he's quitting his job at the rigs and he's going to get his degree.

And then they're just sitting there, not saying a word.

Just until I finish school, Mutt says. Then I'll get a job, start paying my own way.

Mutt's dad takes off his glasses and rubs his eyes. Mutt's mom gets up and stands behind Mutt, putting a hand on his shoulder, and it's the first time she's touched him in maybe a year. Did you hear that? she says. Sure I heard, his dad says. I'm sitting right here. She squeezes Mutt's shoulder and sits back down, looking like she's posing for a photo where she's supposed to be happy. I'm so thankful, she says. I'd just about given up on you—no diploma, and running around with that good-for-nothing woman, with her dealing all those drugs. What woman? Mutt says. And who says she's a dealer? And then I heard you've been living out at the lake, his mom says, and I

thought, that's it, we've lost him for good.

Well I'm proud of you, his dad says. It'll be nice to have you around again. We'll get you that diploma, and then maybe start looking at trade schools or something. Year or two, you'll be making good money. Then he shoves back on his glasses, gets back at the numbers on his screen.

You need any help moving your things back? Mutt's mom asks, getting up to get a carton of juice out of the fridge. No, Mutt says, I can get it myself. One load, no problem.

Which is when Mutt first notices that idea sitting in his head, and he thinks, well shit. And he knows it's bad but he wants to believe it's good. Mainly he just wants to tell Gwenn what he's doing, to tell her that he's getting his degree, that he's got friends again. But what if the husband's there, he thinks. But then he thinks: he's probably not there. But what if he is, he thinks. But then he thinks: but maybe he's not. And maybe Gwenn is, and maybe she's lonely.

So Mutt tells his parents he'll be back with his things, and then he drives across town to what he's starting to realize might not be a mansion after all. And the truck isn't around, so Mutt thinks, see, he's gone. He probably dropped her back off after a day or two, already sick of her drinking. But just in case the husband is around, Mutt parks down the road, then sneaks up onto the porch, peeking in one of the windows, the same one he'd caught the husband peeking in a couple weeks before. But Mutt can't see shit. The lights are off—it might as well be a window into nothing. So Mutt thinks, do I knock, or do I not knock. Then he decides: not knock.

So Mutt just walks right in.

And as soon as Mutt does, he realizes his idea wasn't just stupid—it was about the worst one he's ever had.

All he wants is to never have come, to have meant what he said when he'd told himself that he was never coming back to this place, not for nothing. But here he is, and Mrs. G's on the couch with her husband's hat in her lap, and her skin a weird enough color that Mutt

knows she isn't just sleeping, she's gone.

And shit just everywhere—some of it human's, some of it dog's. And bags of pretzels torn apart, left in shreds near the staircase, and all of the pretzels either missing or crumbs. And a puddle of puke next to the umbrella stand, crusted over.

Carl the Dog? Mutt shouts. And he's not even feeling that bad for Mrs. G, because now all of those hers are gone, and she's finally nothing, not like before, but this time, really nothing. And Carl the Dog comes skulking in from the kitchen, snarling at Mutt. Hey, Mutt says, what the hell's your problem? But Carl keeps barking and snapping. Where's Gwenn? Mutt says. She here? And then he remembers Carson Jr.

And Gwenn's not there, and Mutt realizes that if she hasn't come back yet, she might not ever be coming back—that maybe she's better at meaning the things she says than he is. And he can tell that meanwhile Carl the Dog and Carson Jr. have been fighting for territory in this house that they couldn't get out of—Carson Jr. eating anything he could figure out how the hell to get out of its wrapper or its can, and Carl the Dog doing everything he could to eat Carson Jr. The signs are everywhere. Split-open boxes of macaroni, of oatmeal, of chocolate chip cookies, left scattered across the carpet. A half-chewed sneaker under the dining room table. Claw marks along the frame of the kitchen door Jr.'d managed to get closed.

Mutt tosses Carl the Dog out into the backyard, his hand getting bit in the process. And then he decides to leave, and make an anonymous phone call from the payphone on Main Street to tipoff Tahoka PD that there's a dead body in Post, maybe two.

But even while he tells himself what he thinks he's deciding, instead he opens the kitchen door. Carson Jr.'s inside sprawled out on the floor, eating a handful of uncooked macaroni. His arms and shoulders are covered with bite marks from where Carl the Dog had been nipping at him, and Jr. keeps saying button, which makes no sense, but the way he's saying it, Mutt can tell he's happy to see him.

And Mutt thinks: Mrs. G's gone, and Gwenn's not coming back. And then: so either it's you, or it's no one. And then: goddamn it.

So he carries the boy out to Gwenn's car, and as he does, he's rounding down the grades he would have got, C's to D's, diploma to no diploma. And he runs out to the backyard and opens the side gate so that Carl the Dog can get out, and as he jerks open the latch, he's rounding down everyone he ever knew, Big D from best friend to just Dean, his parents from people who probably love him to people who'd probably rather just have him gone. And then he runs back to the car and they're driving, Mutt's trying not to think about it, but they are, and as they coast past Main Street Carson Jr. pukes all over the passenger door but Mutt's too afraid to stop, because if they lose their momentum now, they're going to lose it for good, and as the car swings onto 84 Mutt's rolling down the windows and Carson Jr. starts crying about the mess he's made, and Mutt's thinking, maybe I'll find her and she'll take him, but then he rounds that down too, because he knows there's no way in hell he's ever going to find that woman, the woman he met on this same road at about this same spot that they're now passing. And then they're farther, farther than most anyone he's ever known has ever been interested in going, driving to someplace new for the both of them, and Mutt feels like he's stripping off a jersey and turning it in, and then another, and then another, until he's pulled off just about every jersey this town had ever taught him to wear, and I don't know how to explain what I thought I was doing, or why I thought we'd get as far as I thought we'd get, but I knew I had to keep driving until we were too far away to come back again even if we wanted to. It's just that if you do something bad enough to a person, sometimes it makes you feel like you want to do whatever you can to make them somebody different, somebody so far removed from that person they were that they won't even feel like what you did to them was to them, but to someone else entirely. Which is what I'm doing. I'm going to fill this kid's head with as many perfect little memories as I can, until they crowd out anything that's left of the feel

of the dog's teeth popping through the skin on his shoulders, or the smell of his dead grandmother, or the taste of the macaroni I'd fed him that I'd topped with my snot instead of the syrup that he wanted. The more that I hate him, the more I'm going to work at it. And I hate him enough already to keep working at it until long after I'm gone. ■

Jorvik

Viking speak: Do you remember Kristen?
You were a research assistant at the hospital, having
recently graduated college. And there was Kristen
on the 4th floor, the most beautiful girl from high school
with a nurse on either side of her walking
down the hall. The Neuropsychiatric Institute
made her flat face look historic, Norse. White fumes
of antipsychotics in the air like ancient tools.
You looked away, Sandra, but
Oh she recognized you from the night you dropped acid
and went to see the *Dark Side of the Moon*
laser show at the planetarium in Hollywood.
I know bodies can survive in peat forever.
I've seen the wheat-colored hair of the bog people
at museum exhibits. I have pressed my cheek to the glass
case of the missing. Kristen, could they be you? Could you?

Writing from the Outside: Caitlin Horrocks on Foreign Settings, the Stakes of Childhood, and Dress Codes for Space Dolphins

"Being in a foreign country, . . . I had to re-think my relationship to language, to my own sense of who I was in the world."

Caitlin Horrocks's first book, a collection of short stories titled *This Is Not Your City* (Sarabande Books), came out in 2011 to critical acclaim. Winner of numerous awards and fellowships, her stories have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Paris Review*, *Tin House*, *One Story*, and have been anthologized in *The Best American Short Stories 2011*, *The O. Henry Prize Stories 2009*, and *The Pushcart Prize XXXV*. In other words, Caitlin has managed to publish in nearly all the top journals and anthologies a fiction writer could hope for, and done so at a young age and in remarkably short order. Says Ron Carlson of *This Is Not Your City*, "Caitlin Horrocks is a stunning writer and these stories mark a brilliant debut."

The following interview took place over a series of emails in early 2012.

J.W. Wang: How goes everything? Any resolutions for 2012?

Caitlin Horrocks: I'd like to spend less time sitting on my butt. This is true in a big-picture way, but I also just mean that huge swaths of my professional life (writing, grading, reading, etc.) are spent sitting in a chair, and that's driving me crazy. So far, I've made myself a stand-

ing desk: I put my laptop on top of a cardboard box that I put on my dining room table. It's classy.

JW: Ever consider one of those kneeling chairs?

CH: An old roommate of mine had one. And one of my colleagues sits on a big balancing ball in his office. I'm open to suggestions.

JW: Can you tell us a little about the novel you're working on?

CH: I've been researching Erik Satie, a French composer and Very Strange Man. A sample: the performance indications in his music, rather than saying "Slow," or "Lento," etc., are commands like "With your bones dry and distant," "Apply yourself to renunciation," or "Without your fingers blushing." He made himself the head of a church he ran out of his apartment, and was an original 19th century hoarder—there were entire scores found buried after he'd died that he thought he'd lost. I still have a lot of unanswered questions as far as making a life into a book—I don't want to plod along, year by year, writing the novel equivalent of a biopic. But he's my subject.

JW: When do you think we should be expecting the novel?

CH: Wouldn't I love to know? No time soon, honestly. Historical fiction has been a whole new challenge. I stop writing every three minutes to look up things about the Franco-Prussian war and 19th century mussel farming in Normandy. Just when I thought my Google search history couldn't get any weirder.

JW: A common criticism the international literary community has for American literature is that it is overly insular, concerned primarily with American domestic issues and failing to address more global topics. A number of stories in *This Is Not Your City* **are set**

outside of the United States—two in Finland, one in Greece, and one in the Gulf of Aden—some with non-American protagonists. You're also making a French composer the topic of your novel. Is there something about dealing with foreign cultures that attracts you as a writer?

CH: Absolutely. Travel means observation, and most of the writers I know have spent at least a portion of our lives being the person leaning against the back wall, watching. Being in a foreign country, especially if you don't speak the language well, or at all, was for me a really intensified form of that. I've been both voluntarily and involuntarily invisible—sometimes I didn't want a store clerk to speak to me in a language I wouldn't understand, and sometimes I wanted very much to participate in the social or professional life around me, and wasn't able to. I had to re-think my relationship to language, to my own sense of who I was in the world. That's the basic, narcissistic side of my interest in other places, that experience of being an outsider.

As an outsider, you notice differences, see things about your native country or language you'd never thought about or articulated. You see different landscapes, different ways of living, different attitudes. You get to hear what people really think of where you're from. You have to look at things from additional angles. I think so much of fiction writing is empathy, so any additional angles the author can take on helps the work.

JW: What are some rewards you find working with these stories you don't find so much with stories set in the U.S.?

CH: There's a big risk that a foreign setting will just be window dressing for a story that could happen anywhere. Even when the characters are under a lot of specifically travel-related stress, I feel like there's a whole genre of Befuddled American Abroad stories that I'm wary of adding to. I'm especially proud of stories I've written where the

characters are of different nationalities than mine, and the places they're living feel really necessary to me as a writer and to the story I wanted to tell. Even in those stories, though, the main characters are still outsiders in some way. I don't know that I've written a story set outside the U.S. with characters who are totally comfortable with where they are. Although, what good character is? That sounds like a pretty boring protagonist.

JW: I think most editors, if they opened up a story and the first thing they saw were pictures and maps and drawings, they'd quickly hit the "no" button.

CH: Probably, although I'd like to think curiosity might get them past apoplexy about the formatting issues. But this was why I originally submitted that story ("It Looks Like This") exclusively to online magazines. I had the perception (fair or not) that those editors would be more open to this kind of story, and that it would be easier to do online than in print.

JW: What made you decide to go against conventional thinking with "It Looks Like This"? (Which, by the way, is as much fun as I've had reading a story in a long while.) Can you tell us a little about the conception and writing of this story?

CH: The story started as the last assignment in a "Forms of Fiction" course in graduate school: Create Your Own Form. I immediately had the idea of doing something illustrated, but then I didn't want it to feel halfhearted or lame. I wanted the pictures to feel necessary to the story, not just take up space. I think that idea, of taking up space, triggered the idea that for the narrator, the pictures are about taking up space, about helping her get through this difficult assignment to write about her life. I was also teaching intro composition at the time, so I'd probably been seeing a lot of papers with two-inch margins and

unnecessarily large pie graphs. In the story, I liked the way the images helped the narrator to be playful in ways she normally wouldn't. They helped me be playful as a writer, in a story that otherwise contains a lot of unhappiness.

JW: You often hear creative writing teachers warning students against writing from a child's perspective, or having children as protagonists. Childhood is one of the major themes in *This Is Not Your City***, with many children playing important, if not protagonist, roles in the stories. What is it about working with these characters and the theme of childhood that attracts you? Any advice for apprentice writers hoping to prove their teachers wrong?**

CH: I think the warning comes from the idea that the stakes aren't big enough in childhood, that the ways kids act and react just doesn't matter to the degree our actions do as adults. I think this is partly a real challenge and partly bullshit.

"Zolaria" is all about childhood, but the full cost of what happens when the girls are young is only revealed when the narrator is older. I snuck into adulthood to make the story work. I've also made young characters older so they could get into more trouble and provide more conflict to the plot. Both of those can feel like a cheat. On the other hand, I tried to be really true to childhood experience in my story "At the Zoo": several of the little boy's sections were cut because the editors thought they seemed implausibly adult. If those bits weren't believable in the context of the story, that's on me, but the things that were cut were often things I remembered thinking, verbatim, as a child. And I wasn't an unusually brilliant kid.

I think children generally exist more deeply, more articulately, than we give them credit for, and it's easy to forget that the problems or concerns that feel small to adults feel overwhelming to them. The writer just needs to find some way to translate that sense of scale to the adult reader. I think Charles Baxter's "Gryphon," Susan Minot's

"Monkeys," Z.Z. Packer's "Brownies," and Julie Orringer's "Pilgrims," all do this wonderfully.

JW: Many writers go for loud explosions and overt conflict. Much of the tension in your stories are psychologically rooted; in other people's hands, these stories probably would've involved bullets and gunfire and all kinds of present action abuse. It's remarkable how you're able to get the readers invested in your characters through careful restraint and not resort to cheap tricks. Can you tell us about your process when figuring out what your stories are about?

CH: I would love to get a gun into a story and have it really mean something. My ambitions include blowing stuff up. But I totally agree that the stories in *This Is Not Your City* are rooted in psychological conflict, rather than physical. In another writer's hands there might have been gunfire, but in other hands, I think even less would happen than in my version. I don't write a lot of action, but I'm really interested in plot, in what readers know when, in how the disclosure of information can be manipulated without it feeling like a cheap trick. I feel like a lot of fiction writers (the ones who aren't blowing stuff up) have just ceded plot to movies or television, or at least novels. I ask my students to think about what short stories do well, about playing to the strengths of the form (and these don't tend to include pyro or world-building fantasy epics), but stories also don't need to be limited to people having sad conversations with their loved ones and coming to uncomfortable realizations about their lives. I mean, my book is full of people having uncomfortable realizations about their lives. But I hope it doesn't feel like those happen in a vacuum of ethereal thought.

JW: I suppose another way to ask this is, do you sit down with a specific conflict in mind, or do you build characters and let them lead you somewhere?

CH: I often have a fragment of both character and conflict, but I never have the whole story charted out. I feel my way through, with one scene or detail suggesting another. Partway through a draft I realize what the ending should be, and then I hope I can convincingly take the reader the rest of the way there.

JW: Having known many people who suffered sexual abuse as children, I was really happy to see that as one of the topics addressed in your book. It's something most people wouldn't touch as a subject, and it's far more prevalent than people would think. What were some considerations you had to deal with when you decided to work this into a story?

CH: I'm assuming you're talking about the story "Steal Small," which started entirely with the half that's now about "bunching" dogs. I love dogs, so this was one of the more terrible things I could imagine people doing. The story started as an exploration of what kind of people could possibly rationalize that cruelty. I ended up with one character who just doesn't see it as a big deal. But the other regrets what she's doing, and as I thought about what her backstory was, I arrived at her sister's sexual abuse. Lyssa already sees this failure to protect her sister as so massive that there's no going back from it, no capacity to rescue anything or anyone anymore, including herself. My main worry, writing the story, was that it would feel too neat and calculated. The parallel between Lyssa's failure to help her sister and her failure to help the dogs is awfully tight. Real life is usually messier, but I hoped the parallel would feel warranted, and relevant. It was also important to me that the sister, in the little bit we see of her, be more of a survivor than a victim. Lyssa's a survivor, too, but in a much more compromised way.

JW: How long do you think Bev is going to keep up her guinea pig blog at http://guineapigcity.tumblr.com/?

CH: Right now, the last entry is January 1, 2012. A date for starting things, not stopping them, but I'm feeling at a loss as to what to do with the blog. I think there's a place in the world (and in Bev's heart) for a blog that posts literally nothing but daily guinea pigs, but the fiction writer in me is screaming that I need to do something with the blog, create some kind of narrative with it. And I don't know what that would be. Part of being a short story writer, rather than a novelist, is that my characters really just stop for me where the story stops. Credit for the guinea pig Tumblr actually goes to a friend and fellow writer Elliott Holt, who suggested it because *The New Yorker* had asked me what happened to Bev after the story ended and I didn't have a clue.

JW: You've lived in so many different places: Phoenix, Ann Arbor, England, Finland, the Czech Republic. What *is* your city?

CH: Right now, Grand Rapids. Which is the entirely dull and factual answer, but I also feel very much at home here. I accepted a job here over the phone, sight unseen, when my partner Todd and I had to make the decision to move across the country while I was sitting in a hotel room in China and he was at our house in Arizona. I'd never been to Grand Rapids, and most of what I'd heard about the city was frankly not positive. Fortunately, most of what I thought I knew was either just wrong or a couple of decades out of date. There's a lot happening here, a lot of energy and momentum and support for art and artists of all kinds (yes, even in rust-belt Michigan). I'm truly happy to be a part of that. It's a great beer town, too.

JW: What's your beer, then?

CH: Bell's Two-Hearted Ale, but since that's made in Kalamazoo, I'll give the honors to Founder's Red's Rye.

JW: So, magical realism. Or something fantastical, anyway. I have

to say I really enjoyed "Embodied," and the mad scientist in "At the Zoo."

CH: Thanks! I've loved a lot of magical realist authors and stories, and it's something I've wanted to play more with in my own writing. I've noticed I respond to it as an editor, too—a magical realist story can fail as easily as any other kind, but it's immediately less likely to bore the reader along the way.

JW: What were some of your past lives?

CH: I do get déjà vu, but only for things it feels like I've dreamed, not lived before. If my lungs and eyesight in other lives were anything like they are in this one I would have died young, repeatedly.

JW: Are space dolphins just . . . dolphins in space?

CH: When we were kids, my sister had school folders with really over the top designs by a "Hawaii-based marine artist" (Christian Lassen, online at http://www.lassenart.com/). Think Lisa Frank with whales. Looking at his website, I don't think his dolphins are actually in space so much as cavorting with orcas and white horses under the stars. But I remembered them as being in space.

JW: Do they wear those air helmet things?

CH: They think they're too pretty. They just hold their breath.

JW: What are you currently reading? Any recommendations?

CH: The last few months I made a real effort to find more time to read, especially newer books. I was mostly successful. I recommend the novels *What You See in the Dark* by Manuel Muñoz and *Swamplandia!*

by Karen Russell. For story collections, Danielle Evans' *Before You Suffocate Your Own Fool Self*, and Roxane Gay's *Ayiti*, were both very good. It's not new, but I read *Let the Dead Bury the Dead* by Randall Kenan a couple of months ago, and it blew my doors off.

JW: Besides more reading and writing, what have you found to be the most useful or inspiring towards your writing?

CH: My novel was partly inspired by Satie's piano music, but that's the first time I've had musical inspiration. I was just creating a playlist for *This Is Not Your City* for a music blog, and realized that there's essentially no music in the entire book. I'm trying not to place new characters in such silence. I've written at least one story inspired by a painting (Monet's "Camille on her Death Bed"), but it was really bad. I have a story inspired by *The Oregon Trail* computer game. Like most writers I know, I try to stay open to anything and everything. I recently watched the Czech film *Something Like Happiness* and it made me want to write, but I haven't figured out what yet.

JW: Any parting advice for us? On duty-free shopping? Visiting roadside attractions? Raising guinea pigs?

CH: On visiting roadside attractions: yes, do this. THE THING?: WHAT IS IT? in Arizona is a treat. (For the overall experience. THE THING? itself is pretty lame.) More generally? I've never been a writer who keeps a regular schedule, who writes every day and studies craft books. That's worked for me so far. But especially as I've tried to transition from writing stories, where I feel like I have some kind of clue, to a novel, where I have none, I've been even more procrastinatory than usual. In that spirit, rather than giving advice, here's some advice from Ann Patchett that I'm trying to take myself right now: "The trick, after all, is not to convince the rest of the world I need to be working. The trick is to convince myself." ■

David O'Connell

Starter Kit

And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,
Went home and put a bullet through his head.
Edward Arlington Robinson

Be it Monday, December, first period and dark yet
another forty minutes, or even Friday, June,
the bell about to ring, it's money in the bank
that nine of ten high school juniors will let loose

an *ooh!* (less shock than satisfaction)
when "slim," "rich" Cory "puts"—not *pounds*,
not *slams*—that "bullet through his head." Thank heaven
for this ringer in an uphill year of Bradford's winter

and Edwards' hell, hell, hell. Praise God all America
gets envy, and, with a little prodding, that someone
will sub Trump or Diddy for Cory, and someone else
will say he saw an *E! True Hollywood* that went riches

to rehab, and after that all hands will bandy theories
why this dreamboat sunk. Ten minutes left,
I wrap things up with Simon's folk rock adaptation
that always has them nodding: *oh I wish*

that I could be / oh I wish that I could be / oh I wish
that I could be / Richard Cory. And if the vibe's right,
I'll take Garfunkel's harmony, my off-key falsetto
getting laughs that dull the pain of questions one

through ten. Dismissed. Still, anyone could do this;
this kit runs itself. Four quatrains and the rhyme scheme.

First person and the last line payoff. Ask: *Why do we learn what we learn in this order?* Ask: *Why is it summer*

in the end? Remember, the job's more sleight of hand,
less therapy. Bell rung, you too will forget
poor Cory, that teachable irony, that jack-in-the-box
reset, waiting again for the catch.

Influence

Bishop, Lowell, sure, but also
Mingus, Hawking, Jung,
and then, too, I heard Woody Allen
this morning confess to this
interior debate he's had for years

about two types of films and which
is more satisfying: movies
that tackle existential questions—
God: *where?* Suffering: *why?*
—or those pure escapist flicks

(*Everyone Says I Love You*, maybe,
or certainly *Bananas*), and Allen says
the former, because they are,
in the critical eye, respectable,
are often a serious *temptation*—

his word—which I, half listening,
daydream-hitched to Eve
and the apple and thought
how language molds us in its image.
Not that I've read much Derrida,

though I confess to stamping
his imprimatur on a few earnest rants
ten years back when, like Foucault's,
his name was ubiquitous as patchouli
and, like patchouli, was almost

always misused. Think *Comedy is tragedy*
plus time, Allen Alda's suspect line
from *Crimes and Misdemeanors*,
the masterpiece of Woody Allen's
mid-career. There, when Martin Landau's

ophthalmologist-killer stares into
the fire (by way of Raskalnikov
and Cain), don't we sense what hangs
in the balance is what remains
unsayable, what waits? Small wonder

most cling to the B-plot: Allen's
humbly bumbling documentarian
losing Mia Farrow to big wig Alda's
unctuous charm. A manageable grief.
Funny, even. And this morning,

eighteen years on, Allen said
he's come to see that comedy
may serve the greater good, if only
since—his words—*like air conditioning*,
it gives us all a break before we face it.

After Another Biopic

If this is a film-worthy marriage,
we're in for trouble. That tight shot,
maybe, where I wince shut the door,
hush hush the caller,
or the hour your fix
cuts our first rush bliss to ribbons,
until, at last, my love miracles
the needle from your arm.

But maybe this isn't that movie at all
and the plot just thickens round my middle
till I'm that 60ish, Irish knit, comb-over
you gaze on fondly
because I'm saying something really tear-jerking
as, side-by-side, the post-production
birdsong teeming, we fly cast for rainbows:
lots of panorama, lots of vista.

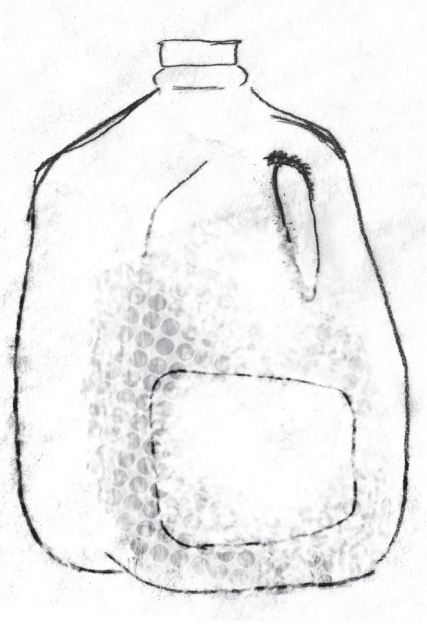
Or maybe that's all opening credits,
and we're more gorgeous than we are,
and I'm way clueless you're an agent
until I come to in the chase scene
as you leave the Mafioso midair
(slow mo)
and without reason:
Boom!

Truth is, most days,
I'm your too-brief-cameo peck
stepping off to teach Romantics,
daydreaming some kid's living that

school-day-soundtrack montage
promising hard streets overcome,
adversity transcended.
Cut

to the carnival at night,
the neon-sunburst Ferris Wheel
where this poor boy sees
his future (the mayor's
only daughter) rising
from the midway to the stars,
his struggle through this formula
just beginning

even as, right now,
you, my love, and I,
are so far from the story
that no one but me
listens for your breath,
blessedly familiar, routine,
as you lay asleep beside me,
and nothing whatsoever happens.



She hopes every morning he awakens and dreads going to work, dreads turning these milk jugs over, dreads seeing the numbers that mean the days when things will end.

Benjamin Rybeck

Shop, Drop, and Roll

She carries out the plan she made months ago: attend the grand opening of the Shop, Drop, and Roll (SDR). The local papers alerted her about this incoming store, as did the ads on television, as did the whispers at work. Lately, things like this have interested her more than ever: new restaurants opening in downtown Portland, or new novelty snacks (cracker on one side, pretzel on the other!). New, new, new: this is what she gets when she enters the SDR, grabs her shopping cart, and glances toward the two TVs hanging above the entrance, once of which shows herself in present tense walking into the store, the other of which shows the parking lot where she imagines a past version of herself still lurks. The SDR might be the newest thing she's ever seen. The SDR—with its white floors that stretch on and on and seem unwalked-upon, maybe even unwalkable; with its Christmas lights streaming over every rack of every aisle—the SDR might as well be a newborn home from the hospital.

To her as a little girl, grocery stores were great mountains, impressive sights. Bright packages of foods she loved stacked—*stacked!* Her father would guide her down the aisles and allow her to point to four things on the shelves that she absolutely wanted, and her father would buy the items, no questions asked. This agreement they had, the two of them. This agreement turned the grocery store into a wild place. Whatever she wanted she got, in the grocery store, and at home.

But the SDR is more than a grocery store. Three full stories packed with food and drinks and electronic equipment and furniture and tractors and minivans and even reproductions of old trains! She has trouble imagining how the small children in the store today experience this place, these sights, this overload of whiteness. Does it all look as

glorious as the grocery store looked to her years ago? She looks around as she pushes her cart down the cereal aisle. She spots a child with light-up shoes and pigtails, pointing to an item she wants on the top shelf. Her father responds unfavorably, swatting the miniature hand from the air. The child looks unfazed, as though getting her hand swatted—and getting other things swatted too—is routine.

Never hit a child anywhere, she'd always thought; not on the face, not on the hand. Never hit a child, no matter how much they misbehave, no matter how much they annoy you, no matter how much you want to, never, ever, *ever* hit a child. Her parents had never hit her. Her parents had been sweet and loving and gentle. Children, she'd always thought, are the purest creatures in the world, and deserve to do what they want without experiencing pain. Discipline should take forms other than the infliction of pain; discipline should take the form of the deprivation of beauty and wonderment, but only for long enough to make the child begin to miss it. But she knew other opinions on the matter floated around the world like ash being taken by the wind. One alarming day, she heard some woman who'd just written a book about child-rearing say on NPR that hitting a child is encouraged until the child is three, because all they understand until then is pain. But this made no sense to her. Surely *she* understood more than pain at three. Surely she understood wonderment too, guiding her father through the grocery store, and picking those items off the shelves like diamonds pulled from a mine.

But today, she pushes her cart through the store but does not take anything off the shelves. She moves through the cereal aisle, and then gazes at the dairy coolers, with the ice cream, milk, etc. etc., while above her noises flash in her ears, the noises of the electronics on the second floor, of large TVs, loud speakers, and blaring videogames. She wonders whether to put something in her cart, to maintain the appearance of shopping. Did she even come here to shop? She's not sure. She tries to decide what kind of dairy products she needs. She traces her fingers across rows of cheese and milk jug caps, and she

cannot decide. She wishes to be more like the man she spots peripherally, reaching repeatedly into the cooler, checking expiration dates of milk. She wishes for that determination. She turns and gets a good look, finding him handsome and familiar. But he's not here to shop. He's here for something else. He wears a blue Oakhurst Dairy polo shirt with a nametag pinned to it. She cannot make out his name, but she can make out his title: Merchandiser. This is why he checks the expiration dates on all the Oakhurst Dairy products, turns them over to confirm their freshness, tracks the milk.

She doesn't need to see his name to know who he is. Bryan Velas. She hasn't seen him in a long time, and really, it's pure luck she sees him today, but it's Bryan Velas all right, and everything that made him popular in school remains: the Prince Valiant hair (on the edges of which premature grayness now creeps); the muscular chest (which a flabby stomach now underlines); the small feet which, folks said, made him a ballerina on the basketball court. She knows Bryan by all these things. She wonders by what he might know her if he only turns her way.

What might he remember about her? 6th grade, when she decided to write notes to the people she met with text like, "Hello, my name is Melissa, what's your name?"; or 7th grade, when she wrote a note for Bryan Velas and he showed his friends, and they passed it around writing the most vulgar things they could think of at the bottom of it; or 8th grade, when, for multimedia class, each group needed to make a video, and Bryan and his friends decided to shoot a video called *Melissa Explains It All* in which they made fun of her for having "magical powers," for being able to "communicate with the dork dead through lame-ass notes," and when Bryan and his friends followed her around with this camera for a month, videotaping her in some embarrassing situations, like whistling in the lunchroom and moving her head back and forth as though dancing to her sandwich, and when the boys *of course* got in trouble for making this video, but not before screening it for a classroom containing 50 of her peers? Everybody

knew her. Everybody in school knew the girl with the magic powers. The girl who wrote the magic notes. But, she figures as she watches Bryan Velas check more expiration dates, he probably won't remember any of this, and he probably won't recognize her even if he turns her way. It doesn't matter, anyway. She can't remember anything about him, apart from what he did to her—in middle school, and later on. She can't remember if he got into an Ivy League school. She can't remember if working for Oakhurst Dairy—his father's company—was something he'd always wanted to do. But she hopes he is dead-end. She hopes every morning he awakens and dreads going to work, dreads turning these milk jugs over, dreads seeing the numbers that mean the days when things will end. She hopes he checks for his own expiration date in the mirror every morning. She hopes he looks for it in his eyes, in his mouth, in his fingertips. She hopes he looks for it and wishes, *wishes*, it's sooner than he thinks. Maybe if she had hit Bryan Velas and his friends in middle school they would have learned. Maybe if she hadn't just tried to turn the other way and ignore them, but had instead whaled on them, giving them smacks on their foreheads, giving them kicks in their stomachs—maybe they would have become ghosts to her. Or maybe his parents should have done this. Maybe there's something to be said for hitting.

She keeps close to Bryan Velas as he moves on from the milk to check the cheese. She wants him to notice her, to look right at her. She wants him to see that she's older now, just like him, although her hair isn't going grey yet, and her stomach is still reasonably flat. He reaches into the cooler and pulls out another jug of milk and turns it over and then puts it back. He pats down his body until he finds a notepad that he withdraws from his pocket. Then, he looks to the floor, up and down the floor, as though looking for something else he dropped. And for a moment, he looks right at her, and he holds his eyes on her for a second, and she freezes. She's like a child again: in the grocery store, she gets what she wants. But now, with Bryan Velas's eyes on her, she doesn't want this recognition anymore. She wants to

hide inside her shopping cart and curl up like an item somebody has taken off the shelves.

But nothing lights up in his eyes: not recognition, not pain, not anything. This look: is it the same look she remembers him giving that morning after the accident, when his parents came to pick him up, when his dad, his shoulders broad as though always wearing a padded blazer, came to pick him up and led him out of the gymnasium by the hand, as though guiding his son to a safe place back home, away from the eyes that watched him as she lay crumpled on the floor, feeling like she might die, soaked in the cold sweat that came when she went into shock, pain rippling like an earthquake through her body and cracking her skin—is this the same look he gives her now? Well, she was 16 back then, and 14 years later, she can't quite remember. She wishes she could remember.

Because after all of that, time sped up for her a little bit. She left Portland for Tucson at 18 to go to college, and on the new campus, she became a new person. Not because she made up stories, but because she refused to answer most questions. She recognized that part of her downfall in middle school was answering every question with complete honesty. (Melissa, what *on earth* are you doing? I'm rocking out to my sandwich!) She vowed, in college, to never lie, but to simply *shut up*. Myths cropped up by senior year. She became popular because of what people *thought* they knew. They heard she performed with a circus family. But no: she used to have dreads and follow around the Smashing Pumpkins. A groupie. But no: not just any groupie! A sexless groupie! Because some of them heard she lacked a vagina. She possessed the sort of past she'd always wanted: magical, dangerous, absurd, full of daring escapes through windows, snow angels in fields, and banana-colored boys. But she wanted more than this too. She wanted a child. But the doctors told her, at 18, that the worst was true: she could never have a child. She wanted to be artificially inseminated, but the doctor chewed on the metal part of his eraser and told her, Impossible. She took the brochures and pamphlets

from him that day anyway, as though she just needed to research the situation thoroughly. Surely, she could find a loophole here; surely she could find a way out of her own body. She carried the bag of brochures and pamphlets back to her dorm room and set them on a chair at the fold-out card table she ate upon, and she named the bag Thomas. The dining room became Thomas' room, and Melissa slept in a sleeping bag on the floor. She told him her story. After years of avoiding herself, she told Thomas who she *really* was. She knew this looked crazy; but nobody watched her anymore, and sometimes it felt nice to talk to something.

Now, with Bryan Velas's eyes on her, she needs to make a decision. She should run away? Should she speak to him? Should she ram her shopping cart into him and throw him to the floor and give him the beating he deserves—the beating his parents should have given him years ago, when he only understood pain? Usually, she avoids decisions. She goes months without opening her mail because opened mail asks her to decide: pay this bill on time or not on time, renew subscription or cancel subscription. She has not even picked anything off the SDR shelves.

But she doesn't need to make any decision, because he just says to her, Excuse me, and she backs up, out of his way, and he reaches past her, grazing her arm with his fingers as he searches out another jug of milk. His fingers curl around the handle, and he lifts the expiration date to his eyes, and she backs off, her body feeling rubbery, that fleeting feeling of his fingers still hot on her arm. She stumbles backward like a drunk person, and stares at him as he puts the jug of milk back, as he picks up another one, as she becomes invisible to him once more. She wants to swat at her arm, his touch now a mosquito drinking her blood; she wants to swat that feeling of him away. She hasn't been touched by anyone for a couple years now. Not since moving back to Portland at 24. The last time was her coworker in the bookstore whom she took to her car and climbed on top of, and he came so quickly he didn't even have time to spit out his gum. Number

30 for her; 30 in six years. The first time for her, she was 18, and he was 18, and he lived across the hall in her Arizona dorm room, the boy whom she used to spot picking his nose when he thought nobody could see. They did it on his couch, him on top, him fumbling with the condom, and her putting her hand over his and guiding it away from the wrapper and telling him, Don't worry about that. He didn't protest in the way she thought he might. He just slid into her, and it didn't feel nice; it felt like work. Boys in the dorms, boys in her classes, a handful of professors, coworkers at the bookstores in both Tucson and Portland where she's worked since graduating college: she targeted them, often providing the condom herself—the condom she had pierced with a needle earlier that afternoon. She could get outside of her body. If enough boys fell upon her, surely the problem would not stick; surely one of them could get her pregnant. But the doctors were right. She tried, tried, tried, but she could not fucking do it; she could not get pregnant.

Of course, Bryan Velas was handsome; he still is handsome, really, his hands still rugged (even though his skin looks a little dry), his jaw still gaunt (although softened by a bit of a double chin). Sometimes, with the boys on top of her, she thought of him, not mocking her, not hurting her, not ruining her life, but running his hands through her hair, and moving inside her, and biting her ear. Sometimes she thought that for all the boys she found herself with, they all should have been Bryan Velas. After all, he was the reason she could not have a child. Shouldn't he have been the one to climb atop her time after time? Shouldn't he have been the one to set things right? And for a second here, she lets herself sink into it, the dream of family. A miracle, a miracle! the doctors would have cried as they handed her baby boy to her—as they handed Thomas to her—and as she handed that child up to Bryan Velas, standing over her, smiling. A child the two of them would have raised. And a child they never would have hit. A child she would have taken to the grocery store, to the Shop, Drop, and Roll, and walked down the aisles with, and picked out the

groceries with. A child whose hand she never would have smacked down, no matter where it pointed.

She swears a spider crawls on her arm, and she swats at her skin, but there is nothing there. The tingling: it was just the feeling of Bryan Velas's touch leaving her body. It's just the feeling of world coming back to her, of the dream disappearing once again.

One minute later, she leaves the SDR. The sunlight looks dim to her. She rubs her eyes—a little too hard, maybe, because her left one keeps itching, keeps feeling dry, like she hasn't blinked in weeks. She pauses for a second at the front of the store, looks at the pine trees around her, still full in the winter, still green and mountainous. Cigarette smoke curls to her nose. She smoked a cigarette once in college. It almost knocked her over, made her see the world momentarily through a candle flame. She spots the smokers: a teenage boy and a teenage girl who look identical, with black hair and septum piercings, wearing the SDR uniforms, the blue khakis and tan t-shirts and striped bowling vests. They declare a thumb war as they smoke. He wins.

She moves away from the front of the store and feels better, except for a leak of guilt over leaving her shopping cart in the middle of the aisle. Usually she makes a point of cleaning up after herself wherever she goes. At friends' places in college, she stayed late to do the dishes. At restaurants, she stacked her plates before the waiter came to take them away; she wiped down the table with a napkin too. She never wanted to cause additional stress. But now who tries to alleviate *her* stress? If she'd left her college friends with a huge mess after every party, so what? If she'd been rude to every waiter or waitress she'd ever seen, would it have changed anything? If she had fought back against Bryan Velas, would he have stopped? If she had had that child, and the way to stop him from becoming Bryan Velas was to hit him, then she would have begun the first day she got him home. She would've made a fist in her room and brought it down. The second day, she would've returned with a broom handle. The third day, a

belt. She would have beaten Thomas until he bruised, until he cried, until his life was ruined, until he hated her and would later spit out how much he hated her in his adult voice, cursing his mother for the abuse—but at least he would be kind. She would've beaten him every day to keep him kind.

The sunlight hurts her back. Sometimes this happens. The pain returns to her at odd times, no matter how many of the pills she takes in the morning, no matter how much over the recommended dosage she flies. She wipes at her face. All her movements feel slow. It takes minutes for her hand to climb to her forehead, then for her palm to turn over, then for it to wipe across her skin. And such an ordeal, her labored-over steps, each one a decision.

She sees the Oakhurst Dairy truck—not one of the big 18-wheelers that sometimes drive round Portland, but a small truck used for minor pickups and deliveries. The logo of the dairy, the smiling acorn with beautiful teeth, streaks across each door. She approaches the truck and stares at the acorn. Stupid smile. The truck isn't too high, so she turns and looks into the side mirror. She smiles, trying to do it like the acorn, but just looking foolish, looking like somebody who isn't accustomed to smiling. Her smile looks like a lopsided gash in a basketball. She feels like she's looking into a funhouse mirror: her smile is really not that ugly; her body is really not that wide; she is really not that tall.

She flattens her palm against the side of the truck and feels its vibrations. The smell of exhaust becomes strong to her. It surprises her that she didn't notice it before. The truck warms her palm, and she looks through the window, to the front, and she sees someone sitting there: a little boy, in the passenger seat, close to her, separated only by the inch or so of glass. Her guess about his age: four years old. He has been watching her as she scrutinizes herself in the mirror. When her eyes meet this boy's, he smiles like he sees a clown. And she cannot help smiling back, because when a child smiles at you, *always* smile back. She touches her teeth and the child touches his. She puts her index finger against her temple and the child does the same. She makes

a face—a grimace, like a monster face, mouth contorted and opened wide—and the boy makes the same face. The boy mimics her every action. Although the boy's young, he must understand she needs a mirror. So he obliges her.

After a minute of this, she stops trying to be funny and stares at the boy. Yes, she sees the resemblance; the boy *does* look a bit like his father, with his tousled blonde hair longer than the hair on most small children, with strands falling down his forehead, making him an unusually sultry four-year-old. This past version of Bryan Velas smiles at her. This version of Bryan Velas before they met in middle school, before the abuse, before the mockery, before the accident. This version of Bryan Velas that just wants to smile and open his eyes, just wants to be a mirror for somebody badly in need of one. Seeing this past version of him makes her detest the present version even more. He leaves his son in the truck? This is the most offensive thing Bryan Velas has ever done. Eclipses everything he ever did to her. Leaving his son in the truck. Not taking his son inside to show him the store, all the cleanness, all the colors, all the people rushing round with wide eyes. What is there to see in the parking lot? Wonders lie within the SDR—wonders Bryan Velas hides from his son, forcing the boy to sit in the vehicle and stare straight ahead.

She cannot let this be the case. She cannot let this boy stay cut off from the world inside. She cannot let Bryan Velas make of his own child what he tried to make of her. So she tries the door; it's locked. She tries again, and now, for the first time, the boy stops looking amused, and instead his eyes widen. She struggles, pulls hard as she can. When it becomes clear this will not work, she bangs on the window. The boy jumps but still watches her. Hey, she says. She knocks on the window twice more. Come out. Unlock the door. Let me take you inside. Do you want to come out? She expects an answer to this question. Yes or no. She wants yes or no. If the boy does not wish to come out, that's fine, she will leave him inside the truck, she will leave him alone, no harm done. She believes in respecting the wishes of children. But the

boy needs to answer her at least; otherwise, how will she know? She needs her answer. So she bangs again, harder this time, and pulls on the door handle, letting go and hearing the plastic snap back into place. She keeps trying, snapping the handle, knocking the glass. Hey! Answer me! Do you want to come out? But still, the boy remains impassive. She doesn't understand. How can the boy *not* be ecstatic that somebody has arrived to free him? He's been locked in here for so long now, kept away from the fun inside, kept away from all the excitement a child should be allowed to see. How is he *not* unlocking the door; how is he *not* tumbling like a basketball from within; how is he *not* rolling into the parking lot quickly, freely, ecstatically?

When she was little, her father always gave her the choice before he went into the grocery store: come in, or stay here. She always chose *come in*. Why would she want to sit in the car and stare at a parking lot when she could go inside and look at the colorful things on the shelves, and run her hands over the vegetables, feeling the stony texture of the ears of corn, the smooth texture of the bell peppers, the grainy texture of the broccoli—or the powdery texture of her father's hand as he wrapped it around her own and led her through the aisles? Nowhere else did he hold her hand but in the grocery store. That place joined her and her father together like two halves of the same person—as though the great silence that filled her home normally, where her mother and father never spoke and never kissed—as though, in the grocery store, this great silence served a purpose, because no noise needed to be made, no secrets needed to be told, because father and daughter already shared everything when they walked down the aisles. After all, why tell a secret to yourself?

She wants to give this to the child. She wants to take his hand and guide him through the store. She wants him to see. She bangs the window with both fists, and kicks the side of the truck, and shrieks, Yes or no? Yes or no? The boy closes his eyes as though playing dead. He crosses his arms. His chest rises and then falls like a leaf whenever he breathes, because he breathes deeply, heavily. Yes or no? Falls like

a leaf.

By now, the others in the parking lot—all the people loading up their minivans with the day's purchases—have noticed the incident: the crazy woman banging on the door to the truck, shrieking, that crazy woman who, a few of the shoppers had noticed, just walked through the store and stared at children but didn't actually buy anything or put anything in her cart. Inside the store, the security team—consisting of overweight ex-cops with mustaches and red, sweaty faces—notices the incident on the store cameras and swings into action, moving out the door—moving past Bryan Velas, who has finished checking the expiration dates and is leaving the store himself, unimpressed and knowing he needs to move along to the next stop on his route. The store confused him and he's lost track of time. He does not know how long his son has been waiting in the truck. And he still doesn't know how to answer his question: Bricks or wood? This is what the boy asked him as they pulled into the parking lot that afternoon, and Bryan Velas did not know the context, and did not know to what this question referred; he guessed the boy had heard his father saying those words on the phone earlier that day (probably while discussing the renovation plans for the house, which plans he hopes to have the money to get started on pretty soon), but the whole time in the store, the question has haunted him. Bricks or wood? Bricks or wood? And he's still thinking about it—still trying to decide how to answer—when the security guards storm by him and almost knock him over. Other people in the store notice, and the other moms and dads rush out to the parking lot. *Maybe it's my child*, these people must think. *Maybe I shouldn't have left him in the car while I came inside to shop.* And when Bryan Velas gets outside—when the sunlight feels cold on his forehead, shines dimly on the pavement; when, compared to the white light inside, it seems like midnight out here—he sees the cluster of people, shoppers and security guards, descending upon his truck, *his truck*, and he sees his son in there as the woman screams at him—as the crazy woman screams at him. But he knows this woman, doesn't

he? He recognized her in the store, but that shame he felt when he saw her—when he turned and looked *right at her* and then could only gather the words Excuse Me together—froze him. He had friends who sometimes saw her around town, but he himself never saw her around town, and he thought if he'd avoided it for six years, he was bound to avoid it for some time. But there she was in the store, and in that moment he froze, in the moment he muttered Excuse Me, he thought of that day, just as he's thought of that day every day for the last 14 years: the laughter amongst his friends and himself upon seeing that the new girl coming in to try out for cheerleader was Melissa; when the group of them high-fived when they watched Melissa try to let herself be grabbed tightly enough to be lifted into the air (she kept instinctively trying to wiggle away from whichever established cheerleader touched her); and finally, when Bryan Velas threw his basketball toward the court. He was an excellent shot. He knew the ball would miss Melissa by exactly one foot. He didn't want to hit her. He just wanted to startle her. But what he didn't know was that, in the 5 or so seconds the basketball took to fly across the court and bang against the wall behind the girls, Melissa lifted one of the girls up (part of her training), and held her in the air over her head for only a couple seconds before the basketball slammed against the wall and Melissa, spooked by the noise, loosened her arms, and let the girl fall down. Oh, that *other* girl was fine. Led the team to victory in a cheerleading competition later that year. She was fine because she landed on Melissa, her 120 pounds slamming down upon the girl who wrote all those notes, crushing her back against the basketball court. That afternoon, when his dad came to pick him up and take him home, Bryan Velas didn't want to leave; Bryan Velas had this strange feeling like he wanted to stay there, like he wanted to help Melissa. He knew it was his fault. His friends told him it wasn't his fault. That Melissa was just unlucky. That some people *are* just unlucky and nobody can do anything about it. The school administration told him it wasn't his fault. Even Melissa's parents published a letter in the local paper

that said it wasn't the basketball player's fault. But that day, it *was* his fault, because his dad told him so when he got his son home, when he pushed him across the room, when he told him how his son's life was ruined, how his future was fucked, how he was never going anywhere now. Never mind that nobody else seemed to blame him (an unfortunate accident: these precise words most people used), and never mind that when he married that cheerleader two years later, the one who had crushed Melissa, he felt for a brief while like his life wasn't fucked, like things were okay after all—never mind that, because that day on the floor of his house, his dad made it his fault, and his dad made him pay for it with books hurled against the walls, with banshee screams, with a belt.

So Bryan Velas cannot move at the door, cannot walk forward, can just stand there, as commotion rages around him, just as it had that day years ago. Can he save his child? The security guards rush forward. He freezes by the door and watches. He does not know if he can save him. He does not know if he should. Some part of him thinks that he deserves whatever happens. Some part of him, thinking of that afternoon with his father, believes he should stand there and watch, and let this woman consume his child, consume his life. That much he deserves. With the crushing force of the back of a hand landing hard against his face, he realizes that he deserves whatever happens to him today.

But just before the security guards have reached the truck and pulled this woman away, he sees that his boy, as though intuiting something, as though sensing it's time to open his eyes, *opens his eyes*, and looks to the store, and looks at his father. And Bryan Velas, for the first time in a long time—since the boy's birth, since the accident on the highway killed his young ex-cheerleader wife and split the boy's head, leaving him with a permanent scar and only peripheral vision in one of his eyes, since finally accepting, at the age of 30, that he would work at Oakhurst Dairy for the rest of his life—Bryan Velas feels like the two of them, father and son, are completely safe, and like nothing

in the world will ever touch them, because in a moment of crisis, the first thing the boy does is open his eyes and look directly at his father. Bryan Velas knows what this means for them. The boy will come to his father. The boy will tell his father things. No silence will separate them. The world will be a pair of cupped hands for a long time now.

But Melissa knows nothing of this. She cannot see anything but the boy, with his eyes now open, her words now getting through to him, busting down the door that kept them apart, breaking open the window. Yes, she knows, her words did all of this, roused the child from his slumber. She knows that this boy will remember her as the one who helped when nobody else would. He will remember her although his father does not. This much she knows when she asks the boy in the truck, Yes or no? And when the boy opens his eyes and looks behind her, staring with wonder at the SDR as though it's a pile of gems—when the boy does this, she stops banging on the window and forgets how to move. She can have a child. This can be her child. This is the child she and Bryan Velas were meant to have together. Yes or no? In this breathless moment before the guards dash her against the door, she gets her answer. ■

Jack Miller

Feast of Excited Insects
i: Spring's First Thunder

> "This is the time when, as the Chinese say, 'the dragon raises his head.' The lordly dragon goes into hibernation in September in the form of a tiny creature, and thus remains unobserved till he calls the insects to life. On the day of the 'Excited Insects' certain fetishes are displayed to placate them."
>
> — *Chinese Creeds and Customs*
> by Valentine Rodolphe Burkhardt

The bullroarer call: I know its wellspring,
and bear that dubious privilege
like a child born blind with flashlights
for fingers.

Fluids thaw to course
beneath chitinous shells,
a static of tiny heartbeats
mistaken for
a fervent whisper.

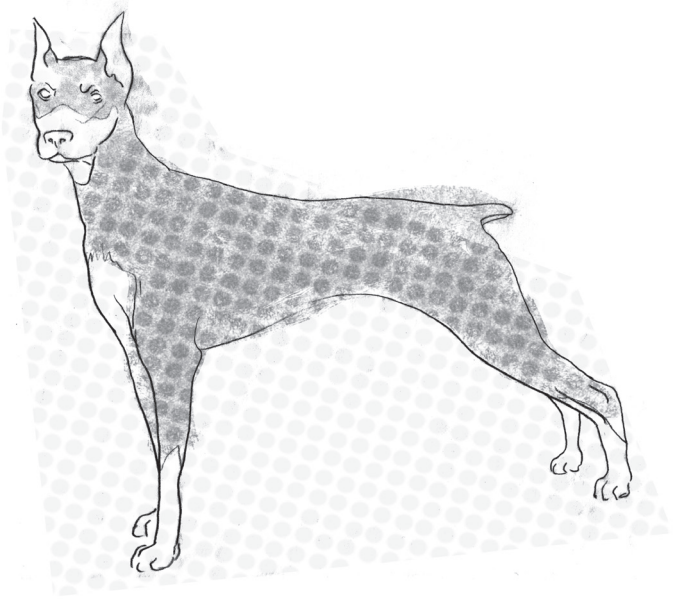
Academic the particular alchemy
of the dragon's waking yawn,
the prickly ionic unrest
that gathers

as you cleave the unanimous air
to reach for a coffee cup,
eddying motes of dust in

carousel currents;
galvanic accretion

in the reproachful hush of a black dress
as you burrow deeper for warmth.
Then release: tectonic shifts
find voice in

the rustle of eye beneath lid,
and subterranean bruises
surface with a rumble
too low to hear
that rouses the swarms.



This is the hardest part. Not because he likes dogs,
but because they're moving around.

Todd Grimson

Fingered by the Marshmallow

Dragsters are the fastest race cars on the planet, lately hitting up to 230 miles an hour in their short, quarter-mile races. It's an art form for connoisseurs, each endeavour lasting only about six seconds or so, fueled by nitro, one on one, "Big Daddy" Don Garlits and all the rest, competing against the laws of physics, against the limitations of matter itself.

Jack listens patiently, there in his living room, while Bobby shares all manner of drag racing lore. Most of this is unnecessary, but Jack is patient. And Bobby gets a kick out of talking about this stuff.

Bobby "the Marshmallow" Marshall drove both dragsters and funny cars there in 1967, '68, making more money with funny cars—he had one that looked like a Pontiac GTO he did pretty well with—but his heart was always in dragsters, that was the ultimate for him.

The wreck that burned him up happened in Santa Ana, in a slingshot dragster, when the clutch disintegrated, engine over-revved, and the Marshmallow bounced end over end engulfed in white-hot flames.

His career is over now, and he's become addicted to Demerol, supplemented with heroin now and then. He doesn't like heroin as much, however, because those who manufacture it don't care too much about quality control. In other words, out of nowhere, without warning, you might drop dead from an O.D. But his nerve-endings are either dead or constantly jangling with pain.

Last night Jack treated Bobby to a local prostitute, who danced slowly to Elvis singing "Love Me Tender" with a black blindfold securely in place. She did not flinch when Bobby touched her with his left hand claw. She was high. She smiled. Jack left them alone, smoking cigarettes and watching television in the next room.

When Candy came out, an hour or so later, no longer blindfolded, Jack gave her a very large tip. She accepted the cash, looking at him with red-rimmed eyes, no words. Jack could not hold her stare.

Bobby strolled out sometime little later, looking around, saying, "It looks like you've been reading books on the fall of the Roman Empire. This help you understand America these days?"

"I don't think like that," Jack said, which made Bobby laugh and then start to cough. His lungs are shot since inhaling all those flames.

Jack had known him before the wreck. He had been at the track now and then, betting against the damn fool and generally cleaning up.

Bobby knows the innovative cam grinder, Chuck Girard, who has gambling debts from Lake Tahoe he apparently thinks he can put off indefinitely, because it was a "private game."

Girard has barricaded himself in, on his five acres up near Bremerton, Washington, with his Dobermans and semiautomatic weapons, trip mines, land mines and bouncin' bettys, at least that is the word.

Chuck Girard is working on something special, a revolutionary new chassis, and people are curious. If anyone might show up with an incredible innovation and amaze everyone in 1969, it's Chuck Girard.

The Marshmallow (the "Marshmallow Roast," some called his notorious wreck) has made a deal to betray Girard, without too many second thoughts it would seem, for a thousand bucks.

The next day, Bobby spends some time on the phone.

Everyone always needs a backer, and the cover story is that the Marshmallow is going to introduce Chuck Girard to a backer, a guy who's backed some dragsters down on the Florida circuit, a guy who works for NASA and is interested in the pure aerodynamics of the problems involved. This will be Jack's role.

Now, Marshmallow gives Jack a smile. It's funny: as burned up and grotesque as he is, he's not shy. He still has a certain optimism, even. Maybe it's the Demerol. Sometimes Demerol-addicts get the heebie-jeebies, but this doesn't seem to be the case with Bobby Marsh.

Jack was once awarded a Bronze Star. A couple of Purple Hearts.

That was a long time ago. He remembers two blue-eyed German teenagers with their hands high up in the air, seeking to surrender, standing there next to the road. He and Frank were hurtling and bumping along the bad road in their jeep, smoking Lucky Strikes. But the POW camp would have them going right at the next crossroads, and he and Frank were in a hurry needing to turn left.

"Ja, ja. Danke."

The German boys sat precariously on the front of the jeep. Frank looked at Jack, frowned. Jack looked at Frank. Yeah. They weren't going to leave these guys loose wandering around.

Okay, let's do it. It's all set. Chuck buys it, Bobby says.

"He still might search us," Jack remarks.

Marshmallow nods. Smiles. What a smile. He seems enthusiastic about the business, as if, within reason, this expedition will be fun. He has faith in Jack's expertise.

Jack says, "I'm guessing he won't look under your balls. This is a .38 with a two-inch barrel. We'll use some electrical tape so it won't fall out of your ass. When I give you the signal, you go to the bathroom, come back and give me the gun. You positive Chuck's still a drinking man?"

"Drinks like a fish, always has. Only thing that improves his disposition, the sonofabitch."

They drive up to Bremerton from Portland, which takes two and a half hours, and commence following the complicated instructions away from the highway to the home of Chuck Girard.

The place isn't as big as Jack expected. Or at least, from this side it doesn't give the impression there's a lot of land to spare for raising sheep or planting corn. The big barn back over yonder must be where he works on his engines. The mad scientist's secret lab.

Girard is a runty guy with a Luger and three fucking Dobermans. He pats Jack down and Jack says *What the hell?* like he's surprised.

"I've got enemies," Girard says.

No, he doesn't do more than a very cursory check of the Marsh-

mallow.

"Sorry," Girard says, as he puts his Luger into a holster worn on his belt and only now moves to shake Jack's hand.

"Glad to meet you," Jack says, remembering he's supposed to work for NASA, prepared to respond to any questions, but they're left unasked. The Marshmallow Man has a brown paper bag with an unopened bottle of Jim Beam.

"Now you're talkin'," Girard says, with a grin. "Let's go in the house. We can go out to look at what I'm doing later on, if it sounds halfway interesting to you."

They walk up a little hill to the plain white frame house. Skeeter, Chuck's wife, is introduced. The dogs stay outside.

Skeeter is an unhandsome woman, friendly but a little shy. She attends to chores in the kitchen while the men drink and talk, sitting in the living room.

Marshmallow has briefed Jack, and he's a quick study, but luckily once Chuck Girard has had a drink he can't stop talking, as though he's had it all pent up, waiting for an audience, and he just goes on and on.

How the engine is the key variable, but the chassis is important for getting hold of the race track. Damn right.

"It's a matter of matching your horsepower to what the track will take. You can overpower any surface," Girard says, "but if your car bogs coming off the starting line it'll probably do a wheelie, and you're screwed. The driver can't pedal and play games—it's got to be hammered every time. People have been talking about controlled slippage, the slider clutch, for years now, but I think I've got something new. A 'planetary' transmission. You ever hear of that? Makes it so you can upshift on the top end. The thing to do is test it and get the bugs out, make it reliable. Wait'll after we eat, I'll show you what I'm up to. I've got a proto I'd like to run down at Woodburn in a month or so, but after that the cat'll be outta the bag."

Jack nods appropriately and feels completely relaxed. Everything is going very well. Chuck seems pretty full of himself.

Marshmallow gets Girard talking about famous crashes, and then they drift back into such arcane topics as *heat sinks* and *killing the torque*.

Jack finds all this detail boring, but he isn't bored.

He's keenly alert to every nuance of the atmosphere, the mood.

Dinner is served.

Skeeter sits down with them at the dining room table. Chuck says grace and they eat pork chops and candied yams and green beans from the garden, fresh-baked biscuits—it's a good old-fashioned homecooked meal. But before it's done (Jack doesn't want Skeeter to be bustling about clearing the table) the sign is given, and Bobby looks perplexed for a moment, his shiny pink bald head, pale blue seemingly lidless eyes . . . but he excuses himself, goes to the bathroom, and when Jack hears the toilet flush he says, "Be right back," dabs at his mouth with a napkin, and gets up to meet Marshmallow in the hall.

He takes the gun from him, removes the safety, then strolls up quickly and puts it to Chuck Girard's left temple and blows his head apart before Chuck even has time to be alarmed.

"Sorry, honey," Jack says, and shoots Skeeter, poor unlovely woman with a halfassed beehive, shoots her basically right through the heart. She hasn't screamed or yelled, just gasped, but now she falls backward out of her chair and somehow takes her plate with her, making an inglorious mess. She noisily farts before she dies.

"Whew, that was fast work," Bobby Marshall says, nervously, admiringly, and Jack shoots him in the forehead.

He sits down then and takes off his right shoe, fetches some more bullets from a hollow space under the lining going down into the heel. He reloads, and goes to the front porch. As anticipated, the Dobermans are here, in a state of maximum alert, not barking, milling around. Damn. This is the hardest part. Not because he likes dogs, but because they're moving around. He doesn't want to just wound one and then have it try to bite him as he leaves.

Jack has an idea. There are more pork chops in the frying pan. He sets this out on the porch, beyond the screendoor, with extreme care,

and the dogs are interested . . . even if they're still skittish from the earlier noise. Though hell, Girard probably shot off guns here all the time. He seemed the type. And his nitro-fed drag racing engines had to be awfully loud.

The dogs go down, one two three. Jack puts an extra bullet in the head of one he's not absolutely sure of, it was still twitching one of its paws there for a sec.

Now to clean up.

The gun goes in Chuck Girard's right hand, or rather, thrown clear a bit, after first being wiped clean and then smudged with the man's prints.

Some kind of domestic dispute. Girard must have killed them both, Bobby and Skeeter, and his dogs too, so they wouldn't be lonely, killing himself to finish things off.

No fingerprints. Jack washes his glass, his plate and silverware, dries them, puts them away. Takes Girard's Luger and almost decides to steal it, but calculates it might be known and possibly missed. Puts it in the bedroom closet, up in a shoebox.

Now leave. The dogs all stay dead. Jack has been careful not to track blood, but if he misstepped he's not too worried. So what if by the time the cops come, it looks like some local yokel got curious and had a look around.

There's nothing else particularly in his head as he leaves. He hears some birds, some crickets down here by the road. He feels good.

He's not thinking about playing blackjack, drinking bourbon, or some blond prostitute with soft breasts.

Maybe he hears North Dakota when he was eight years old. Maybe he sees some abandoned barn full of bullet-holes, landscape overgrown with brambles and weeds. A scarecrow trampled and maimed.

Is that a crow up on that wire? It speaks to him, sarcastic as any crow in bomb-blackened Germany. Pecking out the soft blue eyes of a dead kraut.

The sky here is the same, it smells the same, rubber and some kind

of wood burning, meat somewhere, black plume of smoke bending horizontal, squandering its form. Somewhere there must be all sorts of old buildings burning down.

Jack starts his car. He sits there for a moment, adjusts the rear-view mirror.

A few days later, some quantity of alcohol in his system, he's in a motel room on the outskirts of Vegas, sleepless, looking outside without opening the window at the slow-to-nonexistent traffic, remembering that look of unsurprise on the Marshmallow's face. Remembering that face.

"Honey, can't you sleep?"

This is from Debbie, no it's Vickie, maybe Candy, who he's known for six, seven hours now at least. Or maybe it's been longer than that. Jack stares at a slowly moving Lincoln Continental, maybe wine-red, cruising slowly, slowly, like a shark, through amber-tinged ruins.

They know where he is.

Everyone deserves it. Everyone. Every time. ■

Jeff Tigchelaar

Metallica & I

It turns out
they've both been to shows. He
saw them way back—like, *way* the hell back—
back before they were known, back
before they were really even Metallica.
Back in some guy's garage or something.
Back, in fact, when what's-his-name was still with them . . .
But she's barely listening. She,
for the moment, has retreated
to a private personal distance,
a joyous yet foggy place
she loves to revisit.
At best, she nods
at his little
anecdote
before launching right into her own Metallica tale:
how *she* knew someone who somehow
knew so-and-so, who someway got them all in
and then—
and then—
they were backstage, backstage
with Metallica
and James Hetfield
kept handing her beers,
but the band was totally laid back
and so mellow
and calm and completely
under control
and all that wild shit is mostly just
a stage thing—for image, you know—
and really they're all just

gentlemen, she said, perfect
gentlemen, Metallica, sitting backstage
putting back some beers
with me
and some of my friends and
etcetera, and etcetera.

And after that, he responds
not by bowing in her presence
or pausing to reflect,
but by saying that, well, he once,
he once,
he once . . .
And that's really all I can tell you,
because that was all I could take.
I gave up on my search for a copy of *Siddhartha*.
If either of them had been listening, they'd have heard
the door chimes jangling behind me.
There was no grace in that place, and the only love
was for the band.
Rather than listening with rapt attention, delighting
in a shared passion, each silently despised the other
for having been with Metallica,
even for a moment, even
so long ago.
So, as I said, I couldn't tell you what came next—
but, then again, neither could either of them.
She might have said, "Believe it or not, I am—
in a sad, strange way you could never understand—
both sister and spouse to both Lars Ulrich and
James Hetfield,
and our mutual father-slash-father-in-law
is none other than
the late Moon Unit Zappa."
She could've uttered those very words,
with no regard for the fact
that Moon Unit Zappa was
neither dead nor male,

and he would have countered,
after no more than a shrug, with
"Well, odd as it may seem,
Metallica and I were once riding in a zeppelin
somewhere over the equator, fully intending to engage
in a bit of recreational skydiving,
but as we stood at the open portal
holding hands and preparing for the plunge,
the band chickened out at the very last second
and asked if it could just paint my toenails instead.
Of course, I said yes. (This was not a proposition
to which one says no.) And then
they went to town, painting away,
decorating those little fuckers in exotic rainbow fashion,
their strokes confident and bold. And at that moment,
Metallica had never been so happy.
But soon it came to an end. Sadly,
it was time to land. Despite their display of skydiving spinelessness,
which the band kindly asked me to keep under wraps, Metallica
still had to pay the driver. And not only did they
tip him well after he dropped us off
somewhere high in the Andes,
but then they invited the blimp navigator
to join our table for breakfast, which
James Hetfield
cooked on a roasting-spit
ignited by his own breath of fire.
He prepared us a very good breakfast. Lars was in charge
of the fresh-squeezed orange juice, which he pressed
in his ample armpits, much to the delight of us all,
including the small group of animals
that had gathered around in an oblong circle—
and by small group of animals
I in no way mean to say 'a group of *small* animals'
—because there were giraffe, my friend. Giraffe.
And that *is* an accepted plural."

But such a tale, I'm sure, would only fall
on deaf ears. The only way to get to these people—
to get through to these vicious bookstore clerks—
would be to give their stories the responses they deserve.
As in, "Wow! Get out! How neat
to have seen such a fabulous band—
in their formative years, at that! How special
to have relaxed with them after a show
and have the lead singer take such keen interest
in you as a person! Brushes
with greatness—especially such
intimate brushes—sure are wonderful.
I have to admit: I'm jealous."

On the Body, and Every Other Consideration: An Interview with Kim Addonizio

"If you become any good as a writer, what's happened is that the shape you're making is so much more interesting to you than your own experience, or than gaining sympathy from someone for your losses."

Kim Addonizio is the author of five collections of poetry: *The Philosopher's Club*; *Jimmy & Rita*; *Tell Me*, a finalist for the 2000 National Book Award; *What Is This Thing Called Love*; and her latest collection, *Lucifer at the Starlight*, a finalist for the Poets Prize and the Northern CA Book Award. In addition, Kim has published a collection of short stories, two poetry craft books, and two novels: *Little Beauties* and *My Dreams Out in the Street*. Her awards include fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Pushcart Prize, a Commonwealth Club Poetry Medal, and the John Ciardi Lifetime Achievement Award. While she says in an alternate universe she'd be an old black man sitting on the porch playing blues harmonica all day and her previous occupations include everything from fry cook to tennis instructor, she currently teaches private workshops in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Josephine Yu: Your first book was published eight years after you received your Master's. Would you encourage writers to wait to try to publish their work? Does the rush to publish (usually in order to secure an academic appointment) compromise the quality of the poetry that's being published?

Kim Addonizio: *The Philosopher's Club* took a while. It was a finalist for something early on, and then went around and around to the contests for three or four years. And each time it did, I tried to make it a little better. From the original manuscript I started with, I must have changed about half of it by the time it got to Al Poulin at BOA Editions, and then, of course, I worked on it some more with him. I'm glad, now, that I don't want to shred my first book. There are poems in it that aren't that realized, but I think it was ready to be out there. And yes, everyone's in too great a rush to publish. It's like a sickness. I don't have it anymore, but then, it's easy to recover from once you're well-published. I understand the need and desire. But if you can wait until the work's ready, you're going to feel better about it later.

JY: Sex is a topic you write about frequently, as you explore the complex dynamics, benefits, and consequences of relationships prompted by our most basic human drive. In "Visit" a couple finds comfort in sex after visiting the man's dying mother, and the speaker protects him from danger, from grief, with her body. Then in "Theodicy," just as God is about to strike down the cruel and stupid couple he has created, they turn to each other and discover fucking: "God's head filled with music while the wild sparks leaped / from their bodies, bright as the new stars in the heavens." Do humans find redemption in each other's bodies? Or just distraction?

KA: Well, it depends on the humans, and on the bodies, doesn't it? We can distract ourselves endlessly with sex and desire. I guess I do believe in a kind of bodily redemption, though. Getting to the spirit through the body. I don't like the whole concept of renunciation, or asceticism. Going off to a cave to meditate. It seems to me the purpose of any spiritual practice is to learn to live in the world—to transcend it, yes, but to live in it. I consider writing a spiritual practice, and I think sex can be, too. Along with eating incredible food with friends you love. I'm tempted to say something New Agey, like, "It's all one."

In terms of poetic subjects, the body is a big one, for me, because it leads to every other consideration: suffering, love, loss, pleasure, connection, mortality . . . I'm not sure I believe in a body-based poetics, per se. For example, all that French feminist stuff, which I dimly recall, about how women's bodies lead to a certain kind of writing. Certainly there are cultural determinants, but I'm not sure I buy the idea that there are biological ones. Anyway, there is certainly a stance toward the body that my poetry takes: that it's interesting and important as a subject; that its knowledge is as important and crucial to our whole selves as intellectual knowledge. A lot of poetry I see now is in this sense bloodless—it privileges the intellectual. I don't want to privilege body or intellect or emotion or spirit—I want them all to be present.

JY: When you address sex, you also often address power, as in "Them," in which the speaker remembers the shifting of sexual power between boys and girls as they become men and women, and "What Do Women Want?"—a bossy declaration of desire for a cheap red dress and the sexual freedom and power that the dress would grant its wearer. Is there a sort of redemption in power?

KA: Some of my work has been concerned with powerlessness. I'm especially interested in the way girls internalize all this shit about what it means to be female and what we're supposed to be about. It's like this perverse focus on the body, isn't it? On the body as image, as surface.

JY: It seems something redemptive is desperately needed in this world so full of suffering. Yet the suffering in your poems is urgent, essential for the development of the complete person. The ones who escape suffering are disadvantaged, lacking. Take the ordinary man in "Suffering: A Game." The speaker decides to lift him from his comfortable life and put him with the survivors of the camps. Compared to them, he's "slower and probably stupider—and his face,/with no grief to give it character,/is oddly shapeless[.]" What

tension is then created by the desire to protect loved ones from suffering and the knowledge that suffering is a valuable part of human experience?

KA: That's such a Christian perspective—forging one's spirit in the fires of suffering. Maybe I connect to it through my Catholic childhood. I'm obsessed with suffering. I meant that line about grief giving his face character to be somewhat ironic. You take this ordinary guy, and pretend he gets dragged through all this horror, and in the end, all you want is to give him back his ordinary life, because of course suffering sucks. That's the little circular drama that the poem enacts. And not just ordinary suffering—the Buddha's "old age, death, and disease"—but these evils human beings visit on each other. Maybe, too, that poem is about the randomness of much of this kind of suffering. Perhaps a better word is "impersonality." Jews, gays, and gypsies in the Holocaust, the Armenians and the Turks, Tutsis and Hutus, Israelis and Palestinians, on and on—it's killing by category. We hate by category. And identify ourselves by category, too. I think good poetry tries to subvert that kind of thinking. Do you know that Wislawa Symborska poem, "Could Have"? It's a chilling poem, because it says that you were spared for no real reason. Luck of the draw. That's how I often feel. I'm uncomfortable when I think of the idea of suffering ennobling us in some way. Is suffering valuable in itself? I'd have to say no. It's inescapable, though, and maybe how we respond to it can be in some way valuable. The alternative, since we all have to suffer, is for it to simply crush us.

JY: I love the speaker's bold, direct moves to pull the reader into the poem even when struggling with feelings of helplessness, as in "Things that Don't Happen," in which the speaker attempts to turn a sense of failure and loss into a gratefulness for the loss that is held in abeyance each day, such as "the benign tumor, the wreckage / at the intersection where you might have been standing[.]" The

speaker assumes the power to determine the reader's future, yet immediately feels she has chosen poorly, lamenting, "I've kept you from a thousand better things." This brought to mind the economics term "opportunity cost." Is there ever a good choice, considering we're always sacrificing something else?

KA: I don't know. Is there? I'm just working through my own questions in these poems. Not necessarily discovering any profound or wise answers. I don't think the speaker in that poem is assuming the power to determine the reader's future. I think the speaker is just saying, "while this is happening"—i.e., while you're reading this poem—"something else could have been happening." And I never realized it's quite that self-deprecating—"I've kept you from a thousand better things"—but you're right. Yet the space of the poem is also the space of keeping disturbing things in abeyance; the poem is the known, and while the reader is inside the poem the reader is safe, in a sense. At the end of that poem, the reader is cast into the unknown, that "begins / as soon as you stop listening, and turn away." It's like, inside the poem, there are all these questions, all these strings of possibilities, too, but there's also a sense that the virtual world created in the poem is a safer place than whatever is out there. Hence the plea to the reader to stay in the poem. I often seem to plead with the reader, I notice. Stay. Stick around. It's a scary world out there. Stay and keep me company in here.

JY: Many of your poems have that intense, surprising way of drawing the reader in—not just into the poem, but the action, the *necessary* action. In "Collapsing Poem" the reading is told "this poem won't finish unless / you drag me from it." The speaker implores, "Just pull up and keep / the motor running and take me with you wherever you're going." Could you discuss the relationship between the poet, the poem, and the reader?

KA: My poems always imagine a reader. I was so amazed and gratified that Whitman imagined me. "Look for me under your bootsoles." He posited this continuum, this connection, and his example has influenced me profoundly. My persona whines more than Whitman, she's more desperate. Whitman just knew, or at least wrote like he knew, that there was this common soul we all shared, and that time didn't matter. Doesn't matter. He is this intimate, immediate spiritual presence in his work. That's very seductive to me, whether it's Whitman, or Sappho, or Donne, or any number of more recent poets exploring and extending the lyric tradition. I'm not interested in reading a poem authored by language. That doesn't mean I'm looking for autobiography, but I'm looking for a human being to whom something mattered in the actual physical world. If that's not the case, then truthfully, I don't give a shit. Machines can generate language for language's sake. You know, sometimes I read poems and feel slapped in the face. It's like the poem is saying "Fuck you" to the reader. Though anything so direct and clear would be, in fact, refreshing. Instead it's something like, "The bottle. Dimensional. What we began, what (in spite of) (listening) occurred. Scratching on the door until we let it in. The straw through the mask. Taped. Talked. Clocked." Blah, blah, blah. Private, opaque, boring. How have we come to this? Some of the theory I find provocative, until I confront the actual poetry. Then I feel like what a non-native speaker once said to me: "Oh, this English is like a stone on my head."

JY: Returning to the speaker's sense of helplessness, I was thinking also of "On Opening a Book of Photographs." After describing the bodies in one photo, the speaker says, "However I / tell this, they're not redeemed. There they lie." Why do we pursue our compulsion to write about the dead? What is accomplished?

KA: The poem describes a photograph by Lee Miller, who was not only a model and fashion photographer, but also took photographs

in World War Two. At Dachau she took this amazing picture, this very carefully *framed* image, of a pile of corpses. The poem tries to enact both our need to redeem suffering through art, and our ultimate failure to do so. "There they lie." i.e., the bodies are lying there, the people have been murdered, nothing can change that. And the obvious double meaning of "lie": The fact of the corpses puts the lie to the idea that the narrator might redeem their suffering through art—not just witness, but art. The poem is a sonnet, it's this formal, made thing, as the photograph is a formal, made thing. And of course, the fact that there is this poem, that something has been made in yet another attempt to speak about these things, goes back to the hope that we might not fail. I have another poem, "Cranes in August," that says it another way: "What we create may save us."

JY: Perhaps you would contrast "On Opening a Book of Photographs" with "Explication," in which the prisoners die seemingly due to the audience's lack of attention.

KA: Both poems are about looking. One's based on a photograph and the other on a film. And both are asking questions about what it means to witness something, and whether or not that does any good. "Explication" is based on a film I can't now remember the name of, but I remember how the camera showed us these people in line for the gas at whatever camp it was, and then led us away by involving us in other aspects of the protagonist's life. And that's natural, of course—to look away. It's even necessary. How could you live in the world if you continually confronted the horrors that are going on every minute? But, you know—what's the balance. When are we abrogating responsibility? What is our responsibility? Those are the underlying questions animating those poems.

JY: Then in such different poems—"What the Dead Fear," "Heaven," "Night of the Living, Night of the Dead"—the dead are so alive,

though often worried, confused, wistful, still adjusting. What prompted you to begin writing about the dead from this unusual perspective and in this intimate and tender way?

KA: I think I stole the idea from Stephen Dobyns. He has a poem that begins, "Here's how the dead pretend they're still alive." I just liked the idea of imagining the dead. It's just another way to talk about the living.

JY: *What Is This Thing Called Love* often addresses aging and death and the sort of terrible news that "Dear Sir or Madam" threatens to deliver: the knowledge that love is just a chemical reaction in the brain or, worse, "a dead girl winched up from a river," the news of cats dying of old age and friends dying of cancer. Death is always nearby. And yet the collection is infused with humor. What is the place or purpose of humor in the serious business of poetry?

KA: Well, humor in poetry has a serious purpose, I think. It's a way to talk about the harder issues without going under. A point of opposition or tension. Just as in life.

JY: Billy Collins called the poems of *Tell Me* "intensified versions of the barroom ballad." And you've said you like the idea of a book of poetry as a jukebox that you can choose a tune on. Music is an important aspect of your last two collections: *What Is This Thing Called Love* is full of blues and even one poem that wants to be a rock and roll song, while *Lucifer at the Starlight* has sections titled "Jukebox" and "Dance Floor." Can you talk about the connection between music and poetry?

KA: I wanted to be a musician first, and so music's always been a point of reference. You can very clearly hear the music in a poem that is paying attention to its rhythms. You hear the beat, you hear the pitches

of the vowels, the percussive or liquid sounds of the consonants. With some of my work I've tried to make the poems song-like: relatively short, with a series of rhythms you can ride from the beginning to the end. I'm not sure that quite explains what I mean, but I can hear it when I'm writing. I want a certain effect of intensity, yes.

JY: Are song lyrics poetry? I'm thinking of my students who bring lyrics into class when I ask them to share their favorite poems—and also singers like Jewel who have published collections.

KA: I think song-writing is a different art form, as is spoken word. Not to disparage either one. But to my mind, song lyrics need the music, and spoken word needs the performer. There are cases where the writing works alone, but mostly it's the synergy of the language and the other element that, when it works, is the magic thing we respond to in great songs and great slams.

JY: I've heard you admit you're a rather shy person, yet your poems, as Billy Collins described them, are "stark mirrors of self-examination." I wondered about our separation of speaker and poet; the reader makes an agreement, a sort of pact with the poet, that she will not assume the speaker and poet are the same. This provides the poet a sort of privacy, you might say an anonymity (even if a false one). What's your position regarding the identity of the speaker in your work?

KA: I look at it like stepping onto a stage—the page is a performance space. A dancer moves in her ordinary life, but the way she moves in dance, in performance, is different. A singer is herself, yet also this other character. She performs a song that may be about her experience—or not—and she inhabits the song while she sings it. If she does her job well, the experience becomes the listeners'. I hear Lucinda Williams do "Drunken Angel," and I think of people in my life who

have self-destructed. And I feel totally connected to her when I hear her CD, but I don't expect or need to meet her in person. For me, art provides both intimacy—a mental, spiritual intimacy—and a privacy, in terms of the personal. I *am* shy, socially. I don't do well in new situations. I'm a little hermetic in my daily life. But none of that is particularly relevant to what happens in my writing.

JY: You sometimes bristle at the term "confessional," which has been applied to your poetry. Does fiction afford a great distance from the autobiographical, or a clearer divide between the speaker and the writer?

KA: I don't mind the term confessional if it's not being used as a pejorative. The confessional is a mode, no better or worse than any other. Photographers and painters do self-portraits. All the arts have some practitioners who work with autobiographical material in some way. But to answer your question, yes, it feels like people will more readily believe in your imagination and your artistic competence if they encounter it in a work of fiction. Though there, too, readers sometimes seem to think that all your characters are you. They are, but only in the broadest sense. And I feel that's true in my poetry, as well. I make shit up all the time in poems, or twist it in some way.

JY: You're collaborating with other creative women on projects ranging from a word/music CD to a poetry writing guide. How did you and Dorianne Laux go about writing *The Poet's Companion*? In the text, you acknowledge the dual authorship, occasionally referring to the reader's two authors, yet you've achieved such a natural and seamless voice.

KA: It was pretty easy for us because we could always finish each other's sentences, anyway. In the case of that book, often one of us would write a chapter and the other would just take it and do what

she wanted and add her own stuff. We'd trade back and forth, or sit at the computer with one person typing and both of us thinking aloud. It's hard to remember who wrote what, now. Except for the grammar chapter. I wrote all that because Dorianne can't keep it straight. She's an amazingly talented writer who doesn't have to—she's just got the syntax already wired in.

JY: You once told a story about lying to get out of work and then becoming seriously ill. You said after that experience you've tried to reserve out-and-out lying for your writing. Could you talk about balancing truth and fiction? How do you write honestly, write about what you know, while exploring the creative possibilities of the lie?

KA: If you become any good as a writer, what's happened is that the shape you're making is so much more interesting to you than your own experience, or than gaining sympathy from someone for your losses. You have to be led by your imagination and your interest in the poem. The language, the patterning, the imagery, the music—those are what excite me. I often start from my experience; you've got to start with something. I'm not big on research, or science, or nature. I'm interested in human beings, usually. But I don't care if I'm faithful to "what happened." I can't imagine writing a memoir, where I'd feel like things had to more or less stick to that. I'd much rather make things up—being tied to "what happened" seems horribly confining.

JY: In "'Round Midnight" you point out that there's "No plot without desire,/the more desperate the better." In the book of your life, what desire drives the plot?

KA: Good question! The first thing that popped into my head was, "The desire to be loved." Then I wasn't sure I wanted to admit that. Then I thought, "The desire to be seen." So I guess I have internal psychic drives before I get to the acceptable stuff, like, "The desire to

create art and pass something on." But that's definitely there.

JY: Tattoos are fascinating and, as you and Cheryl Dumsenil point out in your introduction to *Dorothy Parker's Elbow: Tattoos on Writers, Writers on Tattoos*, people always want to know what you got, where you got it, why, what it means, and if it hurt. So I must ask you, in the words of Mark Doty, "What noun / would you want / spoken on your skin / your whole life through?"

KA: My own most significant tattoos, for me, are a chameleon, for change; and a lightning bolt, for love's realization. In the film *Holy Smoke*, Kate Winslett writes, in lipstick, two words on Harvey Keitel's forehead: *Be Kind*. I think they are the most important words. The one noun, then, I'd inscribe—but under the skin—is compassion. ■

Alec Hershman

The Usher

I saw you wrap a cello
and I swanned,
took you from the back.

Rim-simple I ran my hand
across the handles,
across the frets.

What did you think a ghost
was made of?
Shadow stitches

to the floor its paper-waters.
A storm is responsible
for much of this—the living

running on chalk-feet,
the clouds landing
like a kind of mold.

And we're no better,
just dust and rosin.
So we must flee the pavilion,

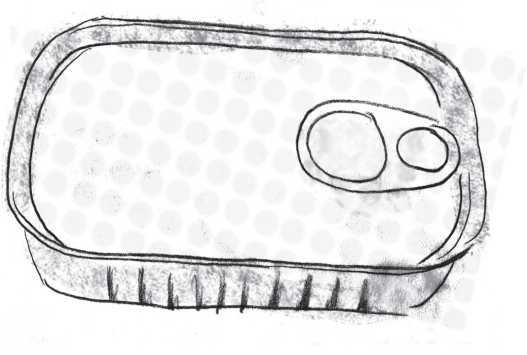
And I'd carry you
if not for your wheel-chair,
lift your arm to point, if not

for the slip-shot spine.
Wristbone, cornerbone—
two brief meters of the fall.

Listen, when you hear me now
it's just behind the ear, sliding
through a puddle in the cross-walk,

your thin shoulder rolling in my grip,

your useless feet an inch above your shoes.



If you're destined to be a sardine,
the can will drop from heaven.

Ed McWhinney

Burn Out

My sister came to visit with a friend of hers, a beautiful woman if a little out of shape. She was very talkative and was soon at ease with me as if we had been friends forever. Evidently, she was well educated and cultured because she could refer to Swedish films, saying I reminded her of a fellow in a Swedish film with sweat on his brow, the kind that uses words like pellucid and insouciant, at least as they appear in the subtitles, which made my sister laugh because he would not even be able to pronounce those words correctly, she said. We Irish have a strange sense of humour, this cultured lady added. The other day I went to a restaurant here with your sister when an English lady with a dog appeared. She asked the waiter if dogs were allowed. The waiter said, dogs yes, mother-in-laws no, leaving the English lady perplexed. I tried to laugh politely, twitching my head on my shoulders no doubt, she had such a lovely face and cheerful smile. Being out of work I had become a rather insouciant and apologetic type, characteristics that choked my doings with others, especially the alarming variety of technical people I came into contact with such as the man who came to take away the broken satellite dish and the tools salesman who called to the door with all the tools I needed to do repairs on the house and the man in the computer clinic where I took the non-functioning laptop. If you found a genie in a bottle washed up on the beach, what three wishes would you make, he said? At first I believed that this was his way of informing me that my broken laptop was beyond repair but no it was only a lead-in to a joke, a rather lengthy one that soon lost me. However, I didn't forget to laugh, knowing by his tone when he had hit the punch line. Joke over, he leaned on the counter and said there was nothing really wrong with my laptop, the hard disk

simply needed to be fragmented or something to that effect, a simple task which he had performed and now the machine was functioning if not as speedily as when new well fast enough for the likes of me. He was a tall, thin man with a long, narrow face and a little meggle on his chin. He touched the keys of my laptop with slender fingers, the words qwertyuiop, asdfghjkl and zxcvbnm, making more sense to him than any I could utter, ink under the fingernails, and then he touched the meggle with his thin, inky fingers. When I asked what I owed him he said; no fix, no fee, in a deep, cinematic voice; unless you want to write me a blank cheque for the laugh.

It was a rainy day in dismal Cork as I left the computer clinic with my laptop under my arm. A good day for a funeral as they say. At that time my sister was of the opinion that I had become too moribund and blamed it on my lack of social vigour. She no longer called to see me all that much but when she did it was to harass and accuse. You ought to get out more. Why don't you take a trip, join a book club or walking society, you have become so withdrawn? Before I could conjure up a witness for the defence her mobile phone would start off, its stupid tune blaring incessantly, and she would have to step into the hall for a better signal. I could hear her voice disturbing the shadows in the house. She spoke loudly and with the confidence of a person successful in the marketplace. When she returned she would snap the ridiculously small phone shut and place it back in her purse with the air of a busy person giving time to someone entirely insignificant. I loved my sister but longed only to make myself scarce as far as she was concerned, stay out of her busy life, avoid being a nuisance as far as possible, though I admit there were times when my blathering tongue ran out of control, my voice sounding off with shameful nonsense in her ear. Your voice is in my ear she said to me once, right here like a drip in my ear. Then it would be some time before she would appear again such as this most recent visit with her Dublin friend. She would be staying over for the night, she said, with her friend as they were attending a seminar in a nearby hotel. It would be nice for me to have

some company and they hated hotels. This information sent my brain into a panic. When, how, why, I wanted to splutter but could find not the spittle to make a sound. Don't worry, she said, I have everything arranged, she will sleep in Granddad's room. I will cook prawns and we'll have a civilized evening together. It will do you good.

When she was gone, much to my relief and to the relief of the shadows, I threw myself once more upon the divan in the second floor room, arm dangling over the side, touching the floorboards, you know how it is, questioning every note of the blackbird outside on the sill, or in the tree, and began to dream once more of escaping back West, Dingle and Corca Dhuibhne, soft rain drifting in off the Atlantic over the bogs and valleys, nestling in the gentle contours of Mount Brandon, falling into some unreal existence out there, poetic and strange. You might think that I am being hard on my sister, with the little portrait I've given and of course you are right. I haven't told you about the lengths she has gone to, to get me out of myself, how she has persevered with my moods, trying to cajole me back into the world, imploring me to be less serious and more at ease. To no avail. Moribund is the word, actually she never used it, morbid is another, miserable is the last.

That evening before my sister, her friend, and the prawns arrived I slipped out the back way and began to drive around in the car, lost in time, driving on into a strange texture, mind-twisting vaporous air dripping from a grey cloudbank, creating an interior cloudiness in my brain, so that soon I found myself astray while driving up a hill near the airport. I'd taken a sudden off-ramp from the South Link and ended up first in a farm-yard with a runway in sight and enormous red and white pylons on every side, then into the middle of a herd of cattle crossing the road, heavy udders weighed down by milk. The cows, enormous beasts from that vantage, brushed past the car, rear ends covered in thick layers of stinking dung. The farmer strolled by, no hurry on the man, merrily thumping a splattered rump with his stick. A cow prodded my side-view mirror, slamming it out of shape.

The farmer's son came at the rear with an ear-piercing whistle and a demon in his eye. A beautiful collie lumbered at his heels ready to spring. How do I get out of here, I asked the farmer's son. For a moment he stared at me silently and I fancied that twinkle in his eye said, I'm not in the mood for solving metaphysical dilemmas, but then with a dramatic clearing of his throat followed by a ball of healthy sputum aimed with precision just wide of his boots and the collie's head, he said that any left hand turn would do me, pointing with his stick in the general direction of a runway. As I drove on, taking only left hand turns which did eventually get me back into the stream of traffic on the South Link Road, the rain began, the wipers knocked to and fro, drivers staring straight on, drivers bobbing heads to music, drivers shaking fists with all the pent-up fury of belonging, displaying an enviable sense of proportion that signalled how normal they were. When I reached home I parked the car and surveyed the scene. My sister's car was parked outside. I sneaked in the back way and held still in the scullery. I could hear their voices coming from the kitchen.

Taking my chance I tip-toed past the kitchen door, seafood sizzling, music, laughter, stepped gingerly around the tell-tale broken timbers of the stairs and climbed into the mouldy attic, drawing the loft ladder up behind me. I shut down the trapdoor and was alone in darkness broken only by rays of light filtering through cracks in the slates. There was enough of it to reveal that the newspaper at my feet was eight years old, yellow and mouldy. My position now was not normal, whatever that is, which had suddenly become the aim, to be not normal, tormented, finger on the self-destruct button, unable to evaluate any sort of criteria or make any valid moral judgement whatsoever, at the risk of loss of civil rights in perpetuity, rather to somehow find some mental state profoundly other than what would be left below in the world, at the risk, I repeat, of loss of civil rights in perpetuity. Here, my hope was to stumble on something other than what I've always been, adapt eyes to find beauty among the ruins, the decomposing sandcastle, somewhere in desert sands, in crumbling ma-

sonry, in the vilest of places. Even there in the drab attic, one thing was reaffirmed, colour is the sign of life. My eyes adjusting to the darkness I crawled along a splintery beam until I reached a crack big enough to see out through. I saw cloudlets parting from the grey cloudbank to fall like parachutes towards the trees, the rolling, tumbling sky full of them. I saw that the grass needed to be cut. I could see the next door neighbour's beautiful golden retriever sniffing among the stalks of dandelions. The wild grass danced in the breeze, the trees gently swayed, the unchained cloudlets as the universe tumbled to inertia. Somehow or other, I thought, I could be happier here than anywhere in the civilized world chewing cobwebs and observing the chromatic and refractive effect light has on the attic beams and upon metal pots placed to capture leaking drips of rain, light still streaming in through the cracks in the slates, while the practical fellows calculated confidently, lump sums, bridging loans and superannuation funds, bonds and stocks and monetary funds. Actually, if I was in Paris, I could leap into the Seine, but not being able to afford to get to Paris, I'd have to settle for the Lee, if I didn't perceive it as somehow less romantic than the Seine. More stupidity. In this attic, I mused, I might starve to death or hang myself from the rafters if I had a rope and knew how to make a proper noose, always a hundred miles from nowhere, avoiding sloth, always very busy but busy at what, head always brimming with ideas that run out of control sometimes or more often with no more inkling to answer the doorbell than I had to put a pistol butt in my nose or jump in the Seine, The Lee or The Tiber. Here in the attic, I could be Mr. Dunne, my neighbour, finally gone mad after more years than he cared to recall, conforming to every rule in the book, obediently imbibing the strong values and beliefs of his superiors, economical, sociological, and eschatological, the first rule of society being to drag everyone in, sign that contract, right there on the dotted line. It can become almost impossible to disentangle yourself from the web. I am Mr. Dunne, gone mad now at last, according to his wife, who spoke to me through her open window recently, poor Larry was losing his

mind, she feared. For example when they went out for their walk he would no longer salute the neighbours and in fact would keep going if she stopped to talk to somebody, as if they didn't exist. And he has all these obsessions, she said. He mopes around looking for things that no longer exist, rummaging in boxes and cupboards for old watches and bits of useless junk sent to the dump long ago. He just spent the entire day rummaging around in the garden shed for a compass he'd had when in the boy scouts, long gone, then it was a precision level that belonged to his father who'd been a stone mason. When he sits still for any length of time he begins to believe that he is a piece of furniture. He searches high and low for a tube of Bostik to glue broken pieces back on. I had to hide the glue for fear he'd poison himself. Poor Mr. Dunne after all the service he had done the state, to be reduced to a piece of furniture in his front room, rifling through drawers and cupboards for a watch that was no longer there; pained look, hangdog eyes, long, sickly features, vague physical resemblance to an exhumed body, skull and bones, something of a sad, but sardonic expression. It was all very quiet in the attic. That eight-year-old newspaper was so quiet now and I was quiet, just a little breathing sound, a slight wheeze in the chest, something sighing like wind through the thorax, like wind in reeds and how about achieving the indifference of a recluse who dreams only of growing a beard until it extends out through a crack in a slate, finally unable to extricate oneself from this lonely, forgotten position. It was so quiet I had to strain my ears to pick up even the merest tinkle of my sister or her friend's shrill laughter. Cowering in an attic under cobwebs, I am Mr. Dunne, old and weary, sitting on his chair until he becomes a part of it, sitting in the room, yes, blending with the furniture, no further need for subterfuge, contemplating the end of life and such. Moribund may as well be my sister's word for it or stagnant. Dead is another.

The next morning when my sister's friend came down for breakfast she treated me with cool indifference, the jokes were over. The banter was as dead as the men in her life, no longer, men, no longer. The

stock exchange was in her eyes as she choose her cereal, caring for her life, minding her existence. She examined the date small-stamped in pink letters on the egg. I slipped out of her way. Soon they would be gone. I would be safe in the second floor room. For a rare interlude, I felt quite together in myself listening to their voices below at breakfast, laughter-waves vibrating on the air. I did not know whether I was becoming more perceptive or more insane. It is difficult for the subject to decide without parting from the subject which is impossible to our knowledge, give or take a sense of transmigration or astral projection, to be other than one subject at any given time, in this infinitely absurd world. Ridiculous how difficult it is to make sense. Ridiculous how accuracy evades us so easily. Ridiculous how tenuous our judgements, judgements that can rise from the swamp like hot air balloons, pumped full of gas. I could go on, but the day allowed in a daydream in which I saw myself in a dance club with my sister's friend, better give her a name for this oneiric segment, another one of those words I'd struggle to pronounce, Lucille or Lucinda, maybe Lady Caroline and I'm talking to her through a kaleidoscope of noise and lights, fascinating her with a combination of metaphysics and fanciful nonsense. She wore a tight black sweater, shoulder length black hair, eyes like burning anthracite in the disco luminosity, her fascination for the macabre as I related tales about my grandmother whose spirit appears to me, who was once a great reader of tea leaves, tarot cards and tales of the supernatural, who left instructions to have pins stuck in her when she was in her coffin laid, so avoiding her great living dread, to be assumed dead while still in her senses and buried alive. Lady Caroline was very impressed. She leaned closer. A breast touched my arm. Do you believe it is possible to state an absolute truth, she asked. Only in images dragged into the light from the deepest subconscious, I replied, relayed in language uncontaminated by history and then with a theatrical brush-back of my quiff, I asked did she want to hear the expression of an absolute truth, making her lean closer, making her eyes glow sharper, both sumptuous breasts

in contact with me, yes, she sighed, an absolute truth at last? . . . My hand flew to my head to suppress a wave of panic. Only just. The voices of the ladies rang against the floorboards. Only just, this wave of panic suppressed. The follies of reason. The accusing voice; what do you do every day, my sister's friend, Lady Caroline, said, the day before when we first met, even repeated it for fear I was a little deaf, and what is it you do every day? He's a doorman, my sister said. He works in the premises of an agricultural insurance corporation. But at the moment I'm afraid to say . . . afraid to say, by the way, what do you do every day, emphasis on the first do, extra weight on that one, do you do, doldrums, driving, drudgery, drink, these are the witnesses who will speak for me, a poor, nondescript man unable to separate himself from the subject that was from the first chosen for him but not by him, placed upon him, no choice in the matter, no one ever asked him, this coat of skin, these bones, the metabolism of an insect geared to survive any level of radiation, not exactly of his choosing and the mind in it, the power to choose or not may well have begun there. A Cuban revolutionary once said: If you're destined to be a sardine, the can will drop from heaven. I'm not sure what that means but somehow felt it was pertinent as my sister and Lady Caroline continued to bray in the room below, Lady Caroline not as shapely as she should be anymore, maybe she should take it easy on the eggs. I told her that as I helped carry my grandmother's coffin out of the church I heard something knock against the lid, which tale had the effect in the blaring discotheque, under the kaleidoscope of lights of drawing our heads into contact, a most profound moment and one worth more than many others. Her face looked lovelier under the surreal lights than in daylight. Do you think she was tapping against the coffin lid with her hand? I could hear them moving below, laughing still, shrill voices raised in the hallway now. We're going came my sister's voice, come down and see us off. I stood at the head of the stairs and threw a word or two I don't remember what. Lady Caroline smiled, her lips were moist, breasts pert in tight woollen jumper, alas, shapelier now

than other parts, enjoy the silence, she said, I think she said silence, but whatever word she used it sent them in titters through the front door, slam and in chortling racket down the garden path. Bye, bye, echoes hovering like smoke on the air, bye, bye, enjoy the, was it sloth, she said, or asylum, silence maybe, it was too late to get it now as all settled down back into place, the dust, the shadows, uneasy at having been disturbed into architecture too elaborate for them, falling like sandcastles in the desert returning inexorably in a process of entropy into a natural state. I remained motionless there. I drank the pellucid air, I stroked the pensive sunlight, I watched the world turning on its axis, so beautifully precise, the precision of the most well-oiled machine, moving relentlessly on without so much as the squeak of a hinge. I stared into the abyss, take care, some voice spoke, take care not to become a monster, staring into the abyss, the abyss staring back at you. I heard my heart beat, no more than a shadow, if sound and shadow can be so configured, my heart beat on the stairs, in the empty house, the echoes of their voices settling with the dust stirred by their exit, the empty world, the shadow of a heartbeat. ■

Contributors' Notes

Kim Addonizio has been called "one of our nation's most provocative and edgy poets." Her latest books are *Lucifer at the Starlite*, recently a finalist for the Poets Prize and the Northern CA Book Award; and *Ordinary Genius: A Guide for the Poet Within*, both from W.W. Norton. Kalima Press recently published her *Selected Poems* in Arabic. Addonizio's many honors include a Guggenheim Fellowship, two NEA Fellowships, and Pushcart Prizes for both poetry and the essay. Her collection *Tell Me* was a National Book Award Finalist. Other books include two novels from Simon & Schuster, *Little Beauties* and M*y Dreams Out in the Street*. Addonizio offers private workshops in Oakland, CA, and online, and often incorporates her love of blues harmonica into her readings.

Matthew Baker holds the inaugural Postgraduate Fiction Fellowship at Vanderbilt University. His fiction has appeared in *American Short Fiction*, *The Kenyon Review*, and *Denver Quarterly*, among others, and his randomized novella *Kaleidoscope* can be read at www.kaleidoscopeof.com.

Ron Carlson is the author of four story collections and four novels, most recently *The Signal* (Viking, 2009). Thirty years' worth of his poems are forthcoming in *Room Service: Poems, Meditations, Outcries & Remarks* (Red Hen Press, Mar. 2012). His work has appeared in *Harper's*, *The New Yorker*, *Playboy*, and *GQ*, and has been featured in *Best American Short Stories* and *The O. Henry Prize Stories*. He is the director of the writing program in fiction at the University of California, Irvine and lives in Huntington Beach, California.

Rachel Dacus has published three collections of poetry, including the full-length collections *Earth Lessons* and *Femme au chapeau*, and a chapbook, *Another Circle of Delight*. Her new collection, *Gods of Water and Air*, was a semi-finalist for the 2010 Akron Poetry Prize. She has published stories, essays, reviews, and interviews, and her poems have appeared in *Atlanta Review*, *Boulevard*, *Many Mountains Moving*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Rattapallax*, and other journals. She also has a CD of poems accompanied by music, *A God You Can Dance*. She lives in Walnut Creek, California and works as a grant writer and fundraising consultant. Visit her web page: www.dacushome.com.

Anne Doran is a native of greater Detroit where she taught in the public schools for 35 years. Now retired, she enjoys attending regional and national poetry events when she isn't writing, hiking or seeing the latest movie.

Paul Griner's books are *The German Woman* and *Collectors* (novels) and *Follow Me* (stories). His work has appeared in *Playboy*, *Tin House*, *Ploughshares*, *Zoetrope*, *Prairie Schooner*, *New York Tyrant*, *The Indiana Review*, and *elimae*, and been translated into half a dozen languages.

Eileen G'Sell teaches creative writing and composition at Washington University in St. Louis, where she works in publications for the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum. Recent and forthcoming work can be found in *Boston Review*, *Ninth Letter*, and *Associative Press*.

Alec Hershman lives in St. Louis and teaches English at St. Louis Community College. Other poems his are forthcoming in *CutBank*, *Washington Square*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Anti-*, and *Sixth Finch*. He is currently the poetry editor at *The White Whale Review*.

Caitlin Horrocks is author of the story collection *This Is Not Your City* (Sarabande Books, 2011). Her stories and essays appear in *The New Yorker*, *The Best American Short Stories 2011*, *The PEN/O. Henry Prize Stories 2009*, *The Pushcart Prize XXXV*, *The Paris Review*, *Tin House*, and elsewhere. Her work has won the Plimpton Prize and a Bread Loaf Writers' Conference Fellowship. She is a fiction editor at *West Branch*, and teaches at Grand Valley State University in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Howie Good, a journalism professor at SUNY New Paltz, is the author of the full-length poetry collections *Lovesick* (Press Americana, 2009), *Heart With a Dirty Windshield* (BeWrite Books, 2010), and *Everything Reminds Me of Me* (Desperanto, 2011), as well as 29 print and digital poetry chapbooks. He has been nominated multiple times for the Pushcart Prize and the Best of the Net and Web anthologies. He is a contributing editor to the online literary journal *Common-Line*, co-editor of the online nonfiction journal *Left Hand Waving*, and co-founder and -editor (with Dale Wisely) of the digital chapbook publisher White Knuckle Press, www.whiteknucklepress.com.

Todd Grimson is the author of three novels and of short fiction published in *BOMB*, *Bikini Girl*, *PANK*, *The Quarterly*, *Between C&D,* and elsewhere. Some of this appeared under the name I. Fontana. He has lived in Avignon, NYC, and Guadalajara; now resides in Portland, Oregon.

Ed McWhinney lives in Cork, Ireland. Work published in *Barcelona Ink* and online at *Juked*, *Word Riot*, *Fiction on the Web*, *Spilling Ink* and *Contrary Magazine,* where there is an index of his stories.

Jack Miller took second place in the Vallum Award for Poetry 2011, and his work has appeared or is forthcoming in several journals, including *Constellations* and *Sugar House Review*. He's finally feeling a sharp sense of closure, as *Juked* has published

the other half of a previously half-published poem. To see how it ends, dig up the 2009 issue of *RHINO* (or just visit www.jack-miller.org).

David O'Connell's poems have appeared in *RATTLE*, *Fugue*, *Drunken Boat*, and *Boxcar Poetry Review*, among other journals. He received a Rhode Island State Council of the Arts fellowship in poetry.

Benjamin Rybeck is an editor at Spork Press, was editor-in-chief at *Sonora Review*, and teaches creative writing at the University of Arizona. He's had stories in *DIAGRAM*, *Guernica*, *Natural Bridge*, *Ninth Letter*, and other places, and is finishing a novel about sex tapes and political shootings.

Jenn Scott's stories have appeared in *Bellingham Review*, *The Gettysburg Review*, *Seattle Review*, *The Cincinnati Review*, *Santa Monica Review*, *Cream City Review*, *Phoebe*, *Confrontation* and *Gulf Coast*. Work is forthcoming in *New South* and *The Los Angeles Review*. She lives with four cats and a husband in Oakland, California where she watches too much football, eats too much sugar and spends too much time measuring lines for wedding calligraphy.

Sandra Simonds is the author of *Warsaw Bikini* (Bloof Books, 2009) and *Mother Was a Tragic Girl* (Cleveland State University Press, 2012). Her poems have appeared in *Poetry*, *The Believer*, *American Poetry Review*, and *Denver Quarterly*. She lives in Tallahassee, Florida.

Jeff Tigchelaar is a stay-at-home dad in Kansas. His poems appear or are forthcoming in *Best New Poets 2011*, *Court Green*, *Grist*, *Hunger Mountain*, *North American Review*, *RHINO*, *Tar River Poetry*, and *Verse Daily*. His work received an Individual Excellence Award from the Ohio Arts Council and has been reviewed at cellpoems.org.