The Forever Beard

Michael Szczerban

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Poems

1.

At Least the Gorillas Have a Sense of Gravitas

after Caps for Sale *by Esphyr Slobodkina*

I peddled many caps in the town but sold none. I walked up a hill and sat under a tree and fell asleep. Monkeys then descended from the branches and played havoc with my caps. I woke up in a state of confusion and semi-undress. Monkeys are like unlabeled bottles of hydrogen peroxide. You never know when they've gone bad. Monkeys can mess everything up. They don't know quality products when they see them. They don't know how to find caps that fit. It stands to reason that monkeys will never get to wear nice clothes if this is how they will treat them. Gorillas, though. Gorillas can skateboard and everything. They are unimpeachably fine at living. I have seen those bodacious dudes have an excellent time playing games with death.

Gonads

How many thousands of sets of gonads
did it take to produce me? None,
theologians state: no thousands, just one
pair fitted together, foot into shoe.
Or feet into shoe, or foot into shoes—
I have the lingering sense that despite
ample evidence to the contrary, I might
really have been conceived at a wild orgy
on some rich uncle's country estate.
Then, her Reaganite ethos trumping Roe,
my erstwhile mother hid her lump and laid low
in some town in Maryland as I gestated for nine
illegitimate months; my good health brought
a fair price on a black-market adoption block,
and after two profit-making resales I was docked
in a wooden crib in Delaware. These things
could be possible. They could indeed be so.
For what sense is there in the monotonous
balling of billions of virgins—glaciers
melting by the short fiery passions of horny
young adults, each the proud progenitor
of a new genealogy? New, but never different.

Augury

Hullabaloo in these parts,
a thick orangutangy tang
in the air. It's flesh!

—Have you seen the shopkeepers?
—They're running for their lives!
I've got three sweaty fingers

in three sweaty ear canals. This is
the aftermath of war: some lithe dumb
child I took for a spin, once, twice,

sixteen times last night in a convertible
yellow or red sea of pain. You know:
a test drive, his first, but he was a well-oiled

crankshaft by the end. His mother
missed him but read literature. Huck Finn,
a victim of circumstance with toast

and butter under his hat, wore a dress
and fucked Injun Joe. Twice! They cross-
stitched doilies till dawn. Ha! ha!

I've got my hands on the shattered glass
entrails, and you can't see what I see. My nuclear
brain is so much bigger than yours.

Exotic Fruit

I'm in the fruit aisle when I think of my dad and the story
he used to tell that ended, "If I had known what a pomegranate
was, I never would have met your mother." I recall swipes
at balls with him for nine dusty holes at the public golf course

and the one day he told that tale to some guys in our foursome
and joked, "I still don't know anything about those types
of foreign fruits—except maybe two big cassava melons!"
He let me puff on his ragged, wet cigar after he was done.

Years later, as I matched his drinks after Mom's funeral, Dad leaned
over and slurred, "Make sure you find a woman who is a lady
in the living room and a whore in the bedroom."
A woman nudges past in the supermarket, where I stand stunned

and see prickly pears, polka-dotted like one of Mom's dresses. "Excuse me,"
I say to the woman. "Do you know how to tell if these are ripe?"

The Boy in the Bubble

He spent a lot of time imagining.
He had lived in a bubble for years.

Girl Is a Wily Fish

Girl is a wily fish.
Girl knows that bait
is bait, and that bait
conceals a hook. Girl
knows the angler wants her
to flop on the deck
and to squirm just for him.
Girl knows he wants
to strip off her scales
and have her make him breakfast.
Girl thinks of the ice chest
on the boat and shivers.

Growth

I ask her for a raise. She juts
her lip out, as if to say,
"No way, buddy," and suddenly
I'm in love with someone else.
This relationship has grown out
of hand: I used to clip her shrubs
with pruning shears, but now
I have to use the electric
hedge trimmer. I'm spreading mulch
where weeds won't stop popping up
and raking grass after I mow it.
All for three bucks an hour—
what a forty-year-old nice-ass
but-her-face can demand
from a freshly pubescent
boy with no cash. So thanks
but no thanks, Diane,
I'll spend my weekly seven bucks
buying and trying on condoms
while I think of someone else.
Your hairy lip, Diane.
Fuckin' A.

Fire and Water

I stood out back next to the garbage
can in the rain because I thought
I'd like the sound of the rain

plunking slowly onto the round
plastic cover.
I put my hands in my rain coat's

pockets and thought
it was time to smoke a cigarette,
a habit I had picked up early

that morning to impress a girl
who dyed her hair black.
I scrunched my shoulders up

to my neck and shielded the match
with my yellow rubber
hood and lit the cigarette.

I listened to the rain
on the garbage can. It drummed
faster and I stayed outside, wet

but dry and trying
to inhale on the off chance
she might happen by.

March Remembered

My second-grade class took a field trip
to see an Andrew Wyeth landscape
at the Brandywine River Museum.
I stared out the windows and ignored
the tour guide and her blonde Aqua-Net
shell of hair. Through the panes
I saw a bough, gleaming
and slimy with melting winter,
jutting from a trunk on the bank of a stream.
I wanted to sit on that limb and eat
what little snow was left caught in its twigs.
I wanted to swing my legs free and plunge
mittenless into the bubbling slush below.

There's Something About You I Just Can't Shake

We played football one chilly
September afternoon. Light
shot through the clouds, brisk.
Sweatshirt weather, but I still noticed
your curve. Then, one felonious tackle
on my part—and the stilted rigamarole
of rising up, dusting off—and my intent
had been made clear. No huddle
before the last play, but you went long
for the touchdown. The pass was complete:
we went our separate ways.
In the shower I imagined you. The grit
of your hair in my mouth, the mark of my
cold hand upon your thigh. The spray
of water against my chest, bouncing
back to the tile. It was not love
but rather this.

Queen of the County Fair Takes the Longest Bike Ride in the History of Texas

Her childhood had a home
but she kept trying to leave it.
Its hallway carpets were a dirty
yellow plush, the linoleum, cracked.
Formica smooth as a heel and sad
as a joke. That one-speed was a ticket
elsewhere. It would have been simpler
to drink some Drano or throw a toaster
in a tub but she left and it ended
in a ditch. Her body expired like milk.
Hot breath riding a swollen tongue.

Soap Opera

The advertisers wanted their money back but we had spent it all on Coca-Cola. *No dice* we said and then our spokesman Larry said that into the phone. *Let the buyer beware* we said and Larry said *You may contact our legal counsel regarding that matter sir Goodbye Hold on Hey guys get me a piece of paper I'm going to draw up a press statement.* Then he drew up the press statement on a clean sheet of paper. It stated two things. First was that we had carved everything out of soap. Second was that everyone sang.

Beards Grow on You

By now you've heard. Irony
and more can be screened on cotton
pre-washed vintage-fit crew-neck tee shirts
and sold en masse. So much is permissible
now that Dog is dead.
In the near future a slice of pizza
will plead with you not to eat it,
its speech balloon nestled
between your nipples. "Sex. Do it
for the kids," another shirt will say. And I will!
Oh, I'll fuck all night in Velcro,
no strings attached. I've been Hungary
for a long time now, and cold.
Every shirt needs a body.
Missouri loves company.
Jesus shaves.

Love Sonnet

I want to take you to Cracker Barrel.
I picked you up at eight.
I think that is a perfect blouse.
I opened the car door for you.
I like the way you ask for sweet tea.
I ordered the catfish.
I love this catfish.
I opened my home to you.
I bought a new set of sheets.
I remarked upon your beauty.
I want to touch your naked breasts.
I remarked upon your beauty.
I will touch your naked breasts.
Your eyes shone like water.

Before It's Too Late

Let's kill a dog. Let's roast it
on an open fire. Degrease our mitts
by touching each other. Handle
ourselves with abandon. Topple
the lifeguard tower & wear the sand
in our hair. Wear the sand on each other.
Grip ourselves & shout obscenities
into the blistering black of night. Grip
each other & eat the air. Let's light
another fire & feed it dollar bills. Find
an application & complete it. Let's
wear clothes made out of other clothes.
Till the sidewalks with hammers
& leave a pile of diapers in a pile.
Let's maroon ourselves in a taxicab. See
if our mothers can find us. Look at naked
women wearing socks & provocative
bib overalls. Then we'll grow mustaches!
Kill a dog! Roast it! Call each other Walter!
It was the Sixties! It was 1972.

Immaculate Heart of Mary

Everyone in the eighth grade at IHM
pretended they knew or did things
they did not. Even I, the altar boy, boasted
about the bodies I saw in zig-zag on channel 99,
like they had invited me onscreen.
But when Kathleen sucked Jesse's cock
at a party, I got scared.

My grandfather's gallbladder exploded
and filled him with a foul gas.
His stomach wobbled and forgave
like a tiny waterbed. In the hospital
he was not a man but a balloon animal
made of old skin, slowly wilting.

I had written some poems about dying.
In the black-hearted garden, they all began,
dripping red hearts drawn next to them
with a Bic. But with Dido almost dead
I could not stop laughing.

My father was convinced I smoked pot,
but I didn't. My mother said my eyes
had become sadder, and maybe they were.
But inside I was soft and clean, as immaculate
as my hairless armpits, as pure as a fresh
pink eraser.

I felt as though I would never get older.
When the doctors deflated my grandfather
I felt as though I would never die.
I did not know then all the things
that could happen. I did not know then
all the ugly and beautiful things
I could become.

2.

Washington Crossing the Delaware

Dad's dead and the war's not over. Boats rock in riptides. Corpses float halfheartedly.
We've been riding the blue for so long, our bucket of minnows has turned into silver
sludge—protein, if you can stomach it.

The hooks have gone with the sinkers.
I have constructed a pyramid made of spools of twenty-pound-test fishing line.
I make jokes about how rope may be put to use.

Soviet Invasion

It was December of 1991. I was eight
years old, a pudgy American boy who played
games in the den. The Cold War was ending.
But suddenly, on Christmas Day, cubes
tumbled, in tandem multicolor from the sky.
At first it was an innocent and perfectly
square hail. Then it felt sinister, like
grenades falling on my very own Chechnya.
I could not tell on which speakers the Russians
were playing their synthesized folk music.
The Communist cubes littered the ground
and like dead bodies they stayed put. I cowered
before them like a child. Then, my head down,
nearly in tears, I heard my mother call my name
from the second floor. I could not let
her down! The Communists, those bastards,
would never ruin me. My parents had told me
I could do anything. So I did. I concentrated
and guided the cubes with the sheer force
of my mind. When the cubes fell into rows
they disappeared. But the tempo
of the Korobeiniki kept increasing
and the cubes kept raining down
At the peak of the action, I lost my focus
and threw myself on the floor,
abandoning myself to Gorbachev
and his dirty Soviet needles. His cubes
had obscured my sun. But nothing
happened. The music stopped and started
again. Gorbachev was nowhere to be found.
My thumbs were sore and my t-shirt
was sweaty. But I was not dead.
The invaders demanded my initials.
I told them A - S - S.

How I Became a Chef

"What else do you put in another person's body?"
—Lydia Bastianich

It was the culmination of many years of history.
Ages and ages ago, in the Neolithic
or Mesozoic or whenever all the poets
were rubbing the ridges of their brows
and wearing underpants of mastodon fur,
Czeslaw Milosz licked himself
and discovered that his body
tasted pretty good. It was raw
and salty and earthy and he had
an idea. After his next kill he took
a slab of stringy red proto-bovine—
this was directly after the invention
of the stone knife—and slapped himself
with it all over, so that the meat
would absorb his own. For him that
might have been a spiritual thing
or as close as anyone could get. But the meat
when cooked had a nasty underarm
funk to it along with its saltiness, and oh
how its terrible taste drew him back
to the many failures of his youth.
He could not eat or hunt for days,
until the clawing in his belly forced
him to the animal again. He tore
another slab from its haunch and held it
close to his face. He wept and found
that his tears flavored the meat too.

Entertaining with Kids

It's hard. At dinner parties the howling of our children, locked in the attic, turns a lively scene into an hors d'oeuvre rigor mortis. The kids can't even keep a tune, so we have to drown them out with Bing Crosby, Betty's favorite crooner. Betty's my wife, who I like to say I married half for her knockers and half for her noggin. She's pretty smart, but not so great with the birth control or the bottles of formula. We manage okay, though, now that the kids are older. If they keep quiet for the party next weekend, I might even give them some of those leftover Jolly Ranchers they like so much. And if that keeps them in line, maybe Betty and I will spring for a plastic Playskool jungle gym for them to hang from.

Adventures in the Middle East

Pinstriped pajamas. Oak paneled study. Glass of cognac. Glass of water. Lamp. No lamp. Sun. Percolator. Beard in sink. Hot water. Tweed. Coffee. Page A5. William Shatner. Gas mask. That old national bromide: "I can't get behind a fat ass."

Everything with a Purpose

Oh don't
you wish.

Beware the Jabberwock, My Son

'Twas brillig and all slither-danced
in the spleening neon. Eyes mean
with knuckles: a burbled discotheque
gristle, sweating in cold Prague night.
Snicker-snacked the beat of the tribal
drum. Zithered the strobe, greening
jaundiced torso and miles of undulating pectus.

Above all, over the swarm, the beach ball—
floating, deflated. Our savior, our well-wrinkled
approximation of man and sphere. Our latex
prize leather tanning above. Then, the Bandersnatch
crack of whip, a-sudden, sounded the frenzied howl
of "Callooh! Callay!" And vorpal the knotted heavy
hands of harpoon. And manxome the dirty mouths
seeking, tongues wet with spittle of frumious leer.

Flood

My wool socks don't wick away the moisture
the way they used to, and our house's drywall
has become as soggy and puckered as my toes.
The weather is cold and damp and the sun
has been mentioning that it is getting old.
Cornflakes are rapidly losing their crunch.
The air is thick and heavy, my wife says.
Everything is giving in. We're across from each
other at the kitchen table, and my forearms
glisten in the fluorescent light. My clammy
hand grasps hers, and she looks at me.
I had imagined that the flood would be salty,
like the ocean, and that it would be deep,
deep enough to drown in. A torrent unleashed.
But this—no, not this. My socks are wet. The beams
of our walls bend toward one another at the knees.
There is no raft, no boat. We are choking.

Clockwise

There is a method of bleeding the air
from a radiator's pipes that prevents
the frenzied water within from scalding
the floor. Heating technicians with zinc-stained
fingers are paid by the hour to kneel
and twist hot metal knobs at precisely
the right moment, releasing the steam,
then caging the boil behind an O-ring.
One such technician returns every winter
to my home. Her job is simple, but she
is friendly and we make conversation.
I have considered doing the work myself,
but I have been lonely here, and cold.
I pay her because I have knobs she can turn.

Heaven

after Anne Marie Rooney

I've ridden the bus before.
I know homeless people
have a stench.

What's your excuse?
You have a floppy hat on
& it looks stupid.

There are dusty moths
banging the bulbs above.
The man in velour gave you

a box of eggs. The first time
we met you were losing
your last three teeth.

Take off your dirty jacket
and rub me down with your
bloody yolks. Rub my stump

till I come. Flood my room
with red gold. The moths
are fallen angels

who get a second chance
when they turn their heads
to watch.

Ballad for Dead Wife

When she died it was no surprise. My sons drove their sedans to Cleveland, where they used to live. They all had come out of her and wanted the rest of what she had to give. In the divorce she drained me like a sieve. Philip was a fag, so he took all her dresses, and Tony's loan shark had demanded her jewels. Larry sneered into the funeral home's guestbook but he left it on a stool. Even Bart, the baby, was balding. He took some old photos to frame. None of the boys started bawling. Judith was her name.

Elegy for Husband

Workers in faded blue operated
yellow machinery by her pond,
trawling the bottom for his body.
The weak porch light cast
a shadow of her as she rocked,
old and weak enough to be
mistaken for her late husband.
The rowboat, set free in the pond,
was her own diversion: she liked
to watch men work. Instead his
body lay under the thick humus
of the garden, face down, open
mouth packed with red clay.
Marriage had grown an intimacy
old as rust. That blood and its
magnetism. His mouth was open
when she buried him, as though
he wanted to say something.
She rocked back and held herself
there for a moment. He always
had something he wanted to say.

It Ain't Over Till It's Over

You were right, Yogi. It was over
when DiMaggio stepped onto the field
and then it was over again
when he tipped his hat and stepped off.
He hit like you wished you could.

Nights on the road, you smooched the floury,
left-over dames named Esther and Gladys
who had grandmotherly bellies and stiff hair—
the girls Hawkeye Pierce would leave for Radar.

DiMaggio left with Marilyn.

And after the games, when you were naked
in the cold showers, your ass cheeks
mashed together like lumps of wet clay,
you said things that made no sense
to hide what was in plain sight.

I know. I have an older, better brother, too.

3.

Writing Instrument

I know that semen is not an adhesive per se, but in my life a metaphorical sense is often demanded. Kerry—you and me, we're stuck together. I impregnated you and you didn't want an abortion, so our little guy is on the way. Semen is like a thick ink, my cock scrawling an urgent message on your womb. It says all the things that I can't—that's why I have to put it in you. But I am writing to you now for real. They called me a pencil dick in high school, #2 softness, so maybe I've been shooting you full of lead. I have to get it out somehow, Kerry. Words fit on a page like a man fits into a woman. It's messy but it's all I've got.

I Used My Hands as Oars

There is a steadfast resistance in those who row
down rivers in wooden canoes, each pull a wobbly
affront to the art of drowning. Their painted hulls
are sealed with tar and sap. Water can take a man
and drink him, leaving only an empty raft floating
at the bottom of the rapids—the paper sheath
of a plastic straw, the discarded wrapper of a candy bar.
But I have always imagined us in a yellow
vacuuformed paddleboat on a lake, our shirts
unbuttoned to reveal our sternums shining
in the sun. I saw the scene again last night before I slept.
Midday: the sun a high-beam on the water's mirror.
Hot. Our candy bars had begun to melt and our fingers
were sticky with chocolate. We had blown all the
Bazooka Joe and laughed at his cartoon jokes.
Our cheeks were full. We talked very little.
No matter. I washed my hands and splashed you.
There was your mouth, rimmed with the nougat
of your delicious Milky Way. You squinted in the sun
and your wet shirt dried. I closed my eyes.
I wanted to taste the sweetness of your mouth
and I leaned toward you but your seat was empty.
I had been seeing things again or maybe you
had evaporated. There were no ripples
on the surface of the lake. You had evaporated
and there was so much water. I wondered
what to do with my hands.

In the black-hearted garden

O the fruit of olive trees shriveling
O the air rough as dry grass on skin
O my brow dirty as a knuckle
O my feet clammy and green
O this sweat thicker than oil
O this bitter spit on my tongue
O my breath dry and unstable
O my tears hot and unclean
O you loiterers who have loitered
O you brothers who have fallen asleep
O Peter remember my blessing
O Zebedee your sons will leave me
O Judas you apocryphal memory
O Judas you Herod remade

Landscape Prayer

Let the rain fall over me and soak
me with your deep affection. Clouds
come. Clouds hover. Clouds go.
I know. This world is as transmutable
as sleet. Watch: Bodies ripped apart
by lightning. Wind sweeping animals
away like dirt. Listen: Hearts pumping,
uncertain and leaky as radiator
heat. The electricity in our wet
brains as hopeless as static. Know: Sleet
will come and sleet will go.
Root me here. Let the wind blow.

The Yard

son	i tell you this	in confidence
you	my favorite son	you will understand
me	i was in the yard	the gang's name was
this	before i had english	on my tongue
and	i was ten years old	some boys
not	ukrainian	bled my cheek
more	american	red and white like the flag

Last Will and Testament of Bonobo T. James

after Zachary Harris

I never wanted any of thing
that has been my history. I did not ask
to be born. Neither did you, but we
can chalk that one up to me—
an old story, but true. I've hidden stuff
under these floorboards that doesn't even
exist. Keep looking. Take off your tie
and let the flowers melt in their vases—
I won't be here to watch. I'm hoping
that I can carry some nickels with me
to the afterlife, like the Egyptians carried
livers packed in honey, so I can remember
all the good times we spent here
at this shithole on Smith Street, where the sun
came to die. I made elaborate contraptions
from toilet paper and paper towel tubes.
You remember those, son. I rolled
my nickels down them and heard
the nickels plink into the basket your
mother had woven for that very purpose.
Yes, I'm hoping to bring some nickels
with me when I gone. You can take
the rest of my crap and put it in your attic
along with your mom's crap
and your memories of us
will huddle among the rafters.

Mortar and Pestle

The mirror. The window. The road.
Oregon. Has there been a gold rush?
There's the detritus: flecks

of pyrite flung like mustard
seeds; they grow, sowing greed and hope
and the seed of faith in man. Flecks

of pyrite, mustard seeds.
Hopping in cast iron.
Mortar and pestle,

wheat and chaff. Goats. Sheep. Abalone
off the California coast, hunted
by the greying Dr. and Mrs. Fox.

Her deep breaths and map
from memory. Knife handle
made of bone. A dark undertow

pulling against the rocks.
She drowned. He had forgotten how
to save her. Alone, he sifted her ashes into the sea.

Their children had given them up.
Had given up their parents.
Had ground into stone their mustard seeds.

Shed

Raccoon mask
of open sores,
your hot touch
a quicksilver sliding
down my belly.
Sinking us
both.

Where
did you hide
your scales?
We could have
tasted them
& sifted them
for gold.

Stoic

Think of the Virgin Mary
entering the synagogue, son
in her arms. Think of
the brief moment in which
she straightens her back
and swallows. Your mother
hesitating to tell your father
she is pregnant, eyes open,
neck muscles tight. They pray
at the coffee table and decide.
They think of names. Michael
or Michelle. Think of their
deep breaths, turning
something they didn't want
into something they did.

Sweaty Birds

Post-apocalypse: All the dead
birds alive again, loafing
in a multi-room sauna.
The stupid-looking ones
huddle in a corner.
The dodo drunk
on fruit juice. The turkey
talking neck with the pelican.
Assorted penguins complaining
about the heat.

O Buenos Aires Where the Beef Roam Freely

and board city buses full of men and cows
nurse their young in all the city's best
plazas and pretend that some errant steers
do not hang like dejected teenagers from ceilings
in the city's most highly favored shops
their chests cleaved in two sad halves
dangling awkward and maroon.
O Buenos Aires I could set myself free
in a pasture on your hills where old men
would watch me ruminate and scoop
my dung and protect my children and want me
to be glad in their green grass and to frolic
should I wish or to fatten should I munch and laze.
O Buenos Aires in my life there are no good knives
and no kind old men and no bullish certainty
that every good life ends with a purpose
or that every life with a purpose is good.
O Buenos Aires I would happily live in you
for to live among the good airs is to be satisfied
or dead and to die is to have lived fat and happy.

4.

They Will Come Wearing Uniforms of Blue

1.

What has become of the pizza cutter
and his fat cousin the basting tube?
Perhaps they ran off as gay lovers.
Perhaps not. But they have left my cabinet
and I consider their souls lost to the night.

2.

No kitchen utensils misplaced are ever lost.
They walk off the earth as toward heaven
but disappear like lemmings in black
Arctic water. Even eggbeaters and spatulas
want what is best in the afterlife. Little
do they know that they do not know.
Their souls are pure vinyl and innocent.

3.

Here is some gentle advice for you, Michael.
There is no such thing as loss, only not found
and maybe not found forever. Did you check
the dishwasher? The elastic band of your
shorts? In the past the postal service
has mishandled some items.

4.

Perhaps postmen entered your home
and mishandled your tools. Upon breaking
the pizza cutter they took its corpse. Upon
using the baster to blow air in their faces
they pocketed it for later. The postmen
know all the zip codes. They make all
the stamps. The postmen are gods, Michael.
Let them take whatever they want.

Letter to a Young Criminal

Don't trust anything, not even the newspaper.
Any facts you hear are only a guess. Cops
are just like reporters. They write down
everything, minus the truth. They want
to turn you into a snitch, a rat, a stoolie.
The DA's a bitch who knows the law. You don't.
Get a lawyer. Remember that hearsay needs
more than an ear. Don't tell anyone anything,
not even your name. If they press you, it's Bugs B.
M. Mouse. Shit, don't even admit you ate
a sandwich unless they've got the crusts
to prove it. Maybe they've got some mayo
on wax paper down at the bowling alley,
your shade of lipstick sucked onto some butts
near the scene of a crime. But I wouldn't
worry. Draw your alibi tight—you were
at a funeral, a friend of a friend.
Check the obit in the paper, read that long
list of names. Don't believe anything till
you see it in a box. You're nobody
till somebody kills you.

Many Turkeys, Impressively Arrayed

I hosted a convention of all the thugs in Jersey
whose names were Joey. Seventeen limousines
deposited shifty-eyed, swarthy men in front
of my establishment, the Shore Thing
Motor Inn. They strutted under the green
awning in the summer heat. They adjusted
their elastic waistbands. Joey the Fork,
who I knew through a church group,
congratulated me on the gathering.
I was elated. But I sensed the hunger
of the many Joeys, and I ceased to mingle.
I showed them into my air-conditioned
dining room, where an impressive array of turkeys
lay in wait. I opened bottle after bottle of Barolo
and instructed my staff to bring us fine platters
of pink beef and spit-roasted suckling pig.
After several hours at table some men excused
themselves to the restrooms but returned
with renewed vigor. Additional napkins
were made available for those who requested them.
So many greasy faces smiled at me. I loved
the fat men. I remembered what it was like
to give pleasure and to receive it back twofold.
I fell asleep easily upon another man's bosom.
When I woke up everyone was gone but many
turkey carcasses remained. I collected their
wishbones, washed them, dried them,
and put them in a small box. I put the box
on the desk in my office, and sat down.
How lovely it all had been.

Night on the Boulevard

It was night on the boulevard. In my hands I held:
    a nipple,
    a siphon,
    a jar scraped clean of Vegemite.
Missing the silver of the spoon,
missing the shine of the vessel,
lamenting my lost rattail but savoring
    the nipple—
it was the last night I wore white vinyl.

The Perfect Weapon

That is, if you're into stabbings.
It's thick as a wrist, long as a stake,
sharp enough to puncture a sternum
if the aim is true. An icicle.

Feel the chill of satisfaction from a job
well done. And like the Magic Bullet,
clean up is a snap! The fingerprints
just drip away.

No other implement for homicide
excuses a pair of leather ski gloves.
No other crime-scene evidence
can evaporate by the hearth
or disappear before a grand jury.

The perfect weapon needs
the perfect criminal. There is so much
to consider. Who will see you?
Where will you do it? How close
is the nearest icebox, if your crime
must be committed in heat?

Every murderer leaves twenty-five clues
behind. You'd better backtrack. Write
an alibi. Know who you want to kill.

Solar Power Ruined My Life

after Michael Hartwell

The brochures from Sun Harvest & Co.
told us what we could expect: wonderment,
for starters, and the smug satisfaction
of an investment in the latest
green technology. When the technicians
installed the solar grids in the fields
they told us about how much money
we'd save. They were liars who lied
to us. They shaved our fields brown.
They drove stakes into our pristine earth.
They erected mirrors that blinded us.
Then they left. I had to build a wall
to separate our house from the sun farm.
When it was cloudy all our ice cream
melted. Our water was never hot enough.
I became cranky. My wife left me
for a man who had not cut himself
free of coal power. I wept in the fields
and tried to slice my wrists on the sharp
edges of the solar panels. I refused
to drink bottled water or eat organic food.
I stripped naked, lay down on the panels,
and waited for the sun to electrify me.

The New York Explorers Club

A globe with a meridian the diameter
of a fat man's hula hoop
rests its equator on a carved goblet
just as an egg, soft-boiled and wobbly,
rests in an egg cup and awaits the spoon.

Four men, hair slicked back
to when eggs had time to sit in cups,
huddle over one hemisphere, holding a map
like a damp blanket over smoking logs.

The old Scotsman with corrective shoes
and stockings tight on his aging calves
bears down on the map.

A pair of slickers point eagerly
at the ocean, grins wider than their lapels.

A balding, thick-bearded man closes
his eyes, deep in thought or ready
for a nap. A wooden leg
juts out of his pants.

Above the toothy smiles
of the young men and behind
the wrinkled eyes of their mentors,
the booty of previous expeditions: framed
photographs—a chimpanzee
and a tribesman cuddling behind Peg Leg,
wooly quadrupeds cavorting near the Scot.

The varnished head of a hippopotamus
sprouts open-jawed from the wall.

The Life Well Lived

for E. Warren Perry, Jr.

I come from Mississippi,
and the news is that I wrote
another play. It's good. It's got
a soup can played by a cute girl
and painters portrayed by large men
wearing powdered wigs.
Warhol and Whistler are in it.
The play is about history and art
and makes light of situations some
notable homosexual smokers
have found themselves in.
I thought I'd take some chances
with the content. Thought I'd really
explore the space. And the critics
loved me. I won their awards,
was invited to all their fancy parties.
I became the toast of the town.
What a year it has been.
All that sitting. All that dining.
All those bucks spent living
the life well lived.

Stay Gold, Ponyboy

My toilet does one-point-six gallons per flush,
but let's just call it a bucket and a few
broken pipes. It's a matter of pride.
I have not forgotten my childhood in Wilmington,
Delaware, growing up above the garage
and staring at the ceiling from the brown plush
floor. I burped with possibility.
But there was no hard-won poetry there,
not even a five-paragraph essay on the great
Midwestern cheddars. So I went to college,
toughed it out, made the grade. Moved
to Brooklyn and lived in a windowless room
taller than it was wide. I read some books—
none of the great ones—and met some crazies.
I convinced myself I was one, or could be
if I tried. I left with a parking ticket still
unpaid, just hoping for the lawman to come
after me, I guess, and teach me a thing or two
about respecting the roadways of that great
municipality. But now I'm back in another
home, Pittsburgh, conflicted about screwing
a seventy-five watt bulb into a sixty-watt
fixture. I'm lying on the floor again and staring
up at the light socket from another brown carpet.
When I'm fifty, sitting in a van outside
the supermarket, I will think back to this time.
Back to when I lived on the edge in the steel city,
worried by thoughts of electricity.

Tundra

I did not read the letter that you included with the rest, because it had been torn down the middle—a statement in itself. When I burned the rest of them I also burned the one that you had torn, and I was done with you. But I remember seeing words on one of those torn pages as it curled in the flame: "flummoxed," "lemming," "mustache," "again." I have turned these words over in my mind since that incineration of letters last November, and I have reached the conclusion that you were referring to our trip to the Arctic, however brief, and the disease of candor that befell us. How cold it was. Here is my response: It is not that I stopped loving you on that trip. It is that I never began.

Stories and Essays

Clancy and the Reversible Corduroy

Clancy stood in the hotel bathroom and stared at himself in the mirror. Yeah, he was an old loser. Pale chest, white thighs like pie dough wrapped around chicken bones, his belly pouting like a lip over the band of his briefs.

He heard the room door click shut, then pushed his thinning hair back and rubbed his glasses clean with a towel. He hadn't thought about what he had entered the bathroom to think about, or thought about anything at all, really, but it was time to get back to the hotel room. He pushed through the door and heard the staticky strains of a cello playing through the clock radio, a red-lettered digital with a colon flashing. 1:07. PM.

The envelope was gone from the bed table. That was for the best. He wouldn't have been able to spend it, not after he had brought it here.

Clancy unfolded his clothes and threaded himself into a broadcloth shirt and his Dockers, and then let out a soft groan as he inserted his feet, always tender, into the penny loafers he had worn since '86. He picked up the briefcase and left.

Back at the office Clancy put both elbows on his work table. After a minute he reached into a paper sack, pulled out an apple, and drew a line on it with his thumbnail. He took a bite. It was warm and mealy, but it was lunch. He munched and hunched until he heard the approaching click of expensive shoes on tile and moments later smelled a mixture of bacon grease and Vitalis.

"Yes, Terrence?" Clancy said, straightening up.

"Thought you went out for lunch today, Clancy?"

"That's so. That's so indeed. But Terrence, haven't you ever heard that an apple a day keeps the doctor away?" Terrence nodded. Clancy paused. "So this is a medical matter. Allow me some privacy in my treatment."

"Such a kidder!" Terrence pointed at Clancy and winked. "Keep up the good work there, Clancy."

Clancy watched him walk away and gnawed again at the apple. Happening upon the core, he tossed it in the garbage and drew a long sigh. He swiveled and faced his drawing table, which was covered by grid paper and elementary mathematics.

He picked up a thick novelty pencil—one that needed to be sharpened by hand—and tapped it on the paper. Swiveling again to determine if anyone was coming, he withdrew an early issue of *Batman* and slid it underneath the graph paper. He began to trace, first the logo and then the movement lines that sprung from Batman's cape and obscured Robin. He moved to Batman's helmet, then down to his shoulders, and then to the belt of gadgets.

"One day," he thought, "I will invent a reversible corduroy. And then I will have it all."

The Unfettered Mind

It was mid-afternoon and eight minutes in, but the time didn't matter to me. Time matters only at the beginning or end of something, and I was right in the middle of the West Falls Pie Eating Contest of 1996. I lifted myself from the rhubarb pie and plowed back down into it, taking a quick breast-stroker's breath. My sticky face was hot from exertion and residual oven heat but that was the way I liked my pie, hot—and with a flaky crust that disappeared on the tongue. Not that the taste even mattered, not when I was eating against Bulldog Horris.

At the next breath I let my neck turn and my eyes focused briefly on him, the fat and hairy man next to me, flecks of crust in his bushy mutton chops. Pie filling smeared on his lips, hanging from his nose. He was a wild, untamed eater, like a snarling bear, but his grey-stubbled jowls were the reason for his nickname. Who knew how my wife had fallen in love with him. He did not eat so much as obliterate. He did not think but to destroy.

And I could not allow myself to think about Bulldog as I ate. For weeks I had cultivated the zazen no-mind that I knew could win me the contest, the loss of self I'd need to push past the esophageal Wall. For a while it worked: there was nothing except pie and the eating of pie, the disappearing of pie into me, and then hardly even the taste until the last swipes of my hand brought crumbs to my lips and my tongue rang with sweetness and demanded milk.

I pounded my fist on the rough wood table to call for another pie, this one strawberry, and glugged a swallow of two-percent. And then I was in the thick of another crust and then in its warm goo, swimming toward the plate's far end, drowning my awareness in the juicy red center. But it could not continue forever.

Later, there would be a time for judgment, a time for lamentations and complaints, a time to digest. But it was the middle of July in 1996. Indulgence had become sport, and overindulgence, art.

Portrait of the Life Artist as an Old Man

Abington Holdings, LLC, delivers mail to its tenants on East 24th Street.

The Life Artist leans his cane against the wall and bends over to pick the envelope up from the floor. He grunts. He opens the envelope. He grunts.

Man! Life ain't what it used to be!

The Life Artist's former daughter-in-law moves away.

"To where?"

"Not here."

"I bet she's moving to Parsnippany, New Jersey."

"Can you watch Kevin after he gets out of school?"

"Watch him? Hell, I'll even talk to him!"

The Life Artist rebels against his landlords.

He purchases a turtle and puts it in his bathroom sink. The turtle's name is Smitty, and he counts as an illicit pet under the guidelines set forth in Article IV, Section 3.3 "Additional Constraints on Lessee" of the renewal lease the Life Artist has just signed.

Age is a state of mind, the Life Artist reminds himself.

"Do you know what a lease is, Kevin?" the Life Artist asks his grandson.

"Not really," the boy says. The boy gnaws listlessly at his thumb.

"Neither do I!" the Life Artist exclaims, and tosses Smitty into the air.

The Life Artist's minor rebellion inspires him rekindle an old flame.

Justine, the Life Artist's old college flame, moves from eighty-sixth street to a smaller apartment on seventy-third street. The Life Artist hears about this from a friend of a friend, and shows up at Justine's door with a new haircut and a bottle of wine.

"Surprise!" he says.

"The Life Artist!" she says, and smiles.

The old flame burns.

The Life Artist's heir-apparent declines to spend time with him..

"Stephen, let's go out for an egg cream," the Life Artist says. "My treat."

"I don't like egg creams," his son says.

The Life Artist's son wears a suit and tie. He is unused to being called by his first name. He used to like egg creams.

Age is a state of mind, the Life Artist reminds himself.

"Do you know what a state of mind is, Kevin?" the Life Artist asks his grandson.

"Not really," the boy says. The boy puts a spoon into his mouth.

"Neither do I!" the Life Artist exclaims, and throws his arms into the air. Confetti does not fall from the ceiling.

The Life Artist feigns self-consciousness about his appearance.

Jenkins' Wig and Wig Repair Shop on West Broadway services all manner of customers. The Life Artist and Justine, holding hands, pass by its window on a date.

"My hair has been thinning, Justine. Think I'll need one of these any time soon?" He lifts both their hands to point at a ginger-colored bob.

"Seventy's a little late to be thinking about a sex change," she says. She squeezes his toosh, on the wallet side.

"Oh, you old bag," the Life Artist says.

The building super is tricked by the Life Artist.

"Watch this," says the Life Artist.

Kevin watches.

"Hey, Johnny, your shoelaces are untied!" says the Life Artist.

Johnny looks down and sees that his shoelaces are not untied.

"Gotcha!" says the Life Artist.

Kevin and Smitty forge a bond on Kevin's day off from school.

"Grandpa, I'm hungry," says Kevin.

The Life Artist is busy watching *The Price Is Right*.

"Smitty's hungry too," says Kevin.

Kevin learns more about "Gotcha!"

The Life Artist points to a spot on Kevin's tee shirt.

"You've got a little something right there," he says.

Kevin looks down. The Life Artist pokes his chin.

"Gotcha!" the Life Artist says.

The Life Artist deposits Kevin at his father's apartment.

The building is tall. Its exterior is so glossy it looks perpetually wet. The Life Artist disapproves of his son for choosing to waste his money on an apartment in such a building.

Kevin twirls in circles around the Life Artist in the elevator up to the sixty-fourth floor.

"Good night, young stallion," the Life Artist says when the doors open. "Good night and good luck."

The Life Artist's heir-apparent telephones the Life Artist.

"What's this about a turtle named Smith?"

"My lease prohibits me from having a turtle named Smith."

"Kevin says you have a turtle named Smith that you feed cabbage to and toss in the air like a baby."

"Why don't you come over and find out. I'll make you an egg cream."

"Enough with the egg creams. Get rid of the turtle."

Kevin learns about women.

The Life Artist entertains Kevin after school. They watch TV.

"See that woman?" the Life Artist asks. "That's Bea Arthur."

"Oh," says Kevin.

"Yeah," says the Life Artist.

Dr. Zankiewicz prescribes some medicine for the Life Artist.

"If it stays up for four hours, then I'm in trouble?" the Life Artist asks.

The doctor taps his chart and says, "Yes."

Age is a state of mind, the Life Artist reminds himself.

"Do you know what it's like to be old, Kevin?" the Life Artist asks his grandson.

"Yeah," the boy says. He is eating Life cereal.

"How old?" the Life Artist asks.

"Ten," the boy says.

The Life Artist leaves a message for his heir-apparent at work.

"Son, I just want to say that tonight at ten o'clock I might be having a heart attack. In the event that I kick the bucket, wait, that implies suicide, but I mean I will just have an elevated heart rate and things happen, you know, and I lo—"

Beep.

The Life Artist's heir-apparent returns his father's telephone call.

"Are you okay?"

"Terrific."

"God, you can't go leaving a message on my machine that you might have a heart attack tonight at exactly ten o'clock."

"You're just upset," says the Life Artist.

"Yes, I'm upset."

"I mean upset that I'm getting laid more often than you."

"What?"

"Her name is Justine."

"What?"

The Life Artist misses the company of his grandson during the day.

The Life Artist visits his turtle in the bathroom.

"Smitty, turn over," the Life Artist says. Smitty does not turn over.

"Smitty, just sit there and enjoy the luxury of my sink," the Life Artist says.

I value my independence, the Life Artist reminds himself.

The Life Artist creeps out of bed and begins inserting his legs into his trousers. Justine wakes up.

"Am I just one stop on the midnight express?" she asks.

"Yes," the Life Artist says. He strikes a half-dressed debonair pose in the moonlight, and winks at her.

The Life Artist makes a joke about the news.

In California, another dry forest has caught on fire. Thousands of acres of forest are destroyed. Justine relates these facts to the Life Artist.

"So this is what rekindling a flame can lead to," he tells her.

"Har, har," she says.

The Life Artist misses the company of his grandson during the day.

The Life Artist visits his turtle in the bathroom.

"Smitty, turn over," the Life Artist says. Smitty does not turn over.

"Smitty, just sit there and enjoy the luxury of my sink," the Life Artist says.

Justine wants to spend afternoons together.

The Life Artist trims his mustache when he's busy thinking about things.

Short white whiskers fall on Smitty like snow on a hill.

He decides to call the boy.

Kevin helps make an important decision.

"What do you think I should do about this lady friend of mine?"

"My dad says she's going to take all your money."

"Is she?"

"I don't think so."

"Okay, then."

It's a Wednesday.

The Life Artist considers taping his favorite television programs to watch later, but does not.

Justine and he drink tea, play Scrabble, and take a nap in separate chairs.

They pick up Kevin at school together.

Man! Life ain't what it used to be!

Alfresco

Donald spent a lot of time imagining. He had lived in a bubble for years.

Donald thought that there was a poignancy in the air, as though his doctor had farted and quickly left the room, but there was no doctor, and there was no room. Why did he think of his immunologist passing gas? He did not know, but it is what he thought. Donald felt very out of place outside the bubble.

The afternoon had been full of small epiphanies, but it was now evening. As Donald stood in the dark forest, he realized he had never truly recognized what being inside meant: that he was not outside. And what a pleasure to be outside was! He was out of place but he was also smiling. Smiling, he thought, like gangbusters. "Like gangbusters!" he shouted.

He then thought about his new shoes. They were a brown calf's leather—or so the salesman had assured him. Manny. Manny the shoe salesman. Needless to say, neither he nor Manny had been witness to the slaughter, skinning, tanning, and manufacture of the leather that now shielded his feet from the elements.

And what elements they were: air, blown inexplicably by wind; moisture, clinging to that air; earth, packed into the ground by some unknown but gentle god. The moment was so apparently poignant! He was outside; he was not breathing air purified by a series of HEPA filters and an Ionic Breeze. His arms began to tingle and he took as deep a breath as he could.

Yes!

Moments later Daniel felt dizzy and shook his head vigorously. Then the image of the farting immunologist came to him, and then his mind ranged to the portion of his youth spent in Milwaukee, before he had entered the bubble. He recalled that they had great diners there, all-night attractions that attracted an interesting clientele. But many of these diners did not have sidewalk seating in the summer.

In the bubble, Donald had valued this trait of many of Milwaukee's diners. He took a consistent pleasure in knowing that should they wish to, patrons could not enjoy a brisk breeze while they pancakes ate out of doors. They were just as trapped as he.

But now, as a burgeoning adult tasting the sweet smell of fresh-air freedom, Donald began to question his previous assessment of Milwaukee's diners. Wouldn't it be pleasurable to dine alfresco? Yes, yes, he thought. He thought it would.

Roly-Poly

"You first parents of the human race . . . who ruined yourself for an apple, what might you have done for a truffled turkey?"

—Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin,
The Physiology of Taste

There is a sort of person for whom high school marks the height of his achievement, the pinnacle of his satisfaction. For him, those four years remain a time of unparalleled youthful exuberance. Nostalgia, however warped, recalls the pleasures of physical prowess, of sexual experimentation, of feeling invincible. In my mind, which is equally twisted by my own desires, such a person will be washed up at the age of forty, a drinker of cheap beer. He will refer to high school as the "best time of his life," and it will be a fact. Some people were born to go to high school, and their lives after graduation are spent in sad decline. Or so I'd like to believe.

If nothing else, high school is an amplifier and a polarizer, an institution that sets people in their ways. My high school, Salesianum, was where boys came to become men. In my experience, it was also where little assholes became big assholes, and I learned that the process of becoming oneself often promotes the arrogant belief one's own path is the best. The impressions formed in high school stay with us.

And so the characterization of the boorish has-been, clutching a can of Busch in one hand and his old high school football jersey in the other, sticks with me. This characterization is how I still think of the enemies I had in high school—if I can legitimately say I actually had any. These people were of a particular breed, and I resented them for being able to excel in a social arena that was, at times, very difficult for me. I imagined the people that they would become—the students who weren't in

my more rigorous classes, the students who played football or baseball or somehow had found themselves in the set that asserted its coolness in a way that made everyone else believe in it. I resented them because the only reaction I could conjure was arrogance about my intellectual superiority to them.

The resentment remains, even though I cannot remember many of the names of those who offended my sensibilities the most. I did not have a terrible time in high school: I found a group of students who shared my academic interests, who were not nerds but who were not buffoons either. We shared values: that we had determined that no matter how good high school—or any period in our lives—could be, the best lay in the present and future, not in the past.

By the time I reached tenth grade I had already decided that I never wanted to long for a period that had passed, or for the person I thought I was then. That's not to say that I have cut nostalgia out of my mind. I certainly do long for the idylls of Mrs. Niger's kindergarten room, with its plentiful store of juice boxes, Play-Doh, and afternoon naps. It is to say, however, that I never wanted to be a has-been. If I legitimately reached my pinnacle at seventeen, my life thereafter would have to be a real shitpot. Therefore, onward and upward.

Years after graduating from Salesianum School, an all-boys institution, I must say that I've moved upward—and if not that, then certainly onward. At least I've maintained a pace with the current of my life, and I'm at a different point in it than I used to be. But if our lives are rivers we travel down, I'm still riding the same raft I was in high school, and in high school, I floated in the same buoyant vessel as I did in middle school.

It is my belief that people do change, but that more importantly we remain the same. We cannot un-become the people we used to be. Personal change, for me, has

to do with the aggregation, rather than the replacement, of experiences and thoughts. We add onto the mound of things that we define ourselves by and so change our compositions. The way individuals change is more like the way a landfill accrues its character than the way cars are traded in: our experiences pile on top of one another the way fresh vegetable matter sits on top of a compost bin. There is no replacement for what we used to be; there are only supplements. Many aspects of our personae run deep, though, and no amount of garbage on top of them can fully alter their impacts on who we are and who we become.

I recognize that to hold the position of my own intellectual superiority over others—many of whom I never even spoke to—was arrogant and insolent and in at least some cases, incorrect. Experience has taught me this lesson: I am not as smart as I think I am, and other people are not as dumb as I'd like to believe they are. In college, I formed deep friendships with people I would have shunned a few years before—but the later behavior does not undo the first. All I can do is I hope I learned something along the way, because I am both behaviors, not just one of them. I may no longer exercise my arrogance in the specific ways I did in high school, but I do know that the quality of arrogance, like all other qualities, lies dormant within me. As Whitman says, "Do I contradict myself? Very well then, I contradict myself. I am large, I contain multitudes."

The self we often speak of is an agglomeration of smaller selves—the people we once were but have left behind. We shed our previous selves like snake skins, but they trail behind us like the diagram of Australopithecus Afarensis trails behind Homo Erectus in the classic diagrams of human evolution. Our history as a human species is tied to the species of ape we evolved from. We can never fully rid ourselves of the history from which we have emerged.

In high school, I was at times insolent, headstrong, and argumentative, but I was also caring and smart. I exercised the same qualities earlier on in life, too. As much as I'd like to consider my development as a person by considering these qualities as they were represented in the people I used to me, doing so might well be futile. Memories are tinted by the ways we want to consider the past. For instance, I might recall instances of my assertiveness as a second-grader because I would love to believe that I have always been someone who sticks up for himself. I want to believe that I've always been selfless and kind because I value those qualities now.

One thing I have always been is fat. Photo albums will verify my claim. There's no need for postmodern babble about Subject and Object or the subjectivity we impose on our own memories. Being fat is quantifiable and verifiable, and a more trustworthy description of myself than saying I've always been kind, or arrogant, or any other dubious value judgment. And yet it's different than having freckles or being from Wilmington, Delaware—other qualities that have stuck with me through the years—because fatness does mean something in our society.

Of course, "fat" does mean different things at different times. For the past couple years, I've been weighing in at or above 275 pounds. Seeing the way my hairy flesh hangs onto my frame now is much different than examining my newfound belly chub as a fourth-grader. For that matter, it's also different than struggling with "the deuce"—my term for the 200-pound threshold—in tenth grade. I haven't always been as heavy as I am now, but I've always been overweight.

I've been smart, insolent, arrogant, shy, and walked through many different personalities. I have accumulated different selves, and in a sense I have shoved them into my widening gut. My persona has mutated, and along with it, so has my body: I have the stretch marks to prove it. And, since it's easiest to examine oneself from a

fixed perspective, when I think of the ways I've changed, maybe the best way to consider myself is from this fixed point—that I've almost always been heavier than my peers.

Let's get back to high school. I was tubby before then—since the end of third grade, I think, after I switched elementary schools and began to run out of growth spurts. But high school is a crucible unlike elementary school. At Salesianum, we were supposed to become men. I don't think I became a man in high school, but I did begin to weigh like one.

Every time I've entered a new community, it's taken a long while before I have been able to make myself feel at home in it. It was two years after I switched elementary schools before I found friends that really felt like friends, rather than just people I did things with. I spent a year at Salesianum before I stopped feeling mostly like an outsider. A year into high school was when the FGB was formed.

I was taking a Christian morality class with Father Spellman, a former Navy chaplain who rode a motorcycle, took naps during class, and whose face reminded me of a pink and fleshy newborn mole. One of the projects was to team up with a classmate and to face off on an issue of morality in current events against another duo of students. My team was to argue against the morality of medicinal marijuana use.

When the day of our oral arguments came, I arrived at school in a suit and tie—which was not out of the ordinary, as the school's dress code mandated a sportcoat, slacks, and a tie. I also wore an overcoat that my father had long grown out of and carried my papers in a briefcase I had acquired for use in Model United Nations competitions. The overcoat was dark grey and was trimmed in faux fur. I topped it all off with a fedora. I must have looked like the son of a gangster, caught playing dress-up.

My side lost the arguments, but I received a lot of commentary on my choice of clothing. Most of it was benign, but my carrying the briefcase really touched one of Mark Facciolo's nerves. He was a short soccer player who had a habit of mouthing off. He harped on the idiosyncrasy of the thing, tried to knock it away from me, and called me gay. The remarks were nothing out of the ordinary, nothing extraordinarily cruel or mean—the usual homophobic patter from one member of the peanut gallery. "Gay" at an all-boys Catholic school covers a wide swath of meanings, but suffice to say it was a strong denigration.

Facciolo's cronies picked up on the anomaly and I caught all sorts of flak. My reaction was to bring the briefcase in the next day, and the next, while returning with my own snide commentary. But within a few weeks, two friends had also purchased briefcases and toted them to school along with their backpacks. A show of solidarity. But we had an additional thing in common, beyond the briefcases—we were all fat. Naturally, we called ourselves the FGB, Fat Guys with Briefcases. We knew it was dorky, but it came to be much more than that.

Fast forward through suspender-snapping in the lunch line, briefcases being stolen and stuffed into trash cans, and other garden-variety pranks. Along the way my skin thickened. The FGB became less about the briefcases and more about being fat. It was a mark of something that made us different, and somehow it became a subversive way of being proud of those differences. I suspect, though, that it was also another defense mechanism developed by my mind to control the discourse on my deficiencies.

Of course, it was not always the case that fatness was a deficiency. Plumpness used to indicate one's high class and wealth. Plumpness was a necessary characteristic for the chief of a tribe. It was a quality that exhibited the richness of one's life.

Today, though, you know the story. Our society's focus on thinness is perhaps excessive, but I cannot deny the essential truths that inform our modern perspectives on fatness. Being thin is healthier; I'll live longer if I don't put such strain on my heart and my joints. Being fat is selfish; it means using more than is necessary—a certain evil in a world where so many are unable to sustain themselves. I am ashamed of the weakness (and the haughtiness) that allows me to persist as an obese person. But fatness is nonetheless something that I've accepted in such a way that I'm unwilling to let go of it. I'm willing to accept that all other qualities may come and go, but I'm afraid to change the fundamental pillar of my existence.

Name a quality, and I can see it through the lens of my body type. The obvious ones are easy. Jolliness? Well, ho ho ho, I'm Santa Claus. Low self-esteem? No doubt it's related to the circumference of my waist. But expand a bit: Why do I have a beard? In part because it hides a double chin. How come I've chosen a life that straddles technology and literature? Both are sedentary, and a fat man abhors exercise.

Fatness isn't the reason for who I am, and it's certainly not all that I am. Still, I can't help but connect almost every aspect of my person to the body I inhabit. The proof, they say, is in the pudding.

Young Scholars

The previous weekend, Carlos and Mitchell bought the video camera and filmed a stop-action animation of Yoda riding a My Little Pony from Goodwill in their kitchen sink. It was Carlos's idea, but Mitchell did most of the work, fitting Yoda with a flexible plastic peg that plugged into a freshly-drilled hole in the pony's saddle.

The animation came off well enough, once it had been edited down and fitted into a loop—Yoda rearing back on the animal as it careened around a pole of running water seemed to connect the faucet to the drain. The only trouble was lighting; shadows had revealed their amateur camerawork, and the picture was grainy. Mitchell was convinced the quality had to do with the camera's white balance. The next weekend, he was diddling around with the camera on the porch when Carlos came out of the house.

He set two gallons of whole milk in a bucket full of ice in the backyard while Mitchell continued pushing buttons. Techno music from the campus radio station blasted from a cheap boombox they kept on the porch, next to the bag of red Solo cups they inherited from the previous tenants, who used them for keg parties that Carlos and Mitchell didn't have the guts to throw.

They were nineteen years old, too timid to get fake IDs, and too aware of their place in the college hierarchy to invite enough people to make getting a keg worth the cost. They'd had bad experiences living in the dorms together, too, with alcohol, or with belligerent college drunks at least.

They had lucked out by rooming together by chance freshman year, and moved off campus as soon as they could—complaining to their parents of the incessant noise in their dormitory and the always-encroaching debauchery of the bathrooms at

the end of their halls. Living alone in a small house a mile or so from where most students hung out, their weekends had become filled with a private nerdiness and activities like building a complex system of tubes that delivered cans of soda from a wall-mounted mini-fridge to their sofa. They watched a lot of *Mystery Science Theatre* on DVD.

"Come on, is it ready yet?" Carlos called as he set up a card table next to the bucket of milk and ice. The spring afternoon was warm. Carlos, wearing a tight undershirt with "CARLOS" written in bold Sharpie across his pillowy belly, had begun to perspire.

"Just one more minute," Mitchell said, looming over the tripod. "Stand by the table and let me adjust this one last time."

"Dude, it's going to get dark soon, and the white balance won't matter," Carlos said. "Let's just *do this*."

Mitchell pressed a few more buttons, adjusted the tripod, then said, "Fine, is the stuff ready?" Carlos said yeah. "Then let's *do this*! I'm rolling."

"Get some shots of the milk," Carlos said, doing an exaggerated deep-knee bend.

"I'm already rolling!" Mitchell stood in front of the camera and took off the red Delaware Math League Champions t-shirt to reveal his own undershirt, Sharpied "MITCHELL," and said in his best movie-announcer voice, "On March the third, two thousand five, two young men entered one backyard."

Carlos joined him. "Their mission: to consume two gallons of milk in one hour."

"Science said it could not be done."

"But science was wrong."

They solemnly poured milk into the red cups and looked each other in the eyes. Carlos said, "A toast! To lactose!"

"To lactose!"

"One hour begins—now."

Despite careful calculations of how many ounces of milk to drink each minute, the scene ended in half its expected time, with projectile vomit that would have done an frat brother on spring break proud.

That night, Carlos and Mitchell lounged on the living room couches, actively ignoring the problem sets that lay on the coffee table in front of them.

"We totally have to do it again. Take some lactase enzyme pills, or something," Carlos said.

Mitchell prodded his stomach. "No can do, Monsignor. No can do."

"But how will we know if it was just the milkfat that caused us to puke, or if the lactose had something to do with it?"

"I'll watch you do it. As an independent observer."

"The experiment requires more than one subject, Mitchell." Carlos turned earnestly to him, propping himself on arm of the couch. "What about the *science*?"

Mitchell didn't say anything but walked out of the room and toward the bathroom. Carlos picked up the assignment sheet—electrical engineering stuff—and groaned a little. He had begun the first problem when Mitchell returned, saying, "You're definitely doing it alone next time."

"I'm doing the first half, so you start on the second," Carlos said, holding up the sheet.

"But the second half is harder."

"Yeah, but it's hardest to actually start working, and I already did that, Mitch-*elll*." Carlos drank from his very cold can of orange soda.

"So, what's going to happen when I'm not around to do the tough problems, huh?" Mitchell said, laughing.

"Hey, I'm the one who's got the internship interview in New Mexico," Carlos said.

Mitchell looked away. "Yeah, well, I'm not the one who's got the dad with frat-buddy friends all over the place."

Carlos sighed. "If I could trade him I would," he said, and chewed on his pencil as he looked at the next problem on the sheet.

A few weeks later, squeezed between fat people on a plane to Albuquerque, Carlos struck up a conversation with the woman to his left. "What are you headed to New Mexico for?"

"See my family." She struggled to turn to face him. "*¿Hablas?*"

"No. *Pues, un poquito.* Uh . . . *Solamente parezco mexicano*," he explained. I only look Mexican. "*No hablo bien.*"

"Hmph," she said.

After a minute, Carlos nudged the man next to him. "What about you, my good man? Why Albuquerque?" He said it *Alber-quirky*, to be funny.

The man ignored him. Carlos announced, "I have a job interview in Santa Fe. I'm an engineer," and then stared at the seat in front of him, estimating and then counting the number of diamonds in the pattern of its upholstery, glad but not glad that his father knew a guy who knew a guy.

At the hotel, the desk clerk told Carlos that he had arrived during the free happy hour. He set down his bags in his room and called Mitchell.

"Hi Mitchell. I got here okay. My room is huge and the girl at the front desk was pretty and I think she thinks I'm twenty-one because she told me that there was a free happy hour—that means alcohol, right?"

"Uhh," Mitchell said. "You want to get drunk?"

Carlos had never had more than a few sips of wine at Christmas and Easter, but the prospect of a real hard drink, like an Old Fashioned, or a Brandy Alexander, was suddenly thrilling him. "Well, not really, but maybe just one," Carlos said. One of the first times he and Mitchell had bonded was when they found out that Gary Dubuse, a dumb-looking but popular kid on their floor, had vomited on the floor of the common bathroom and used their towels to clean it up.

They covered their jealousy of his popularity with easy judgments about him, his lack of personality, his stupidity, and claimed they'd never get fake IDs—not because they were scared to, but because they were mature enough to realize they didn't need to get drunk to be interesting people.

Carlos had momentarily forgotten this, but Mitchell's tone reminded him. "I guess not," he said. "Talk to you later."

Carlos unpacked and hung up his suit in the closet and hunted around for an iron to press his shirt—something he'd promised his mother he'd do when he got to the hotel. But there was none in the room, and Carlos walked down to the front desk to ask to use one. "Sure," the clerk said. Her name was Andrea. "Thanks, Andrea," Carlos said, and she smiled at him. He moved his hands on the marble ledge and saw that they had left spots of moisture that quickly evaporated.

"I'll just be a sec," she said, turning away, and he quickly but awkwardly interjected, "Wait!" She stopped. "Um, where's the happy hour?" he asked. She smiled again and told him down the hall in the restaurant. "Thank you," he said, assuming what he thought was the voice of a businessman. "I'll be back later, after I've loosened up a little, to get that iron."

Carlos stepped tentatively into the bar and looked around, his heart beating quickly. But what could they do if they carded him? The bartender looked just as young as Carlos and carried the same gathering of soft hair on his upper lip that Carlos did. The bar was mostly empty—a table with a couple men in suits and some tuxedoed hotel workers setting tables for the dinner service—and Carlos walked up to him and asked for a Brandy Alexander.

"I'm sorry, sir, but what's in that?" the boy behind the bar said.

The question caught Carlos off guard. "I don't really know, to be frank," he said. "How about"—he spied a bottle of Wild Turkey—"a glass of Wild Turkey, with lemon juice, and a little Coke, and salt on the rim of the glass," he said. "It's called a Lemon Turkola."

The bartender shrugged and prepared the drink. Carlos took it, pretending not to notice the large tip jar on the counter, and sipped. It was sour and gross. "Good job," Carlos said. He looked out the window while he drank it, and then ordered another. "Same thing, if you please."

Two more Lemon Turkolas later, Carlos walked dizzily back to his room, fumbled with the lock, and fell onto the bed. He felt crappy and good at the same time. He called Mitchell to talk about the exploits but he dialed the number wrong. He wasn't doing much thinking, and soon he fell asleep and did none.

Carlos arrived in a wrinkled shirt half an hour late to the engineering company's office, and spent more time talking about the potato gun he had seen a schematic for on the internet than about the projects he had done in class.

The interview did not go well and Carlos was not asked back for the summer internship. Luckily, word about his lateness had not gotten back to his dad, or at least his dad hadn't mentioned it on the phone, so Carlos had the luxury of telling him that next year would be better—that the interviewer had said he was a great candidate but that he needed a few more classes before they'd be able to give him an internship. "I'm only in my second year, Dad, so it's pretty tough," he said.

Mitchell hadn't gotten anything together either, so they convinced their parents to front the money for a couple of summer courses, said they'd try to find jobs doing research on campus, and planned to stay at the university from June through August.

Of course Carlos and Mitchell, who by then had taken to frequently referring to himself in the third person, as "Mitch-*elll*," knew that there were no such jobs on their campus. At least, no such jobs for sophomores who barely passed their physics and engineering classes because of the time they spent preparing for their weekend high jinks. But young scholars need to eat, so they ended up working in the one school cafeteria that was open all summer, one manning the cash register where students swiped their cards while the other stacked dirty dishes in the racks of an industrial dishwasher.

Gene, their supervisor, was a twenty-two year old junior in English who had taken a year off after high school and talked a lot about the year he had spent in New Mexico. One day he was leaning against the cash register as Carlos stood there. "Man, it was crazy. I smoked so much weed, man, it was like, crazy. The weed in New

Mexico is out of this world. And then I did peyote in the desert. That shit opens your eyes right up." He smiled at Carlos. "You know what I mean, 'Los? I'm going to call you 'Los, Carlos."

There was something about Gene that made Carlos want to impress him but there was also something else that told him that there was no need—that they were pretty much the same, only that Gene didn't know it. No one said hi to Carlos when he was working the register, and not that many more students recognized Gene. Gene looked weird, too; he was thin, thin enough for his shirts to hang awkwardly from his shoulders, and he pulled at his scraggly red goatee a lot, as though he didn't believe it would stay on his face. "People sometimes tell me I look like T.C. Boyle," Gene said. "The writer. And I got to say, it's pretty true."

"Yeah, I guess so," Carlos said, even though he'd never heard of Boyle. "I've been to New Mexico once, about a month ago."

Gene shifted positions, so that his back leaned against the register. He leaned toward Carlos and said, "You bring some of that fine cheeba back home?"

Carlos laughed and said no, but Gene said, "We ought to hang out sometime," and walked away, tapping the steel counters of the kitchen.

"Gene says he wants to hang out sometime," Carlos said that night as Mitchell and he watched TV. "I think it might be fun."

"That dude from the cafeteria who's always talking about how great the marijuana is in New Mexico?"

Carlos nodded.

"That guy's a wiener. I looked it up on the 'net—New Mexican pot is pretty much terrible compared with pot everywhere else."

"I did not know that, Mitchell," Carlos said.

"Mitch-*elll*," said Mitchell.

The next day was hot, and after work, Carlos was standing in his boxer shorts over a fan. His phone rang, and he picked it up.

"Yo, Los Alamos, it's Gene."

Carlos sat down on his bed, suddenly self-conscious. "How'd you get my number?"

"I'm your boss, idiot. Want to hang out, drink some beers?"

"You mean tonight?"

"Yeah, man, now tell me where you live, and I'll bring some stuff over."

Carlos thought about calling Mitchell to see if it was okay, but decided not to.

An hour later, the doorbell rang and Carlos hopped up from the couch to get it. He peered through the peephole and saw Gene, his chest hidden behind a thirty-pack of Miller Genuine Draft.

"Hey, Gene," Carlos called and opened the door. "That's a lot of beer."

Gene laughed and set the case on the living room floor. "Nice place you got here, man. You want to give me a tour or something?"

Carlos did want to give Gene a tour, to make him feel comfortable in the house, to give them something to talk about. There was the tubular soda dispenser, of course—which Gene insisted on adding beer to, climbing onto the stool to insert a half-dozen cans into the refrigerated chute—but also the rest of the place, full of knickknacks and electronics, that might somehow connect Gene to Carlos.

Gene picked up the pony-Yoda combo and asked what the hell it was.

Carlos was putting the DVD in the player when Mitchell came home—his classes were later in the day than Carlos's. "I see we have a visitor," Mitchell said. "Hello, Mutant." Mitchell stared at him.

Gene laughed uneasily. "What?"

"Mutant, like mutant gene, like Gene, like evolution," Mitchell said. He imitated Gene's manner of speech: "You know, like, evo*lu*tion, maaan."

"I'm about to show him the stop-motion of Cowboy Yoda," Carlos said, and then turned to Gene. "It took us like ten hours to get the clips and, what, two days to edit it together. But the loop around the sink is seamless. You can't tell where Cowboy Yoda starts or where he ends."

They watched the film for a couple minutes. Gene said it was cool, but that it would be better if they were high.

"I don't think we have any of that, Gene," said Carlos.

"It's alright, I've got my own. You at least have a bowl?"

"No," Mitchell said, sitting stiffly in a chair he brought in from the kitchen. "But I see you brought beer. Oh, that's right, beer comes in a can, and not in a bowl. HA!"

Carlos forced a laugh, but it came out muted and awkward.

"Man, what a sausagefest," Gene said. "You guys know any girls or anything?"

Mitchell snorted. "Or anything? What does that mean?"

Gene opened his hands and shrugged. "Hey man, I'm just trying to have a good time."

Carlos said, "Watch out, Gene," and punched the soda dispenser's remote control. A beer flew out of the chute and hit the couch between the two of them.

"That one's yours," he said, and punched the button again. "Next one's yours, Mitch-*elll*."

"I'm not going to drink," Mitchell said.

Carlos caught his eyes and did a little mental pleading for him to be cooler.

"Fine," Mitchell said, and Carlos hit the button again.

They drank in silence, watching the TV set and listening to the carousel music that accompanied the animation. Gene drained his beer quickly and stood up.

"Hey, I've gotta use the john," he said.

Carlos pointed out of the living room and up the stairs, and Gene left, tossing his empty can in the garbage on his way out of the room.

"What the hell, Mitch?" Carlos said.

"Come on, Carlos, he's an idiot," Mitchell said in a stage whisper.

"Yeah, well. So?" Carlos got up and gathered some beers from the box on the floor. "Are you going to help me put these in the fridge?"

A couple minutes later, Gene walked back into the room, saying the house's address into his cell phone. "My friend Gina is going to come over." He tousled Mitchell's hair. "Gene and Gina, ha ha." He paused. "You guys really don't know how to drink, do you? We'll teach you how to drink."

"Not really," Carlos said, trying to be nonchalant. "We keep it pretty low key."

"Yeah," Mitchell said mechanically. "We keep it really low key." He massaged his jaw. He relaxed his back. "Hit that fridge button again, Carlos. I'm going to propose a toast."

Three more beers landed on the couch, and Mitchell cracked his open.

"You guys know what this thingy reminds me of?" Gene said. "This one episode of *The Cosby Show* when Theo moves into an apartment and builds a soda launcher just like this—"

"That's where we got the idea!" said Carlos, and looked back at Mitchell, who raised his can in the air.

"A toast!" Mitchell said drily. "To Cosby!"

"To Cosby!"

They took a long pull from the cans, and sank into their seats. Gene nodded and looked at Mitchell, and then at Carlos. "I like the cut of your jib, Los Alamos," he said. "I like the cut of your jib."

Three Days in Seattle

Before I came to visit, I thought that Seattle was a rainy, dreary place to live, exactly the sort of place where grungy rock and roll would grow—the dank basement of the Pacific Northwest. But yesterday was bright and placid, and today the natural world is full of lively contrast and pristine beauty.

I arrived in town so early yesterday morning it was still night. Sixteen hours later, I had walked several hilly miles around Seattle with my friend Rebecca, who graduated from college a year before I. We ambled from her house in Capitol Hill, a hip, young, gay-friendly neighborhood, over to Belltown, and then downtown to the famous Pike Market on the water's edge. (It's a place where the fishmongers sling gutted halibut and monkfish like they're Frisbees, and the produce looks incredible.) We ate dinner at an Ethiopian restaurant across the street from a used bookstore with a wide selection of poetry. And somewhere along the way, I started thinking of Seattle not just as a nice place to visit, but as a place in which I could live.

Despite already feeling an attraction to the city, I know that in some sense I'm kidding myself about it. My experience here has been tightly circumscribed by time and certainly by geography. The fact is, I don't know Seattle much better than I know the TGI Friday's at the Dallas-Fort Worth airport's C terminal, where I drank a glass of beer, ate a terrible steak, and paid ten dollars for an hour of internet access on my way here. But every experience can be mined for its detail and studied for its connection to our lives.

This morning, Rebecca had to go to work, so when I woke up, I walked alone to a nearby park, sat for a while, and then found a coffee shop across the street from it. I'm there now, drinking an espresso near a window and typing happily.

The walk this morning, through a residential area a couple blocks north of Broadway, the main Capitol Hill drag, led me past another set of used bookstores, one of which was called "Revolution Books." Its door advertised a discussion group about gender theory and the necessity to impeach President George W. Bush. Two birds with one stone, I guess, but even as I recognize the silliness such discussion groups can degenerate into, their very existence makes me feel at home. I prefer bookshops that don't just sell books, but trade in art and ideas. In a similar way, the cultivated décors of the coffee shops I've visited here have made me comfortable—earth-toned floor tiles, an assortment of garage-sale furniture, hand-chalked signs. I'm not drawn by the coffee or the books, really, but rather how these places make me feel. In Seattle, it's easy for me to feel comfortable.

When I reached the park on the edge of Capitol Hill, something about it struck me. I had been trying to search for some frame of reference to describe Seattle—some way to relate it to any of the places that I already knew well. Hillier than Pittsburgh, I'd thought. Cleaner than Philadelphia, and way more indie-rock than Wilmington, Delaware. I even tried to ride Seattle's ferry in order to compare it to the one between Manhattan and Staten Island, but the boat had shut down for winter. Still, none of those comparisons resonated with me. But when I reached the park, with its ziggurat-style whooshing fountain and the reflecting pools that the fountain fed, I recalled the previous summer, which I had spent in Brooklyn.

I lived near Fort Greene Park, which Walt Whitman had helped establish in 1843 by calling for the creation of a new "urban oasis" in *The Brooklyn Eagle*, a newspaper that he edited. Perhaps for a time Fort Greene Park was just that. By 2006, though, the park had aged considerably: its cobblestone pathways had sunken into the ground, and its grass had thinned so that the blades against the dirt were like

wisps of hair on a balding head. The trees were old and heavy with their age. And yet, despite a sense of impending decrepitude, the space was beautiful in its own way.

Even though my immediate response to Cal Anderson Park in Seattle made me think of Whitman's park, the characters of the two were hardly alike. Maybe it was just the physical dimensions of Cal Anderson Park—a couple blocks long and a single block wide—that brought me back to Fort Greene, but whatever my mental bridge from Seattle to Brooklyn, it allowed me a frame of reference.

To me, the Seattle I'd visited was like a newer, cleaner, younger, hipper version of the neighborhoods surrounding Fort Greene Park in Brooklyn, with a lot more care given to this particular expanse of green than Whitman's. In Capitol Hill, the buildings rarely exceed three or four stories, like many parts of Brooklyn, and the streets are lined with row homes that have small gardens behind them. The difference, though, was the crispness in Seattle's air. I felt a breeze here of the sort I'd never felt in Brooklyn. The wind carried had the snap of a fresh carrot along with its thin sweet taste.

Cal Anderson Park was devoid of trees but was carpeted in lush green. The scene this morning was so saturated in color I kept blinking, thinking that something was somehow wrong with my eyes. Compared to Brooklyn and Pittsburgh—even on their most gorgeous and crisp days—Seattle on a clear, brisk November day made me feel as though I were looking through a polarized camera lens.

In this saturated environment, I sat on a bench and watched the fountain pour water over itself. The flow of water has fascinated me ever since I was first allowed to explore the wooded creek behind my childhood home. The inexorable movement of a stream, the predictable but weird whooshing and bubbling sounds water makes as it runs, the feel of running water on skin—all these things and more draw me to water.

Like my mother, I can watch the ocean for hours. When I cannot sleep, I run warm water over my wrists and remind myself of the simple pleasure of liquid.

I was shaken from watching the water run over the fountain's stones as a boy of six or seven and his female nanny walked through my field of vision. The boy still had his baby fat and a floppy mop of blond curls and dimples, which amplified his youthful buoyancy. He was cute. So was his nanny, in a different way, and my glance lingered momentarily on her—but the little boy was so actively happy that he drew my attention back. I was sitting near the part of the fountain that fed a reflecting pool; the pair walked up to the stone ziggurat that the fountain's water source flowed from, and the boy balanced on the fountain's curb. They tossed some bread into the water and watched it float.

A black bird descended and gobbled up the food. I suppose it was a crow, or the sort of generic black bird I'd seen a thousand times before. Then another bird, a peculiar kind of gull with a strange hooked beak, showed up for the meal, too. I had never seen such a bird before. It stamped around in the fountain's shallows for a moment, nabbed a floating crust, and then flapped away to join a group of birds that were converging overhead.

Maybe it was the environment—the warmth of the sun cut by a cold breeze, the sky as blue as paint from a tube—but the flight of the gull fascinated me. Its wings cut sharply through the sky like a pair of scissors sliding through cloth, and for a second it seemed as though the two halves of sky would fall like a blanket onto me. It was all rather romantic, and I felt embarrassed for being so sentimental. I exited the park, crossed the street, and entered this coffee shop.

Another day has passed, and today—Saturday—has maintained the crisp clarity of the day before. In the distance, it's possible to see the snow-capped peaks of Mount Rainier, and despite being almost fifty years old, the Space Needle still looks like a beacon of the future. There is a sense of history here, but not the sort that restricts the possibilities for the city's future. Seattle seems young in comparison to Brooklyn and Pittsburgh—as though its wrinkles have yet to show.

The image of the gull shearing the sky, though, has stuck with me, in the way I imagine the image of bird flight must have stuck with the Orville and Wilbur Wright as they fashioned their early flying machines. I once visited a museum that focused on the history of flight in North Carolina, and at the time I wasn't much impressed. I watched the grainy videos of men strapping themselves into wooden wings and jumping from barn roofs, flapping in vain as they plummeted to haystacks below. I didn't get it. I could see no reason that would compel grown men to act like such fools.

Years later, as a more mature, or at least more experienced, young man, I understand that there are certainly things that compel men to act like fools—that is, if we're not actually fools by nature. Love, or the pursuit of it, has led me off of many metaphorical rooftops, most without bales of hay to cushion my landing. The same goes for the fear of being trapped—and I'd prefer not to count the moments during which I've felt as though I've been futilely pumping my arms in free-fall.

Why not reach for the sky? If I'm able to make myself look like an idiot because of fear and desire, no wonder so many inventors of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in America were willing to risk everything to shed themselves of the earth and all of its losses and failures. Da Vinci, who knew perhaps better than anyone how to parlay the human spirit into technology, designed but never built a

rudimentary bicycle-propelled helicopter. Who knows if his design could actually work—by now, it doesn't matter. What does matter is the impulse to design such a machine. Flight makes for a compelling metaphor for freedom, as it has for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. To break from the ground is to satisfy some human yearning for freedom.

Earlier this morning, I was thinking about Wilbur and Orville Wright along with the rest of the men who were inspired by the way birds had mastered the sky. Then I had a sort of everyday epiphany—one in which you realize something very obvious, but for the first time. I realized why I was in Seattle. The day before, I had been flown to Sea-Tac airport and put up in a fancy room in a Marriott at the expense of the Boeing Corporation, which intended to interview me for a job I had no intention of taking. Flying isn't just a metaphor for freedom, or an idea from the brothers who put Kitty Hawk on the map. It is a fairly expensive method of transportation. I had taken advantage of an airplane manufacturer's generosity to travel quickly from Pittsburgh to Seattle.

I knew that Boeing had something like a hundred and fifty thousand or more employees and billions of dollars floating around somewhere, and so I thought that if they wanted to interview me and try to convince me to work for them, they could do their best. Besides, I could use the opportunity to explore Seattle and spend the weekend with my friend Rebecca. I didn't feel bad about taking Boeing for a ride.

I saw the company as one of the mega-corporations that define the military-industrial complex. The company is both the United States's largest exporter and the second-largest defense contractor in the world. My coming of age in the early 2000s was intertwined with my adoption of a cynical outlook of the government, the military, and capitalism. I came to see the Iron Triangle—the White House, the

Pentagon, and defense contractors in industry—as a set of mutually corrupting forces. They were an insidious and impenetrable cartel that profited by working against long-term public interests.

At college, in the years after the attacks of September 11th, 2001, I learned the vocabulary to describe the situation as I saw it. But my perspective was molded way back in middle school, when I learned that companies like Bechtel and Halliburton routinely overcharged the Pentagon millions of dollars. I heard that they claimed that sixty-watt incandescent light bulbs cost eighty-five dollars each, and that a twopenny nails cost two dollars. I distrusted the government and the companies that bilked it. So I decided to give the system a taste of its own medicine, and took a vacation under the guise of a job interview.

At the airport Marriot, my interviews went well—something about not really wanting the job made me more confident—and I tried to discover why, exactly, people decided to work for Boeing. During the lunch break, I asked the person in a Boeing golf shirt sitting next to me what he was working on. He said he was part of the 787 project, and talked about how incredible the new jetliner would be, as he turned an miniature airplane keychain over in his hands. I later learned that his job, as a junior IT analyst, was to maintain one tiny cog in a vast computer infrastructure—a role that seemed mostly insignificant to the total success of the project. But for him, even such a small role on such a monumental project supplied more than enough enthusiasm to plough through a work week that, to me, seemed filled with boring tasks and boring people. The other people I met at that table were just as excited about Boeing's planes and their roles supporting their design and manufacture. They didn't talk about what they did, but rather about what they were contributing to. They didn't love the

details of what they did every day, but they did love the idea that they were part of something magnificent.

Maybe these people are excited about their jobs because somewhere along the line, they saw a bird in a park and thought that its flight was majestic. Maybe something in their blood made them desire to master the sky. From their perspectives, Boeing might not be a clearinghouse for anxieties about the military-industrial complex. Instead, Boeing could be just a company that makes flying machines. How simple! How romantic! Put in that language, I almost want to work there, because to design and build flying machines is to beat back the containment of gravity. It is to be part of one of the marvels of the modern age. It is to manufacture freedom, an escape from being earthbound.

Thinking about this more positive perspective later, at another coffee shop in Seattle near the Space Needle, I began to feel silly in the same way I felt silly for being awed by the way the strange gull in the park propelled itself through the sky. Perhaps there's room for a flight analogy here: I'm too grounded, too connected to the runway to lift off and to exist in the sky. But whether my perspective is cynicism or just a healthy attachment to reality, it is my own perspective. It is also a perspective I find it hard to step outside of.

I am constantly evaluating the things around me, usually to unspecified ends. I like having something to say. In fact, I like having several things to say, and even better, an audience to say them to, preferably in a garrulous ramble that covers all those things I had expected to say and more. I don't mean that conversation is simply waiting for my turn to talk—listening is as important as speaking—but in either case

my chief pleasure is in connecting to another person by relating or clarifying ideas and judgments about things. Like the engineers who design airplane propellers, I like to use my brain to exert some control over my surroundings.

Here in Seattle, I've been evaluating the city, its people, its weather. Sure, several days without rain are rare for this time of year, so those thoughts might be skewed, and I know I've only met a handful of people. I haven't trampled the city's sidewalks, just covered some of its trails lightly on foot. But, just as I evaluate the people I meet for romance or friendship, so have I been appraising the city. I'm gathering data so I have something to say when people ask me how my trip was, but also because if I'm offered a decent job, I'll have to decide whether or not I want to live here.

Herb Simon, one of the intellectual giants at my alma mater, Carnegie Mellon University, won a Nobel Prize in economics for his thoughts on the way people make decisions. He said that people didn't usually make decisions based on a full review of all information available on a topic, as traditional economics and decision scientists claimed they did. Instead, he said, people "satisfice." In order to save time and energy, we make decisions based on information close at hand and usually settle for a decision that seems good enough, but not perfect.

Here's an example. Last night, Rebecca and I were walking back to Capitol Hill from a concert hall and we wanted to grab a beer, something that would really show off Seattle's microbrew culture, but we didn't want the hassle of trying to find the very best place. So we went into the first place we came across that matched our most basic criteria, a place called Six Arms that served its own microbrews. Their stout, called Terminator, was very tasty, but it probably isn't Seattle's best. In the long run, though, we were more satisfied by choosing convenience and something that seemed

pretty good over a big hassle and perfection. For me, the core idea of satisficing involves asking how much better "better" can be.

Maybe there are people who work at Boeing who aren't taken by the romantic notions of flight that I've been considering. There have to be—Boeing's workforce is more than double the population of my hometown, Wilmington, Delaware. There have to be some who are satisficing—trading their time for a paycheck that provides them with a life that they can live with, even though it's not perfect. Maybe lasting happiness is not something that you must work hard to achieve: It's just convincing yourself that "good enough" really is good enough, or that "good enough" is really the best you can expect.

For me, such tradeoffs aren't freeing. And, come to think of it, neither is the idea of flight. And neither is my idea of Seattle. If we satisfice, then we ignore things; we choose to limit our options, and in so doing, limit our potential. So far, as I've been thinking about flying, I've been disregarding the absolutely miserable times I've spent on planes and in airports. I've looked at Seattle, but past its comfortable middle-class whiteness and ignored its many homeless people. I've never seen the gentle drizzle that defines Seattle for so many people, only a brief and misrepresentative stretch of clear skies.

In any worthwhile appraisal, all of these things must come together. They contradict one another, sure, but that's okay with me. I'm most comfortable when things contradict themselves or appear to be fragmented. There are very few things that are totally good or bad—and perhaps that there are no such things that exist at only one extreme of any value spectrum.

I usually can't help but see the good accompanied by the bad. I can't help but enjoy the view of a city at night when a plane is taking off, even as I worry about the

pilot's incompetence or the effect on the human mind of being strapped into a tube. Yesterday, I thought about the awe-inspiring beauty of bird flight. Today, I'm unable to think about birds without imagining them sucked through the jet engines of a Boeing 747 or minced by biplane propellers.

That's the way I like to think of things, though, with as many contradictions and complications as possible. Without flight, humans would live two-dimensional lives, our feet permanently adhering to the ground. Flight adds depth to our lives and movements, but with it we only add one more dimension to our experiences. Only in our minds can we let ourselves play in as many dimensions as we want. The only true freedom we have is that which we imagine.

Weeks later, after I was offered a job by Boeing and turned it down in favor of waiting for other possibilities to materialize, I have formed a different view of Seattle. It was a lovely place to visit, but time and geographical distance have given me a perspective on my time there I did not have before. Seattle was too nice, too clean, too easy. I was comfortable everywhere I went. But comfort is not what I really want in my life; it's what I want in a vacation. In my daily life, I want complications, I want challenges, I want to have to work to feel at home. I don't want it easy. I'm not willing to settle for a type of satisfaction that can be handed to me.

Maybe if it had rained in Seattle, or I had been mugged at knifepoint—if I didn't have such a perfectly wonderful time—I could give some serious thought to living there. Ultimately, what I liked best about Seattle is what made me second-guess a life within its limits.

As for Boeing, well, one of the last things I saw before I left for the airport was a flyer posted on a store's window. "The air is peopled with cruel and fearsome birds," it said, with no explanation. I thought back to my gull in the park, took it as the best sign I could expect, and flew home.

Distinguishing the Indistinguishable

Until I left home for college, I lived in Wilmington, Delaware, which is about 45 minutes by car from Philly. Although Wilmington has its share of fine restaurants and cultural offerings, it is not a large enough city to support the diversity of experiences that Philadelphia offers. I pride myself on a broad set of tastes and an eagerness to explore new things, so when I had money to spend I often traveled with friends to Philadelphia to explore its gastronomic offerings. I ate fried pork intestines, expensive French cuisine, sidewalk falafel, and sushi prepared by an Iron Chef—the good food of a fine upper-middle-class upbringing. None of those culinary explorations resulted in a reconsideration of myself or my culture. But even so, after watching a Philadelphia Phillies baseball game, my friends and I are left with two questions. The first is easy: Should we stop for a genuine Philly cheese steak sandwich before we return to Delaware? The answer is, of course, yes; we're all eaters. The second question, though, is tougher to answer: Which cheese steak place will we go to?

Our minds and characters are formed, in part, by coming up with answers to the questions that our world poses to us, regardless of whether the questions seem inconsequential or weighty. If character is the set of qualities—mental and moral—that define an individual, then each of the opinions we make and decisions we form says something about who we are, or who we want to be. I think, and therefore I am, according to Descartes. I would go one step further: What I think helps define who I am.

The mitigation of uncertainty in our lives is one process by which we refine who we are. Each decision is an opportunity to become more of one thing, or less of another. Many times, we present ourselves with clear-cut options. If it's cold outside,

I can decide to stay in, to wear a coat, or not to wear a coat. If I decide to venture out without something to keep me warm, I will be cold and I might get sick. I am more interested in the decisions in which the options are less clear-cut, the situations where we must choose one alternative over another even though they both seem to be the same. It is in murky situations that our characters become the most clear. For this reason, I find it difficult to ignore even the simplest questions. Not only is making decisions and forming opinions a way of organizing our world, but it is a way of organizing our selves.

Back to the cheese steaks. After the baseball game, we head for the intersection of Ninth Street and Passyunk Avenue in South Philly. The choice is, as it has been since 1966, between Pat's King of Steaks and Geno's Steaks, the most authentic cheese steak eateries in the city. Pat's, which opened in 1930 and claims to have invented the steak sandwich, sits on a triangle of poorly-lit sidewalk. Its façade is aging, white but dirty, and in need of repair. Geno's sits across the intersection, its own bright neon exterior inviting the same sort of comparison to Pat's that Las Vegas invites to Atlantic City. At the same time, though, the newer and nicer digs of Geno's give the impression that its owners are trying too hard to overcome the historical weight of the landmark across the street.

The space between Pat's and Geno's on Passyunk is the sort of intimate distance that travel guides and visitor bureaus romanticize. The street-corner rivalry is good for both businesses; both sell the same delicious cheese steak sandwiches, but by claiming that one is intrinsically better than the other, customers at one establishment are by proximity enticed to compare and contrast one with the other. I'm not the only one who wants to decide which cheese steak is the best.

I have, over the years, acquired a statistically significant sample of cheese steak sandwiches from each vendor. The fact is that apart from side dishes, manners of service (gruff versus less gruff), and building upkeep, Pat's and Geno's serve fare of essentially the same quality—their cheese steaks are virtually identical. And yet, because I live near Philadelphia and I love to eat, I'm often asked to defend Pat's or Geno's as the best Philly cheese steak. Therein lies the dilemma.

How do we distinguish among alternatives that are indistinguishable? How do we choose among cheese steaks that taste the same but come from different vendors? Whether we're talking about cheese steaks, politics, or anything else, I think that we broaden our inquiries and look past what we intend to judge to the set of factors that surround our decisions. In other words, we look past the identical cheese steaks to the differences in the establishments that serve them. We form opinions on one thing based on our attitudes toward others.

If my mother were forced to order and consume sandwiches from Pat's and Geno's, I'm sure she would claim to prefer Geno's. She'd find the qualities too similar to distinguish, but Pat's would just be too skeevy-looking for her. There's a reasonable rationale behind such a position, I think; a place that keeps itself cleaner and in better shape is more likely not to have roaches scurrying across the kitchen tile. There is a tenable connection between restaurant cleanliness and quality.

That said, it's possible to judge the best cheese steak in Philly by factors that are fully irrelevant to taste and quality. As we already do with so many other things, people can choose the best steak sandwich based on their politics. Pat's keeps its serving windows clear; Geno's serving windows are emblazoned with large stickers that state the business's support for Daniel Faulkner, a young white police officer who

was killed in December 9, 1981. The man who sits on Pennsylvania's death row, having been convicted of Faulkner's murder, is Mumia Abu-Jamal.

The incident occurred on Locust near Twelfth Street, about a mile north of Geno's. Despite Mumia's conviction, the facts of the case remain in question. Mumia's younger brother, William Cook, had been pulled over by Officer Faulkner in a routine traffic stop. Faulkner radioed for assistance; no one knows why. Before other officers arrived at the scene, Faulkner took a blow to the face from Cook, but recovered and beat him with a flashlight. Mumia then appeared on the scene. The prosecution claimed in the 1982 trial that after trading gun shots, Mumia killed Faulkner with four final bullets, including one at close range to the officer's face. At the trial, and in the tangle of appeals to overturn his conviction, Mumia has claimed that he was framed by a corrupt police force and that the state's collection and processing of evidence was both inadequate and improperly performed.

It's now 2006, and Mumia Abu-Jamal is a name that one is just as likely to hear alongside other victims of the System—Rodney King, Amadou Diallo, Jonny Gammage, all black men victimized by the state—as alongside his many celebrity supporters. The rock band Rage Against the Machine and the actress Susan Sarandon have worked to publicize Mumia's message. His case has received international attention, in part because in 1999, another man confessed to the murder of Daniel Faulkner, and in part because Mumia has become a touchstone for many social issues, including the death penalty and police aggression. Mumia has not been executed by the state of Pennsylvania, and neither has he stopped protesting his incarceration. The mere fact that a business has seen fit to advertise its position on Daniel Faulkner's death nearly twenty-five years later shows that the event still has relevance.

It is also an issue that I feel obliged to have an opinion on. A man's life is at stake and in general citizens ought to have an opinion on whom their governments execute and why. There is also an obligation to myself: Whether the issue is as small as favorite cheese steak or as large as a murder appeal, examining my opinions is the only way I'll learn anything about who I am. In this sense, the conundrum of Mumia's conviction is similar to the question concerning the food at Pat's and Geno's, although what I think about Mumia is more far-reaching.

The data I have about the cheese steaks is no more conclusive than the information I have about Mumia's case. On the facts alone, I cannot issue a judgment, and yet to form an opinion one way or the other, I must. I was born after the killing occurred, I have never accessed the court records, and in the decades that have passed since the incident, new information has been uncovered—both in Mumia's favor and against him—by the scrutiny of those who have examined the case. There is no way for me to know factually that Mumia is guilty or innocent, but if the courts are able to issue judgments, then so should I be able to. I want to have an opinion on something that my peers also have an opinion on. To abandon my thoughts because they exist in an unclear context is akin to outsourcing the most interesting parts of myself.

So I must look past the facts of the case into the world surrounding it. I do not have access to the national security briefs the President receives daily, but my opinions on foreign policy are legitimate. There is no way to know everything about the many things we need to judge; we must make the best judgments we can based on limited information. Such are the uncertainties of our world. Often, there is too little evidence for us to base a firm decision on, or there is too much to digest in a reasonable period of time.

Such uncertainty leads us to abandon specifics—being too few or too many—in favor of generalizations. If we cannot pin down minute accuracies, then our second-best efforts are to generalize about facts; and when we cannot generalize about facts, we operate on our beliefs, which may or may not have a basis in reality. We lose subtlety and closeness to our subject matter. We lose the ability to make fine distinctions. We lose urgency. I choose among eateries while comparing the decision to that of a high-profile criminal case, and while a certain sense of perspective is lost, another perspective is gained.

Like fowl, which must swallow gravel along with their food to aid in digestion, people sometimes swallow lies in order to achieve some kind of truth. Some specifics contested in the Faulkner murder case are related to the police's collection of evidence; forensic examiners never tested Mumia's hands for gunpowder residues or his gun to see if it had been recently fired. Those who believe that Mumia is guilty of the murder—for whatever reason—will accept this injustice as a trade for the greater justice of putting a murderer behind bars. Similarly, those who believe civil procedure to be the glue that binds our legal system may support Mumia's acquittal, despite the considerable evidence and testimony against him. Each of these positions, and the myriad others related to Faulkner and Mumia, are based on irrelevant factors. The people who maintain such positions substitute what they want to believe for a missing or contradictory set of facts.

So where do I stand on the issue of Mumia? He is already a touchstone for many other issues that I feel strongly about, but making decisions about capital punishment, police corruption, race relations, and due process is not the same as making a decision about the man. It is easy to say that if Mumia committed the crime, he should receive the punishment; if he did not, then he never should have been in

jail. In this case, though, there is no possible way for me to know if Mumia is guilty; the facts for and against seem equally piled up, and each pile is riddled with inconsistency. I doubt that Mumia committed the murder, but I cannot say whether my doubt is reasonable or not.

I would love to say the question is unanswerable and to think about something else. Mumia is in jail, for either the right reasons or the wrong reasons. But what if I had been on the jury? Our society has seen fit to designate people as the deciders of tough decisions. If they do it, I can too. The facts only get me so far, but I feel compelled to take a side. Otherwise, I don't know who I would be.

In order to make a decision about Mumia, I must broaden my inquiry and consider what I'm willing to trade in each domain to satisfy my convictions in another. When I look past the facts of the case—at least, past everything except the fact that the case is still appealed, I see my political and philosophical beliefs.

I oppose the death penalty. I see it as a naïve and brutal method of punishment. I feel guilty for my race—white—in being an accomplice, unwitting or not, to the systematic discrimination of whites against minorities. I believe that systems of law are not always systems of justice. But not all of the things that I see when I look past the facts of the case are as high-minded or easy to defend. I fell in with a very liberal crowd in college. I think that most police officers are idiots with mustaches and guns. I like the music produced by bands that support Mumia. It's easier for me to believe in the innocence of people I don't know over their guilt. I'm scared that if I believe that Mumia is guilty, I will feel his blood on my hands when he is executed.

My opinion that Mumia's conviction ought to be overturned has very little to do with the facts of the case. It has everything to do with the person I am. And the

person that I am, having come to one conclusion, looks for the next set of loose ends. I began by talking about cheese steaks. It seems inappropriate to return to the topic now, even through the filter of Mumia, except to illustrate one final point—that in some cases, the best decision really can be not to decide.

Pat's does not make any political statement about Mumia on its windows, but as statisticians and lawyers will remind us, the absence of evidence is not evidence of an absence. Just because the Olivieri family, which owns Pat's, posts no signs on their windows does not mean they agree with me. And, although I disagree with the owners of Geno's, I do respect them for honoring the memory of a police officer who died young.

But politics are politics, and people are people, and cheese steaks are cheese steaks. The taste samples I've taken are biased, because they're based on my taste buds. Opinions are different than personal tastes, and it would be a grave mistake for me to confuse the two. My advice is to taste both cheese steaks and see which one you prefer. Or don't. Picking that judgment apart is not worth your time. But the reasons why we think what we think about the death of Daniel Faulkner and the incarceration of Mumia Abu-Jamal—they are something we all should chew on.

The Devil's Lute

Everything dies, baby, that's a fact.
But maybe everything that dies someday comes back.
—Bruce Springsteen, "Atlantic City"

I never thought that Jesus had much to do with rock and roll, but according to some, the Good Shepherd intervenes regularly to cut short the sinful lives of some of our best-known, best-loved musical celebrities.

Dial-the-Truth Ministries has compiled a list of dead rock stars and put it online. They track some three hundred rock star deaths, attributing about half to high-risk behaviors like drug use and the remainder to natural and medical causes like heart attacks and leukemia.

The implication is that while some rock stars kill themselves with their lifestyles, many others are struck down by God. After all, He works in mysterious ways — and Dial-the-Truth has the stats to prove it. According to the site's calculations, rock stars live half as long as regular citizens. Preachers have long told us that listening to rock music is playing with fire; this study claims that performing it is stepping into directly into the flames.

That might be so. Many of the best-known rock musician deaths have been suicides: Elliot Smith stabbed himself, Kurt Cobain used a gun. But what about the member of Great White who burned alive during a show in Rhode Island, the members of Lynyrd Skynyrd who perished in a plane crash?

Such accidents might reek of divine conspiracy, but the stories of rock musicians dying young are not much different than those of other artists, who lived their own short, explosive lives. There is no art form—painting, writing,

architecture—without its share of firecracker practitioners, those who shoot high, ignite, and leave only smoke and a memory hanging in the air.

One might even say that outside of art, the early death plays a huge role in Western society. Celebrity culture is tied up with the glamorization of sex, drugs, and—yes—rock and roll. But so is the rest of our culture, including its more conservative and religious elements.

Christian religion, too, sticks in our memories in part because of its own early deaths: Jesus ascended into heaven at 33, a full 3.9 years sooner than the average Dial-the-Truth rock star. Sure, there was a vast increase in life expectancy over the millennia—but was it not Jesus's own lifestyle and celebrity status that brought him before Pontius Pilate?

Of course there are differences between rock stars and Jesus. I mean only to point out the cultural significance of the demise; how we take an early, unexpected death, and remember it. We try to ascribe the death to cause and effect, try to find reasons for why someone died before they should have. These are human responses to events we don't understand, things we can't help but do.

Early deaths frustrate us because they seem either inexplicable or preventable. Unfortunately, trying to find a moral reason for a death relies on reducing a person's life to a mere set of activities. Although Kurt Cobain was a rock star to you and I, to others he was a son, a friend, a husband. There are aspects to each life that no one will ever know.

For this reason, death is always a tragedy, no matter whether the life that ended was sinful or pure. A person's life ought to be more than a political or evangelical tool, and those who manipulate the lives of the departed in the name of God demean both themselves and their faiths. Evangelists who make examples of the

deaths of rock stars violate the very sacredness of human life that they claim to protect. If we were to reduce Jesus's life to its end, all we would have is a warning against bucking the system, not the rich and diverse set of teachings related through the rest of his life.

Both religion and music can celebrate what makes us human, albeit in different ways. "Smells Like Teen Spirit" and "Once Bitten, Twice Shy" are not laudatory hymns, and Elliott Smith was no savior of the world. But rock music at its best articulates what it means to be alive, and in its own way can help us extend beyond our raw animal selves into the world of the mind and spirit.

Perhaps Dial-the-Truth believes that rock music is an inherently evil force that corrupts all those who come near it. In that case, they don't understand that rock music is simply a mode of expression. Just as language can be used both to denounce the Holy Spirit and praise the Lord, electric guitars and robust basslines can be used for good, evil, or neither.

But maybe what they believe is right—that rock music is played on the Devil's lute, and the only reason our beloved Bruce Springsteen hasn't been swept off the earth is that he believes in the Resurrection.

On the Hunt

"In the end, there's only one person I fear and that's the person I shave every morning," the writer Sam Hazo says at the close of a newspaper review of his play about Hollywood McCarthyism. I think Hazo was trying to say something profound about uneasy political circumstances, but the quote comes off as shallow and pretentious to me. I have no doubt that he shaves his own face, so it must be that he is most afraid of himself. But this idea is nothing new in our society, or at least in my experience of it. That man should be afraid of himself is the hallmark of our era. Every freshman in my high school read Richard Connell's story, "The Most Dangerous Game," and almost everyone else has watched a movie or TV show that employs its basic structure.

In case you weren't there with me in Mrs. Sianni's Introduction to Literature course at Salesianum School, I'll recap Connell's short story. A man named Rainsford falls out of a boat and washes ashore an island inhabited by General Zaroff, a bloodthirsty Russian. Zaroff has grown bored with hunting animals on his island—he is too proficient for there to be any fun left in the pursuit. So Zaroff takes the next logical step and decides to hunt men instead—men, with all their cunning, and Rainsford his next quarry. Rainsford, though, outwits Zaroff, and ends up sleeping comfortably in his bedroom while hounds tear the General's body apart in a courtyard below.

In Mrs. Sianni's class, we did vocabulary exercises every week. One day, I learned what the word "frisson" meant: a sudden thrill. Ever since I've associated "frisson" with the chill of recognition that I felt as I read "The Most Dangerous Game." But it's difficult to surprise a person twice with the same trick, and I tend to

groan when I see or read something that tries to pass off the idea as something original. It's not just Sam Hazo talking about shaving in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, either. The man-hunting-man plot idea has been recycled in all sorts of media, from *Gilligan's Island* episodes and novels by Robb White and Clive Cussler to movies starring Ice T and Gary Busey. Even the family adventure-comedy film *Jumanji* contains a most-dangerous-game subplot. The idea is a little played out.

Then again, why shouldn't men hunting other men be one of the more pervasive tropes of our times? It's certainly more connected to the modern way of life than man hunting animals in the wilderness. I've never shot a buck or even held a gun, but I've walked through streets at night when I've felt hunted; my sense of safety has been flushed like a pheasant out of my home by burglars. The Food and Drug Administration does not regularly allow game meat to be approved for sale—the stuff killed by individual people with guns—but the government employs several hundred thousand people to be proficient enough to kill other people at war.

Connell published his story in 1924, before we had the mechanized, factory-style meat and vegetable production we do today, but in 1924 more people lived in cities than at any time before. This meant that fewer people were toting guns out behind their outhouses looking for a rabbit to shoot for dinner, and part of the American idea of self-sufficiency had begun to erode. Now, in 2006, few people other than rural dwellers and enthusiasts go hunting in America, and the hunting of animals is just one more aspect of American heritage that has been lost along the highways of suburbia.

Even though I've never killed anything—even under the tires of my car—the history of hunting for animals does have something to do with my life. Years ago, I learned that James Lipton, the strangely captivating host of "Inside the Actor's

Studio," had written a book on collective nouns titled *An Exaltation of Larks*. In linguistics, a collective noun (or "noun of multitude") is a word that defines a group of objects; "group" is itself a collective noun. So is "pride," as in pride of lions, and "murder," as in murder of crows. I bought the book because I was interested in learning about other collective nouns, and also because James Lipton intrigues me—but the reasons why I am drawn to learn about awkward, obsequious men with beards are for another discussion entirely. What is important is that I love words and Lipton had written a book about some particularly neat ones.

I learned in the introduction to *An Exaltation of Larks* the collective nouns like murder, pride, pack (of wolves), school (of fish), and so on are the remnants of a rich history of even more nouns of multitude. Lipton identifies these words as "terms of venery" because the terms were first codified in the woods of England by gentlemen whose primary pastime was to chase after animals and kill them. "Venery" comes from the Latin *venari*, to hunt game. The civilized pastime of the hunt, like so many other things civilized people involve themselves in, developed a highly articulate vocabulary. In order to identify oneself as a gentleman in the time of chivalry, one needed to know the complex vocabulary of the hunt. Knowing a pack of wolves from a brood of hens may not have made killing either of them any easier, but the ability of people to glory in wasted time and effort is the mark of any civilization.

However, terms of venery are not just words that mean the same thing as others, like forks that are replaced at each course of a fancy meal. A good collective noun makes use of a rudimentary metaphor to change the meaning of the grouping it names. A gaggle of geese is a term that more aptly describes a group of geese than the word "group." The sinister look of crows flying overhead is accessed by "murder." A quiver of arrows names the set of arrows while calling to mind the peculiar way an

arrow shivers after it meets its target. And an unkindness of ravens—well, I've never seen a raven, but Poe might agree. There are hundreds of such terms that have been retained or forgotten as centuries have passed, but most interestingly, Lipton comes up with new nouns of multitude, thrusting two meanings into one: a rash of dermatologists, a Kerouac of deadbeats, a deck of sailors, a crouch of baseball catchers. Try it yourself; it's fun: a thong of sandals, a noose of deadlines.

So, if the hunt was the progenitor of hundreds of collective noun-metaphors, hunting animals does have something to do with my life in the twenty-first century, even as I write this essay. In the way a hunter possesses the flesh of his quarry, so may a writer possess the tenor and vehicle of his metaphor; if the hunt is about chase and the satisfaction of apprehension, so is writing. I am interested in the use of metaphor to describe and understand my world but also to possess it, to name it, to make it my very own. To name things is a uniquely human impulse, and to chase and apprehend ideas with language is in a sense one sort of hunt.

But the hunt has traditionally been about sustenance. I mention earlier that we no longer hunt for food; we now forage for it at supermarkets. By now most of us are only gatherers and literal animal-hunters no more. However, like the nobility of late-medieval England, the nobility of America's nouveau riche have acquired a vocabulary for their hunt for food, albeit in a different way. In New York, arguably America's gastronomic epicenter, men hunt men—that is, bankers with corporate credits cards hunt for the best chefs, and as a matter of course they must learn the language of the concrete jungle just as royalty needed to know what to call a bunch of woodcocks in the 1500s. ("Fall of woodcocks" is the term, "fall" used to evoke the gentle descent of snow.)

One summer, I lived in Manhattan and worked for an investment bank, and briefly (and enjoyably) joined part of that chef-hunting elite—the group that, like modern-day game hunters, subscribes to journals that reveal what's going on with the sport. *Bon Appétit* and *Food and Wine* are the metropolitan sophisticate's *Guns and Ammo* or *Field and Stream*. I spent hours each week doing research on the best restaurants, working out strategies to get reservations or to con the maitre d' into a table without one. Hunters use wooden decoys and specially designed whistles to lure fowl into range; in New York, calling a restaurant and making reservations with the name of a celebrity sometimes works to gain entrance to an elite establishment. Other times, a couple twenty-dollar bills well concealed in the palm of a hand are enough to convince the maitre d' that reservations were really more of a suggestion than a requirement.

I began to know more about food. As a member of that elite, I required a new vocabulary, particularly with the rise of the importance of local, seasonal, organic foods. I didn't need to know the glens where the local foxes dug their holes, but I did get credit for knowing where my grape tomatoes were from, and the names of nutty French lettuce leaves (mache), bacon made of pig cheeks (guanciale), and the innumerable tasty cuts that can be derived from a grass-fed steer that has been properly aged in a dry cellar.

Lydia Bastianich, a woman who helped turn Italian food in America from immigrant melting-pot chow into the regional cuisine found in the motherland, says that good food is inseparable from desire. "What else do you put into another person's body?" she asks. Man hunting man—or, rather, person hunting person—can be thought of in this way. The Latin *ven*, root of *venari*/venery, originally meant "to desire (and therefore) to pursue."

Venus is the Roman goddess of love and beauty; the English adjective "venereal," as in "venereal disease," comes from the same root as the rest. If love has been humanity's perpetual occupation with itself, then so has desire. The hunt that we all identify with is the chase after another. And love, like going hunting with Vice President Dick Cheney, sometimes ends with someone getting shot in the face.

As we pursue the ones we love—or think we'd like to love—we also pursue enemies. The success of television shows like *America's Most Wanted* and *Cops* is evidence of the urge to identify an object to hunt, to stalk it, and to see it captured. We're all a little like General Zaroff, enthralled by the pursuit of something or someone that could turn against us. And we are also like Rainsford; each of us is eager to turn the tables on that which pursues us. We're eager to pay each other back for misfortune. The thirst for revenge is as universal as the desire to hunt. It is also as empty.

There is nothing like a specific hunt on a national scale to gather the emotions of the public, to pull us into a sense of common purpose. But what happens when we hunt for our quarry but can't capture it? In the Gulf War, I recall the American military searching for Saddam Hussein all over the Middle East. The war ended, but Saddam remained in power; he was a fox who had escaped the dogs. Sometime after September 11, 2001, the United States began the hunt for Osama bin Laden, the man who orchestrated the reason for why I think about dying so much. We still have not captured him. Along the way, in the dust of Iraq, someone found that scapegoat dictator Saddam in a hole. "Ladies and gentlemen, we got him," Paul Bremer announced with a broad smile.

But that satisfaction did not last. And, if and when Osama bin Laden is captured, I think that the thrill at having caught what we were seeking also will not

last. The reason is that Saddam and Osama, and all our enemies, stand in for the ideas we want to capture. In any hunt, we are not seeking the quarry so much as the way we feel when we capture something that seems beyond our control.

The feeling never lasts. Zaroff never tired of hunting; he just upped the ante from animals to men. What is next for us? Each hunt we embark on—international or intensely personal—we believe is different. The hunt is always the same. Centuries ago, we would have been satisfied to kill a single boar for a feast—but another hunt came immediately after the feast ended. So with us now.

To live is to saddle up for a hunt that will never end; our victories are transient, our will for continued conquest unceasing. What we want is all the animals in our forest to be dead, their fat backs crackling on spits over a fire, and yet for us to have food in our larders forever.

Dido

The poet Stanley Kunitz died at one hundred years old this past May. In his more autobiographical poems I recognize myself—the boy staring at the stars and waiting for the world to end in "Halley's Comet," the burn of shame in "The Portrait." But what strikes me most about Stanley Kunitz is the physical resemblance to my dido (pronounced dee-doh, meaning "grandfather" in Ukrainian) that I discovered in a book that presented Kunitz's poems alongside photographs of him. In these photos, Kunitz—who was in his late nineties then—shuffles around his garden the way Dido shuffles around his house. He wears clothing the same way as Dido: it both seems to fit and not to fit their proud, shrunken bodies. Kunitz's pate is just as bald, fringed with white, and colored with liver spots as Dido's. And they both seem to share the quiet, mischievous certainty of self that one must earn over a lifetime. Kunitz is fifteen years older than Dido, but the twentieth century has aged them equally in my mind.

On their bodies, age is neither a malignant force pressing on toward decrepitude nor an uplifting force, as in the development of wine or cheese. In some sense they are not old—because even though I have seen pictures of them in their youths, I find it difficult to conceive of the different people they must have been back then, separated from their wrinkles. They simply are. But that statement is incorrect; Kunitz is no more. When he died last May, I could not help but think of my grandfather, still living. When the poet passed, my chest tightened not only for him and his art, but for the fact that Dido would one day die also.

Dido—his name in English is Wasyl Szczerban—was born in 1920 in Ukraine. He was swallowed as a youth by World War II, digested in a forced labor camp in

Germany, and shat out on the east coast of the United States with a newborn son and a wife. I think it is reasonable to say that he grew up pretty fast. He performed manual labor on a railroad and in factories for decades. Years passed, and his son married. When that son, Walter, had his second son in 1984, I was suddenly part of the world.

Some fathers abandon their children after siring them, leaving them with a gaping wound that aches to be filled. Kunitz's father killed himself before he was born, and my favorite poems from him draw on the loss and longing of being fatherless. But my father's father did not leave him, and my father did not leave me; the fact of my existence depends only on the biology of Dido and Walter and their wives, but the person I have become depends on the relationships they have with me. "They fuck you up, your mum and dad," says Philip Larkin, another favorite poet. "They may not mean to, but they do."

My relationship with my dad is tight, in the sense that it is both incredibly close and incredibly strained. I can only imagine the tension of my father's relationship with Dido; from what I know, the taut string that connects my father and me is a much milder version of the leather belt that often connected Dido and his son. I cannot imagine my father as a boy, or Dido as a father who whipped his son. These facts float in the past that my family shares, but to me they may as well exist in another world entirely. The only experiences I can draw from are the ones I have had—with my father and grandfather as they are now. Everything else is mere legend.

What of the grandfather and his relationship with his grandson? As Kunitz's passing has reminded me, a grandfather usually has fewer years to leave a mark on a

boy than the boy's father does, and some boys have no chance to know the men who molded their fathers. Many boys grow up without ever knowing their grandparents, and I am lucky to have all four still alive. Yet I often wake prematurely from sleep, heart beating fast, knowing for an irrational instant that *Dido is dying right now!* and wishing in that instant that I were already grandfatherless, so that the wound of his death would already have scarred over and left me tougher, like leather left out in the rain.

It is futile, surely, to describe my relationship with my grandfather, because words never seem so reductive and insubstantial to me as when they attempt to describe love. But I must try to use them, because no photograph taken has captured Dido's spirit, no sound recording the resonance of his words within me.

And words may record facts along with fables. Dido, age 86, a native of western Ukraine, a retired unionized auto worker, a faithful Ukrainian Catholic, residing in northern Delaware. Dido, no longer any good at driving at night, unable to hear very well, philosophically against wearing a hearing aid and taking his medicine on time. These are some things I know about his life. I know that Dido used to beat my father with his belt, that he used to make my dad kneel on concrete, bare-kneed, as a punishment or to teach a lesson. I know that he used to smoke heavily but quit when my older brother was born.

I know that even though I claim to love my grandfather deeply, I have no idea who he was for three quarters of his life, or if I would even have liked him had I met him through some trick of time. I know that loving a person is complex, but that loving him seems simple. I know that if I call myself a man today it will be because I learned it from him, and I know that I panic when I think of him dying because I don't know what kind of person I would be if I did not have his example.

Charlton Heston, the actor, is roughly the same age as Dido. He wrote a short book called *To Be a Man*, a collection of letters to his very young grandson. I originally bought the book at a used bookstore for a dollar and kept it around for laughs, but as I've considered my grandfather, I've begun to take the book seriously as a treatise on manhood.

Heston, in part because of his political persona as the spokesperson for the guns-and-ammo lobby but mostly because of the roles he's played and the way he looks, is one of the people our culture has identified as consummately masculine. He's played Moses, John the Baptist, and Ben-Hur, and talks about prying weapons from his cold, dead hands. He's tall, blond, muscular, and square-jawed, with a stentorian voice and steely eyes. He's the very definition of masculinity. But the book of letters he wrote to his grandson is about being a man, and because of the title I think Charlton may have stepped out of the territory about which he can speak knowledgeably. To be a man is very different than to be very masculine. Heston has masculinity down pat, but Dido owns manhood.

They're both male, and they're both men—so perhaps my distinction is nonexistent at worst, or subjective and pedantic at best. Fine. The distinction is then that I do not want to become a man like Charlton Heston but that I do very much want to become a man like Wasyl Szczerban. My reasoning has nothing to do with politics or jaw lines or whether one can play a convincing hero onscreen, but it does have everything to do with presentation. The most important thing Dido has taught me about being a man is something that he has never explicitly said: a man is what he is, in a way that is gentle and strong.

My high school was run by Catholic priests and brothers who were Oblates of Saint Francis de Sales, who is called the "gentleman saint" and is the patron saint of journalists. For a time in high school I seriously considered entering the priesthood and joining the Oblate order. I read De Sales's *Introduction to the Devout Life* during this period and my fair share of Aquinas. The moral backing provided to me by Catholic school, and of reading these and other philosopher-theologians, is like the spine of a book that is continually being rewritten. I don't believe everything I used to, and in fact have repudiated a number of positions I once adopted. Some dictates from De Sales, though, have stuck with me. "Be yourself and be that well," he said. "Nothing is so strong as true gentleness, and nothing so gentle as true strength."

In his past, Dido did not live according to my interpretation of De Sales morality: his parental punishments were corporeal, he was complicit in the prejudices of his times. I know these things because my father told me. But the words of De Sales do describe the Dido I know from my life with him. "Never be in a hurry; do everything quietly and in a calm spirit. Do not lose your inner peace for anything whatsoever, even if your whole world seems upset." Dido would never say these words but nonetheless I hear his voice in my head when I recall those quotes. Dido is at peace with himself, with the good and the bad. That is something I didn't have to hear: the way a man thinks can be discerned simply by being around him for long periods of time.

Now, away from home for the fifth year, I spend fewer and fewer long periods of time in person with Dido. Phone calls are mostly useless; I loudly say hello, he asks me first where I am and then how I am, we confuse each other in different languages for a minute, I say "I love you" in Ukrainian, and the call is over.

To partake in the full depth of Dido's company requires physical closeness. When I come back to Delaware to visit, on a weekend for instance, I head over to Baba and Dido's house, eat lunch, and loaf the afternoon away mostly in silence—or quiet, I should say, because anything that needs to be said can be said. But with Baba and Dido not much needs to be said.

Often, on the long drive from Pittsburgh to Delaware, I think about how long I will be able to spend with Baba and Dido during the time I will be home. Invariably these thoughts end, as any consideration of my grandparents does, with my morbid fixation on their demises. I often stop at their house before I see my mom and dad. But when I bring the tension of such thoughts with me to their kitchen, and I ask Dido how he is, he offers no false assurances. It is as though he can tell what I have been thinking. "You know, I am old man," he says in broken English. "I will be no longer someday. Not today, may not be happen for long time, but you know I am old man."

Dido's mortality is a truth that he has come to know, and it no longer scares him. But I am afraid of the knowledge that his life has a terminus. Terrified. My response is to laugh it off and to give him a noogie or a hug or to segue into one of our special elaborate handshakes and to pretend that he will live forever. But the truth snags me like a fishhook, jolts me like a sensitive tooth meeting ice water.

I can tell when Dido has had his death on his mind. Since the end of high school, about once a year, I will come to visit and be taken on a tour of the exterior of their one-story home. "I make to show you what to do with the house when I will be gone," he will say. He will put on his blue cap and a heavy shirt and we will walk outside through the garage. The space between the garage and the porch will need to be filled in, he will say, the bathroom elongated and converted into a small bedroom, the large porch walled off and converted into a master suite. The porch's foundation must be extended twelve to fourteen inches to match the width of the garage. All the windows will need to be replaced; their sills are old.

I will ask Dido why this must be done: I like the house as it is, as it was when they lived there. "To make someone buy it," he will respond. For the rest of the afternoon I will think about how difficult it is to extend a house's foundation and how difficult it will be to sing *vichnaya pam'yat* at his funeral. I will wonder who will live in the house after he is gone, and who I will have become when that person is not me.

The Breaking Wheel

"Glory to you, inescapable pain!"
—Anna Akhmatova, "Grey-Eyed King"

When Dmitriy Kolesnikov enrolled at the Polytechnic University of Kiev, he was a clear-eyed virgin who read Dante and hand-bound books of poems and hoped desperately for love. Before marriage, before the child, before America—before everything thereafter—he had wanted to be a scholar whose rooms were filled with mottled blue books and whose mind had cataloged his soul's many compartments. For some, such youthful idealisms pass like trout in a stream, easy and forgettable. But Dmitriy carried his desires with him, like a body storing a childhood palsy once cured, like the memory of a bright and cold winter lying dormant in summer heat.

At the University of Kiev, he learned how to ride a bicycle, passing on it the ten miles from the small apartment on the edge of the city to his classes deep within, and then the additional two miles to his favorite book shop, the one with the secret room. He took a degree in mathematics and then joined the Communist Party's youth group for the same reason: he was expected to. At the Party meetings, he tried to shed his first name and pretended that he had never dreamed of a life other than his own. But a stringy-haired woman named Anastasia called him Dmitriy and followed him everywhere, in a manner that first frustrated and then comforted him. She was to be his wife, she said, and soon enough he agreed.

It was a logical union, if not borne of love, but still he needed to justify himself to the small portion of his mind that still yearned for a woman who did not desire him, the kind of woman he might romance with unexpected gifts and long, aching looks

into her eyes. He told himself that to wait for that kind of love in the USSR was as silly as to wait for the freedom of Ukraine.

As a boy he had indulged his wild and irrational hopes, his poetry and thoughts of another revolution. But he was a boy then, and protected by his youth. Dmitriy thought it was time to shed that boy from him, to learn that a slice of rye still nourishes even without fresh butter. The type of woman that Dmitriy the clear-eyed virgin had wanted to cherish had become the woman—really, almost any woman—that the young man ached to push himself into. The stringy-haired girl would do.

They lived with his parents in the small apartment on the edge of Kiev and slept in a twin bed that sagged. He taught calculus to secondary school students and she served food in a cafeteria and complained to him about her work, about how petty the other women were. He, never prone to much talk, nodded silently and waited for his mother and father to sit down at the table.

He, too, had begun to feel the world pressing in on him and had become aware of how small and meager their lives were. They rode bicycles as if they were still students. They lived four people in a small apartment. Despite all the Socialist reforms, he believed that a man should provide for his wife, and had difficulty becoming accustomed to the fact that he could not. Perhaps it was the narrow bed but he and Anastasia had grown into one another since they married. When they touched there was tenderness and care, not like when they first met in the bed, two pieces of lumber shifting against each other in a woodpile.

Dmitriy's father drank vodka and told stories of how his brother died trying to expel the Germans from Odessa. In the middle of a battle, the path to the beaches partly safe, he had stripped off his clothes and let himself be swallowed by the Black Sea. *He thought he had no choice*, Oleg said. *If he didn't kill himself they would have*.

Dmitriy's mother made them linden tea and said, *But we live, and years pass, and years pass, and we live*, as though it were advice, not a simple, irritating fact.

Anastasia had a talent for languages and learned of some Party members who had just returned to Kiev from East Germany. They could try to get permission to live there, in their own apartment, she said. But Dmitriy said no—he did not know German, did not want to ask for favors from the Party, did not want guilt for leaving his parents. Anastasia pressed him and withheld her body from him for weeks. She gave in first, but when they came together again, his stubbornness had receded and hers had grown.

Then, after her abortion, she held his hand at the wood table in the kitchen, and told him that if he wanted to live with his mother his whole life he could, but he would do so without her. In the years since they had married Anastasia had not grown more beautiful, but there was something now beyond her body that connected Dmitriy to her. He would go where she told him.

Months later they were granted a dispensation to move to East Germany, where she taught Russian to children and began to want one of her own. Dmitriy kept quiet, smiling thinly whenever the topic came up, knowing that there would be a second pregnancy, accidental or not, and that there would be no second abortion. He did not know if he could match the joy of a child with his own.

In Germany Dmitriy had made a connection through the university, and mathematically assessed the efficiency of an automobile factory. It ran a wasteful operation, but the suggestions Dmitriy made were never adopted. Soon he stopped making suggestions, and paged for hours through the thick ledgers of numbers, daydreaming about the cold blue waves lapping on Odessa's long grey beaches.

They lived normal lives, serving their time in the Soviet cosmopolis and slowly accruing their English. But Dmitriy knew that the word *normal* is as one defines it, or is what one neglects to define. The two became less of their minds and more of their jobs and bodies and yet somehow they loved each other more. Dmitriy became unable to conceive of a life without Anastasia, for she supplied the imagination he had once cultivated and the emotions that he sometimes did not think he had anymore. At the wood table in their own kitchen she railed against the Soviets and spoke passionately about the West, gesturing madly, her baggy shirtsleeves bunched at the elbows.

Dmitriy no longer resented the USSR, just wheezed in its bad air, and thought infrequently of their few hopes. One of the hopes they could nurture was the child—Oksana, who had just been born—and the other, muted and small, was of a life across the Atlantic.

But instead of the United States the next place was Odessa. Dmitriy's factory closed down; there was never an official reason, just large padlocks on the steel doors. The Berlin Wall fell, and in its rubble Anastasia panicked. *Is this the world we want for our child? Is this the best home we could give her?* she asked Dmitriy. *No*, he said. *But there may be no other world.*

In Odessa Dmitriy worked on the docks, wearing heavy gloves to unload the huge steel boxes that cranes set down on the ground. Odessa's million people, tasting independence, also tasted capitalism. For once the people were able to suck the marrow of corruption; the docks were the bridge between ships and trucks and Dmitriy found some things he could take and sell on the black market. Cameras, caviar, chemicals—he had overheard some Russians saying that they could be sold underground, in the mouth of one of Odessa's old war tunnels.

Oksana grew, as did Dmitriy's black market business. They could afford English-language television, which Oksana watched incessantly. Soon there was enough money to bribe someone in the new church to connect with a religious family on the east coast. Instead of getting rich in the Soviet bloc they flew to New Jersey to start anew.

They stayed in the family's home for six months, during which they learned the Byzantine liturgy against Dmitriy's will—what was the use of a spineless church so riddled with hypocrisy? But the family helped them find jobs, Anastasia busing tables at a buffet and Dmitriy buffing the floors of a high school at night.

Sometimes during the day he brought Oksana to the restaurant swaddled in a blanket, and they stood outside the large window and watched Anastasia as she moved wordlessly through the restaurant, gesturing at diners and then disappearing with their plates lifted in a tray above her head.

They moved to an apartment in Egg Harbor that was just as small as the one in Kiev, and they rode bicycles to work. Many things were the same, but in America the lights stayed on when Anastasia turned them on and even the cheap things from the dollar store seemed to last.

Oksana began to attend school eagerly. Each night the family ate dinner together, sometimes food from the buffet that Anastasia could bring home, sometimes stuffed cabbage when ground beef was on sale, but mostly canned vegetables and egg noodles with margarine. At dinner Oksana would tell Dmitriy words she had learned in school—her favorite was *quaint*—and after dinner, he would sometimes give her a piece of Juicy Fruit gum for dessert. She sat on his lap and tried to blow bubbles into his face. *Ya vas lubyu*, she giggled. *Ya lubyu tebe*, he responded, *I love you too.*

Then Oksana's cough came and she returned home from school tired and weak. She drank tea and then milk fortified with honey and garlic, and slept. After she ate meat she felt a little better, so Anastasia forced her to swallow large pills for anemia and Dmitriy bought fresh vegetables and cubes of stewing beef. But Oksana grew thinner and thinner, and her eyes lost some of their luster.

One afternoon, Oksana came to the nurse's office covered in red pinpricks. Dmitriy could not be reached at home—he was looking for another job, one that would use his education and give them a new visa—so Anastasia was called at work. She rode her bicycle to the school and picked Oksana up; her ailment looked like chicken pox but she was not itchy. They rode tandem on the bicycle to the Old Country Buffet, where Oksana slept in the break room, and in the evening they rode home together.

Oksana slept and slept and awoke with bruises on her thighs and arms. When Dmitriy examined her the next day, he did not believe that the spots of red were the pox. When he pressed on her abdomen she squirmed.

They had no doctor, so when Oksana did not get better in a week he called the family they had lived with before moving to the new apartment. The man hung up on Dmitriy because the Kolesnikovs had stopped attending church as soon as they were out of his house, and he did not pick up the phone for the rest of the afternoon. Dmitriy knew that Anastasia would say to call the priest but instead he held Oksana's hand and waited for his wife to return. They took turns carrying her to the hospital at dusk and then Dmitriy went to work at the high school.

When Dmitriy returned home at three o'clock in the morning, Anastasia was sitting on the edge of Oksana's bed. *She has blood cancer*, Anastasia told him. When Dmitriy came close to hold her, she clawed him away and began to cry. He stood

against the wall and watched his daughter's face, pale and smooth in sleep, periodically looking at the moisture in his wife's eyes. The job at the school had some health insurance, so that would take care of some of the cost, Dmitriy thought, but he had picked up enough to know that medical care in the United States was not a right for everyone.

What is next? he asked Anastasia.

She gets chemotherapy or she dies, she said.

I will get the money, he said, and the next day learned from the other immigrant custodians at the school that he could win money at underground games of poker and blackjack that were run by an auto salesman with connections to the burgeoning mafia in Ukraine.

Dmitriy's talent for numbers had not faded. He had a purpose to focus him, too, and so even against Anastasia's wishes he stayed out after he left work. He bet only twenty, and then fifty dollars a night, but the other men who played poker were stupid about probabilities. He built up a sum of money to use in a streak and came to the warehouse with it carefully folded. That night he won ten thousand and the bulky man who counted it out by the door told him never to come back.

Oksana grew thinner and weaker and bald. In the hospital rooms Dmitriy tried to make jokes but they fell like ice cubes onto the floor of the white rooms. The chemotherapy did not help much. Dmitriy's hair greyed. Anastasia's eyes grew wild and she would not let Dmitriy touch her. During the next months Oksana colored picture books and watched figure skating on television in the hospital and asked Dmitriy to read to her at home. Then the doctors said it was time for radiation.

Dmitriy had the poems of Taras Shevchenko in the box he kept under his bed, and read them in Ukrainian—long, sweeping poems about the river Dnipr, the

tragedy of love, and maple trees. In the waiting area outside Oksana's radiation room he read his translated Dante, the first time since his youth, and did not cry but found himself wanting to. Lives are made of sins, or at least his seemed to be, and sins all have their consequences. Sex. Gambling. Theft. Lies. All had their place in his life, like any other man's. But along the way he had drawn his family across an ocean and into an uncertain future. The fountain of his sin was pride, the belief that his life and the life of his family should be better than others. The punishment was that their lives were not.

Oksana was chewing packs a day, happily blowing her small Juicy Fruit bubbles. Had she not been so quick to smile Dmitriy could not have continued on. Anastasia drifted away from him. She held tightly onto Oksana when they were together, gripping her wrist, and her hair became wiry and streaked with white. Her eyes moved when they should not have. The manager at the buffet cut back her hours, so they could barely make the rent and food and Dmitriy's remaining card-game winnings dwindled. Finally after Anastasia shrieked in Ukrainian into the telephone the insurance company turned several unpaid bills over to a collection agency, and the hospital told Dmitriy that Oksana's radiation treatments could not continue without payment up front.

Late that night Dmitriy rode his bicycle to the warehouse where he had gambled before and hoped that the bouncer would not recognize him. At the door the thick-necked man stopped him from entering, but Dmitriy pleaded that he needed the money for his sick daughter. They shut him out. The next day, he put on his good blue jacket and cycled across town to the auto salesman's lot and asked to meet with him about a loan. The receptionist let him right in, believing him to be an associate from Ukraine.

What do you want from me? the man asked.

My daughter is dying and I cannot pay for her treatment.

Do you have a life insurance policy?

Yes, Dmitriy lied. *Two hundred thousand dollars. I need just thirty thousand for the doctors now.*

You seem to be a betting man, the man said.

And I am hoping you are too.

What are her chances?

Dmitriy left with a check for thirty thousand and the promise to pay all two hundred thousand back if she died. If Oksana lived, then—as the auto salesman said—that would be his price of doing business.

Dmitriy telephoned the bank and the hospital and took Oksana to the cancer ward, where they held hands and she slept fitfully until the administrators relented and gave them an appointment for the next day. That night, after putting Oksana to bed at home, Dmitriy soaked himself in vodka from a plastic bottle as he sat against the kitchen cabinets, Anastasia having refused him entry into the bedroom again. She, too, was absorbed with the grief of her child's impending death. Anastasia knew just as well as Dmitriy that the chances of the radiation working were only ten percent. She had been there in the cold room when the doctor told them.

When the time came they cremated Oksana because Anastasia said they could not afford a plot, and when Dmitriy said that he had found the money, Anastasia said that he had never given Oksana a real home, so to give her one now would be a hypocrisy. Her dust was put in a polished wood box and brought home.

The auto salesman found out that Oksana had died. Dmitriy had written letters saying the money was on the way, on the way, on the way, that the insurance

company was like a huge slow Soviet machine and that it would be there soon. He wrote a letter to his parents in Kiev, saying that he was soon going to bring Anastasia and Oksana back to Ukraine, where he would find work in Kiev or return to the docks in Odessa. He could not bear to tell his mother in ink that her grandchild had died. But she would look at the box and know.

After Oksana died Anastasia stopped noticing things. She did not notice that she had been fired from the buffet, or that the telephone company shut off their service, or that each of Dmitriy's fingers had been broken and he no longer wore his ring. He could not get Anastasia to search for a job; she stared at the box of Oksana's ashes for hours a day. One day he discovered her in the kitchen, the box next to her, her hands covered in mustard, weeping.

Dmitriy received a letter from his mother and father, saying that they had been accosted in the street by two large men who claimed that Dmitriy owed thousands and was no longer good for the money. They had sold what they could and emptied their savings to satisfy what they could of the debt—half of the original thirty thousand—but that they no longer counted him as their son.

Dmitriy hoped for a miracle and spent the hours before his night shift half-drunk, walking the streets of Egg Harbor, stopping into shops with help-wanted signs and leaving them soon after. Then, in August, six months after Oksana's death, he returned to the apartment building and saw smoke seeping out of a window. He rushed in and ran up the stairs to the apartment. Once inside he called to Anastasia but there was no response. The apartment was hazy with smoke from Oksana's room, and Anastasia lay on its floor, next to the smoldering bed, pill bottle in hand, obvious. But their moneybox was gone and so was the ring from Anastasia's finger. It had been the auto salesman.

There was part of Dmitriy that mourned his wife, but it was the mathematical part, the rational mind, that took over. His wife was dead. His daughter was dead. He emptied the canned food in the cabinets into plastic bags, took his winter jacket and his knife, and ran down the stairs. He pulled the fire alarm as he left and placed the bags of canned goods into his bicycle's basket.

He had allowed his daughter to die and more or less killed his wife. If only they had stayed in Odessa, or Görlitz, or Kiev. If only he had been satisfied with what they had they would still be in Ukraine, perhaps even wealthy. He had ruined his family, or had allowed it to happen, and he was not sure which sin was worse.

But it was time to think not of crime but of what came after it, and Dmitriy turned the cycle onto the road and pedaled toward Black Horse Pike. His plan was to bicycle to the Atlantic City beach where he told himself he would commit suicide, but in fact he had already decided to live.

The method of the suicide that came to him in a flash—knife to the wrists, a spilled sack of canned cut green beans and creamed corn—was strange enough to convince him, for a moment, that it would happen: him, bleeding into the water's edge, arrayed by the dented articles of subsistence living in America. The suicide would make its way to the auto salesman. Dmitriy's parents in Ukraine would be safe.

Atlantic City was thirty miles from Egg Harbor, and in the heat, Dmitriy was forced to pull over to rest. He cursed himself for forgetting a bottle for water and for roaming the streets drunk that morning. He was soaked in sweat and his head pounded, but it was too late to go back. He panted and cursed himself again.

After several more stops, Dmitriy made it to Atlantic City, passed through its single-storey squalor and into the district of casinos. He rode past them until he saw a stretch of beach, which reminded him of one in Odessa called Luzanovka, which was

dirty and empty and infested with seagulls. He locked his bicycle to a telephone pole and took out the tin cans and then the knife.

The knife was Dmitriy's father's. The handle was worn smooth but the blade was sturdy and sharp. Dmitriy considered it, his back against a dune, but could not help but think how thirsty he was. His wallet contained forty dollars. He loaded the tin cans onto the bicycle and then rode it to a convenience store, where he bought a gallon of water and asked for a book of matches, and then rode along the beach. He pulled over when he saw another set of dunes that protected the area underneath the boardwalk from view.

Dmitriy dug into the sand with his hands and arrayed the cans of food in the hole and then covered them up, measuring the steps it took to move from the nearest bulkhead to the hiding spot. There was something about the beach that seemed appropriate, that seemed like the only place he could possibly be.

Dmitriy lived through the summer, scrounging from the tourists who wasted everything, slowly working through the cans in his underground ditch, opening them with his knife and then drinking the liquid and finally eating the solids. He found coins in the sand and put them into a can, and then used those coins to buy new cans. He thought back to the apartment frequently and then less so. He felt ashamed that the last clear memory he had of his family was his wife covered in mustard next to the box of his daughter's ash. He spoke to no one except to say that he did not know much English.

Dmitriy remembered his father's brother, who had walked himself into the belly of the sea, and he remembered Dante and the prideful sinners who had been broken on the Wheel.

Slowly the beach became Dmitriy's purgatory. He conceived of his life as his penance. Sometimes, in between dunes late at night, he built a fire using newspaper and a found lighter and he heated the cans, or recooked the garbage he found during the day. He took a net from some fishermen who left it on a jetty and uses it to capture seagulls. He kills them while they are still caught in the net, cutting off their heads with the knife and bleeding them onto the sand. He burns their feathers off and then scrapes them clean, cooks them on the fire and tears bits of stringy flesh from bone. The taste of the burned feather remnants is toxic, the flesh bitter like cigarette butts.

Summer turns into October and it begins to get cold. More people ask what he is doing on the beach but still he keeps to himself. His beard grows long enough to identify him and he washes himself and his clothes in the ocean. When he dries he is covered in a faint layer of white salt. The sky becomes the blue-grey of his eyes, the sand the color of his skin.

He hallucinates, sometimes, recalling his father's memories as his own, believing that in some former life he was happy. He walks along the beach for hours at a time, dipping in and out of his mind. He sleeps under the boardwalk and the police do not disturb him.

November comes and he has no plan for the winter. A family visits the nearest hotel—a mother and two sons—and they play soccer on Dmitriy's beach all day. He watches them from his sand dune as he opens his can of lima beans. Later in the week they play soccer again but the wind blows the ball toward him. The younger boy, freckled, with a mop of dark brown hair, chases after it. The boy sees Dmitriy.

Hi, *mister*, he says.

Hello, Dmitriy says. *Go and take up your ball.*

The boy runs back to his brother and they re-mark the lines of the goals. Later, the mother walks toward the dunes. Dmitriy pretends to ignore her, thinks that maybe she can't see him.

Hey, she says, using her sunglasses to push the hair out of her face.

Good day.

Do you live here? she asks. *Out on the beach?*

You're out here all the time, watching my kids, she says.

Yes, he says. *They are your kids.*

Listen, you look alright, but I'll feel a lot better about having the kids play out here if I knew your name.

My name is Kolesnikov. He pauses. *Dmitriy*.

She nods and softens. *Catherine.*

Listen, she says, readjusts her sunglasses. *I hope you have a place for the winter*.

Thank you, he says.

Later, in the night, Dmitriy walks to the boys' soccer field and traces the goal lines with his feet and murmurs the names of his wife and daughter. He thinks of his father's brother at the bottom of the Black Sea and of the woman named Catherine. *I was like you*, Dmitriy says to himself. *I had my family and I tried to protect it*.

Then he walks into the shallow cold water and breathes.