

# Essays & Fictions

Volume X



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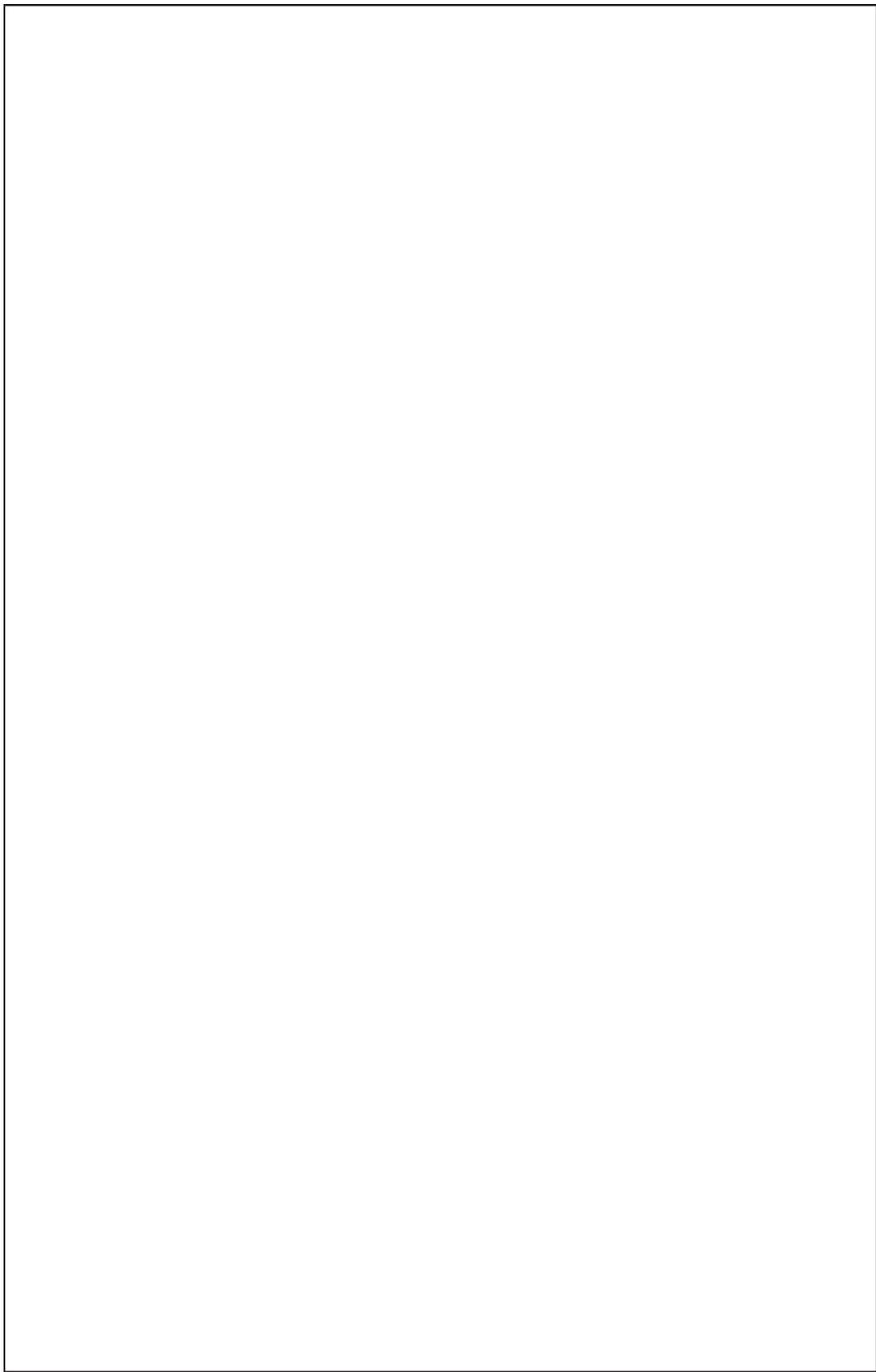
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# Content

## V.X

<i>Contempt</i>	Danielle Marie Winterton	6
<i>Stolen Culture, Six Vignettes</i>	Adrienne Kalfopoulou	16
<i>Expertise</i>	Leora Fridman	38
<i>Playlist</i>	Michael Costello	66
<i>Get Me to the World on Time</i>	Bob Proehl	74
<i>The Deportation Begins at Midnight</i>	David Nelson Pollock	100
<i>Tattles and Titbits: A Poetics</i>	Will Cordeiro	120
<i>Three Seasons of Meat Pie Selling</i>	Emily Culliton	128
<i>Love in Vain</i>	Atar Hadari	152
Contributors Notes		156



*I don't believe in Truth.  
It only serves bureaucracy,  
that is, oppression.*

Alain Robbe-Grillet

# Contempt

Danielle Marie Winterton

“On the surface, our stories are all about *personal choice*,” June said, “but all I see is the thin veneer of artifice that screens us from causes and effects.”

June pushed pieces of salad around her plate with a fork. She speared an anchovy. She sucked on a caper. She slurped her red wine. She peered at Dick. She narrowed her eyes. He made her thighs quiver. He made her insides shake. He made her feel hot and furious and disgusted all at once.

“We think our lives are about personal choice,” June said, “but our lives are really about the something, the one thing, that we all have in common.”

“I once argued with someone about whether or not we all have one thing in common,” Dick said. He was not eating his goat cheese and tomato flatbread pizza. He held a glass of scotch and ice, but he had only sipped it once. “She thought we did, and she thought it was humanity. I thought we did not have one thing in common, that we were each unique in our own ways.”

“We can’t bear to look at what we have in common, because it is too horrible,” June said. “It is something that if we fully confronted, we would not be able to go on. We could not reproduce, because

we would see it was selfish; we could not make culture, because we could see it is pointless.”

June noticed she was holding her silverware in the air and gesturing with her fork and knife. She lowered them to her plate.

June sat facing the window. It was nighttime, and outside, cars were pulling into the pub’s lot. Each one sent a bright flash of headlights deep into her retinas. Each time she cringed and held her hand up in front of her face.

Dick was checking his phone. He was not listening to June, but nor was he focusing attention on his device. Dick was recalling the spread-eagle of a splayed woman, an image he studied extensively that morning, as he did most every morning.

“Already this is something we think about,” June continued. She squinted again as the white light bathed over her. It felt like it flashed *through* her. Certainly she was blinded; all she could see was Dick’s shadowy outline.

“We must enjoy what we have,” she continued. “We must make the effort to enjoy our lives while we are *alive*. And, things can change. That’s what we have to tell ourselves. That things might be different tomorrow.”

“June, dear.” Dick reached across the table and covered her soft white hand with his soft white hand. His nails were manicured with clear polish. His purple Brooks Brothers shirt was starched and crisp, his cuffs rolled up over the sleeve of his black sweater. “Do not shoulder the burdens of strangers. These concerns you can shed without guilt.”

His eyes were dark brown, and warm, and soft behind his hipster glasses, June noticed. Now she could see his face again. His chestnut stubble. His perky features. He looked concerned. She melted.

He caressed her hand with his fingers as he spoke.

“June, he said, “darling. You are so beautiful. And you know I love you. But you are such a huge problem. These ideas in that head of yours. If only you would use your talents to improve on your – how should I say – your *situation*? Your *condition*? Even you, dear, must see, that your life could use some – definition. Everything is a choice, June. And we have so many choices to make. Choosing to live, choosing to love, and yes, choosing happiness, June! We can choose to work out problems rather than run away, or we can choose to walk away rather than live another day enmeshed in conflict. We can choose whether to answer the phone and talk, or to not answer the phone, and let it go to voicemail. We can choose to date or not date, to live alone or with someone else, to have children or not have children; to rent or buy; to drive a car or take the bus. Each of us must choose a career path, and each of us must choose how to eat. These days, you know, you can have organic, local, vegetarian, vegan, gluten free, dairy free.”

Dick’s eyes glazed over with sentimentality, and his voice rose and fell in a gentle cadence as he spoke. June was transfixed. Certainly she could be improved upon, she thought. Perhaps Dick could remake her – in his vision. She imagined the revealing of the new, and much improved, June. Would she have a beehive? Thick eyeliner? Mini-skirts?

“Of course,” June said. “We also must choose what to wear, what to read, what to listen to, and what to post to our profiles.”

“Bonbon,” Dick said. He gazed at her over his glasses. “We must choose our personal style. We must define our good taste. Isn’t that what sets us apart from the true poor – our knack for the aesthetic, our devotion to the beautiful? Isn’t that the ultimate indicator of how far we’ve come – as a species?”

“Sugarpuff,” June said. She smiled sweetly. “The young people tell me that deep in the simulation, there is only the illusion of choice.”

June was a teacher, so she often remarked on what the young people were doing.

“They tell me, ‘Have you read the ingredients on the different jars on mayonnaise in the supermarket?’” June said. “They are all the same. Only the labels are different.’ And even the labels are not so different, I remind them. Not so different at all.”

Dick reached into his back pocket. “Please, allow me,” he said. He put three stiff bills on the table. He put his hand on June’s lower back as they left the café.

\* \* \*

They walked side by side under the golden canopy of autumn maples. June’s honey-colored ponytail glowed. She nestled her chin in her scarlet-colored scarf and clutched at Dick’s arm. He stiffened and stuffed his fists down into his pockets. But she managed to hang on.

Three young boys and a girl approached them on the sidewalk. They wore knitted skull caps of different colors, their shoes were held together with duct tape, and dark creases were visible under their eyes. They ducked their heads as they hustled by.

“When I was young, we all thought we were Jay-Z or Beyoncé,” June said grandly, and she laughed. “We were all amplified to the role of celebrities in our cyberlives.”

From the car window, June saw a group of people on the corner. She saw the young adults they passed standing on the sidewalk. They were holding signs. *30 Years of Class Warfare Against Us. Banks Got Bailed Out We Got Sold Out. Hey Hey Ho Ho The D’s and R’s Have Got to Go.* They were surrounded by people wearing dark hoodies and Guy Fawkes masks. A man with long dreadlocks played a bongo drum. A hunched, shriveled elderly woman wore an orange raincoat. Her sign said *End Corporate Greed.*

“Now many people have had enough,” June said dimly. “They are ready to fight for even the faintest wisp of a hope that someday, they might be able to live a different way.”

Dick, who had put on his dark driving glasses, didn't respond.

"The kids were raised in the cellophane culture," June said. She shook her head. "They have realized their payday will never come. It is said many of them will never work."

"Ah, yes," Dick said. "*Les enfants terribles* must transition into the *nouveau servitude*."

\* \* \*

June followed Dick into Dick's flat. She sat on Dick's couch. She lit a cigarette and crossed her legs under her full yellow skirt. Dick loosened his watch, placed it on the coffee table, and walked by her into his bedroom. He emerged in a white undershirt, boxer shorts, and slippers. He sat next to her. He put his hand on her knee.

"Dick," June said. "What about the things we can't choose?"

"I'll get you anything you want, June." Dick ran his finger along her leg. He started to push up the hem of her skirt. "Just name it."

"Dick," June said. Her forehead had creased, her eyes clouded over with concern. "We cannot wear clothes without inheriting someone else's misery. In most cases, we cannot eat for the same reason. We work jobs where we are only asked to be efficient."

Dick's hand was now at her thigh. "You decide," he said, "what kind of work *you* want to do. And then you make – adjustments."

June's eyes started to droop.

"Turn over," Dick said, and June did. He pulled aside her underwear, entered her in a quick motion, and started to move. June propped herself up on her elbows and held her chin in her fists.

"I don't know, dear," she said. "We cannot gather in public space and share food, thoughts, and companionship without petitioning the government for permission. We cannot exchange ideas without

being watched, listened to, or monitored. Everyone who has ever wanted to live a life of service has had to go through their mental checklist: where do I make exceptions to my ‘morals’—? In what I eat, buy, or believe?”

Dick finished quickly with a spasm against her buttocks and a grimace.

“June.” Dick sighed as he tucked himself back inside his boxers. “Morals don’t exist. We no longer have the capacity to live by them.”

June rolled back to a seated position. She picked her underwear out of her crevice. Dick started to smooth down her skirt.

“Maybe,” he said, “it would help you to think about what we *can* do. We can work, we can enjoy our home, we can host dinner parties. You love dinner parties! We can take walks in the park, travel to beautiful places, and enjoy sports, sex and intoxicants. We can laugh. Think about how good it feels to laugh!”

“Ha!” June said. She stood up and threw her hands in the air. “Ha! Ha!” She turned around once, slowly, like a ballerina. Then she sat down again. She looked Dick in the eye. She pursed her lips and nodded.

“Hmm,” she said. “It does feel good to laugh. But Dick! The illusion of choice masks the fact that in one way or another, each of us learns to submit, each in our own way!”

Dick lit a cigarette and with his other hand, he cupped June’s chin. His hand was cold and so were his eyes.

“Dear,” he said. “You simply haven’t grown up. You live in a dream.”

June felt something steely in her stomach. She peered at Dick. She wondered if she hated him.

“You’re right, June,” Dick said. He leaned back and locked in on her gaze as a spiral of cigarette smoke rose in front of his glasses. He waved it away as he spoke. “You figured it out. You can choose to eat healthy or not, to be on the left or on the right, to get married or not get married, to buy an apartment or a house, but all this means is that you choose the conditions of your bondage. You can never choose a different fate.”

He smiled. “It isn’t personal,” he said. “It’s just the way of things. The way things are, if you will. There simply is not another fate available to you or to anyone. That skin you’re in, shall we say? It’s nothing but a valuable resource in a world where resources are getting scarce.”

“Now baby,” he said. He put out his cigarette and leaned in and took her hand in his. There was no ring on her finger. There never would be. “Be a doll and set out something good for us to eat.”

\* \* \*

Dick popped the champagne bottle open and poured the sparkling liquid into two tall flutes. He handed one to June and enjoyed a long sip for himself. He was wearing his emerald green velvet house robe, his navy blue silken pajama pants, and his favorite rabbit-fur slippers. June had put on her pink apron overlaid with a sage green floral pattern. She stood at the kitchen counter and prepared an antipasti plate.

June was feeling a little frustrated now. She had tuned out during the sex, quick though it was, and only now was she starting to feel amorous.

“I love Sundays,” she said. She moved salami, piece by piece, from the container onto the plate. “Sundays are my favorite days.”

“Do you feel closer to God?” Dick said. There was a baiting edge to his tone now. “I never believed, myself.”

“No God?” June said as she crumpled up the remains of the salami packaging.

“Of course not,” Dick said. He shrugged. “No creator, no miracles, no one raised from the dead.”

“No one thinks about God anymore,” June said. “I mean, why would they?”

“I suppose,” Dick said, and took a sip of his champagne, “that *questions of conscience* are noticeably absent from the popular literature.”

“Well,” June said. She put down the meat and cheese platter and stood by Dick at the kitchen counter. She rested her head on his back. Behind her, on a windowsill that looked out into a city street, was a purple orchid in full bloom. “There really is no urge for social justice without belief in God.”

Dick shrugged her off. He put his drink down. He started to pace the kitchen floor. He gestured in the air with his hands as he spoke.

“Why can’t it just be pragmatic to care for each other?” he said. “Why can’t we do it simply because it makes sense to do it? Why does it have to be because a God tells us to?”

June stared at the green marble of the kitchen counter. Because it makes no sense whatsoever to try to live a moral life, she thought. It is far *more* pragmatic to have only the most superficial relations with everyone, to *move through* the landscape rather than to interact *within* it.

Dick was checking his phone again, and imagining a hairy orifice opening and closing, opening and closing. He had the urge to pull off. He squashed it.

“But dwelling in transcendence is more compelling to me than endless bean tallying,” June said. “What a stupid life we live of infinite ‘how much did I earn—how much can I spend—how much

*E&F V.X*

can I borrow.”

Dick walked up behind her and gripped her tightly around the waist. “In this world you have to pick a side and fight,” he said. He nestled his chin on her shoulder and pressed his cheek against hers. “There is no reason to believe peace exists. There are precious few historic examples of people living in harmony with the earth and with each other. Where do these ideas come from?”

His face was smooth again, and he turned his head, and his hot lips softly kissed her neck.

“When the oppressed rise, they seek to liberate,” June said. She smiled, but her eyes were faraway and empty. “They believe in themselves, but I am not so sure they believe in justice.”

8

# *Stolen Culture,* *Six Vignettes*

Adrienne Kalfopoulou

*for Debra Marquart*

We live among the olives and the sun  
never questioning the olives or the sun.  
We live in this land as if there were no other land.  
In this way when the visitors arrive,  
we are not sure how to treat their rare words –  
how they decorate these olives and this sun  
in garlands of praise! How they make of them something  
we don't recognize, and we, in our ignorance  
and our arrogance, will thank them.

*#1, Strike days, an introduction*

Everyone's been talking about the fact that the Germans are suggesting, or at least one minister is, that the Greeks sell the Acropolis or some of their "uninhabited islands" to help

pay off the country's debt. That is, do whatever it takes to get ourselves out from under. "Whatever it takes" is a kind of mantra in the loud protest marches that have routinely paralyzed the city since April 2010, the year everyone is saying will be remembered as the one Greece lost itself, once again, to "foreign powers."

I don't even know who is involved in today's strike. I only find out about it on my way to the metro, thinking to pick up two bread rings to eat when I see the locked stalls, the fruit vendor's table covered with plastic. None of the African and Pakistani refugees are around who are usually selling sunglasses, shoes, and underwear, spread out on the pavements over white sheets. I ask a policeman. He says it's a 24-hour strike against "the austerity measures." I cross the street thinking it was a good thing I pulled out some cash from the ATM yesterday and in the cab go through the math to decide if this is cheaper than driving my car downtown and paying for parking.

The "austerity measures" means we will all suddenly be conscious of the extras, paying for parking, the second drink after work, or any drink after work; if we do or don't eat out, things that have made living in Greece, or the idea of living in Greece, attractive – especially to those who do not live in Greece. The German minister for example, who assumes the Greeks have overindulged in these finally-not-so-simple pleasures and suggests they use these attractions as collateral. In all the rash of news articles and commentaries on the Greek economy, I stumble on a YouTube clip: "What a great idea. Now, can we possibly sell NJ and NY? New Mexico and Arizona back to Mexico and have ourselves a balanced budget!" And this from a blog: "Oh wonderful! I bet some central banker figured that one out. Use money stolen from citizens to buy the citizens' country...hope the Greeks are dumb enough to fall for this."

The taxi driver isn't in a good mood; he lets out a deep sigh when I tell him I'm heading for the center. "No one's going to the center," he says. "They've blocked it off." Now it's my turn to sigh. I suggest the roundabout that bypasses the center but will get me to work. It is, of course, the road that everyone else is taking. The taxi driver starts to sigh more loudly as we hardly budge on the packed street. Finally he says, "Do you mind getting out here, so I can avoid the center?" I'm amazed. "I'm taking a taxi because I need to get to the center," I explain, still civil. He shrugs, sighs again, says "at this rate you're better off walking and anyway if we drive near Syntagma square we might get beaten up by the demonstrators." I almost laugh, saying I can't solve his problem because I'm too busy trying to solve my own, to which he says I should have just stayed at home. The discussion gets heated but stays restrained despite his telling me I ought to keep my problems at home and my telling him I didn't think I was there to solve his. Finally neither of us says anything as we inch along and he turns on the radio to a station playing church music. A priest is chanting, then lets out a drawn-out lament of distress. The taxi driver allows an impatient Mercedes and two SUVs to get ahead of us. There is roadwork going on both sides of the street, gas pipe lines are being laid out. I notice a stupid TRIUMPH underwear ad, a young woman looking coy in what seems more like a bunny outfit than underwear, and then the inane writing at the bottom: "I am not SWEET, I am just dressed that way."

## *#2, Colonizing discourses*

Both Lord Elgin (Thomas Bruce, 7th Earl of Elgin) and Sir George Everest were British citizens, and as a Critical Reading section of an SAT exam notes: "In 1953 the Everest triumph was viewed as a symbolic event which revealed significant things about contemporary British culture, about the values which had been conventionally associated with Britain's rise to world power..." Like all empires the British enjoyed

triumphs of cultural acquisitions, borrowings and conquests. The problem is, or the problem becomes, what happens when those cultural borrowings are at the expense of another, or in the language of translation, when the source language is somehow left impoverished or bereft of what the target language has taken from it? When the notion of empire was less contested than it is in our day, less invested in camouflaging national agendas and cultural disenfranchisement, practices of appropriation were unapologetic and therefore more legible. The SAT paragraph continues: “News of the expedition’s success reached London on the morning of Queen Elizabeth II’s coronation, a coincidence which enabled commentators... to present the Everest achievement as a culminating moment of an empire which had begun in North America in the reign of the first Elizabeth.”

I came across the paragraph while tutoring a student the summer the New Acropolis Museum in Athens opened to the public. The summer of 2009, like the summer of 2004, made Greeks proud; there was an international appreciation for how the city had managed to transform itself. It was a contemporary polis with a state of the art metro system and, now, a museum with its many invaluable artifacts that eloquently displayed the Acropolis’ history from antiquity. And then, on the top floor, very dramatically, were the Parthenon’s marble friezes that wrapped around the entire floor; the friezes displayed ancient battles, mythic figures, gods, and goddesses, and, also, distinct white plaster moldings of the scenes that were missing, taken by Mr. Elgin, sold to him by the Ottoman Turks, and now part of the British museum collection.

“Why didn’t the Greeks accept the offer of the British Museum to loan them the marble friezes?” for the much-publicized opening of the museum. A friend of mine from the States is genuinely puzzled by this, interpreting the refusal of the Greek government, or ministry of culture, to accept the offer

as another example of misplaced pride and stubbornness. I was hard put to explain it myself, until my friend gave me the clue. “I mean they could have kept those friezes from the British museum on loan forever.”

This was just the issue: the controversy over an acknowledgment of ownership. The Greeks did not want what they believed was theirs to be “on loan” to them, the country of the artifacts’ origin. Seamus Heaney has said in an interview with Seamus Deane (quoted by Denis O’Driscoll in his interview with Heaney) that living as an author garners one the authority of authorship. In the controversy over the Elgin Marbles the problem is, not dissimilarly, one of authorship. Who has the authority to authorize the marbles’ proper name, that is, are these marbles to go by the name of their place of origin in Greek antiquity, or the one given in a kind of arranged marriage in which the bride had no say in her bride-price or married name.

In passage 1 of the two comparative SAT passages on Everest, we are told that the original name of the mountain was *Sagarmatha*, “goddess of the sky,” more locally referred to by the Tibetans as *Chomolungma*, “goddess, mother of the world.” Passage 1 ends the discussion of the mountain’s naming with this sentence: “Like the mountain itself, which is often cloaked by clouds, these local perspectives are unfortunately obscured by the more familiar and less reverential name of the nineteenth-century British surveyor: Sir George Everest.” Everest, who was against having the mountain named after him in 1857, argued that it could not be written in Hindi or be pronounced by natives to India. Nevertheless the Royal Geographical Society adopted Everest as the mountain’s official name, proposed by Andrew Waugh, the “British Surveyor of General India” at the time, who believed this would make the name “a household word among the civilized nations.”

Like Elgin, Everest was a citizen of the British Empire, so the

name's marketability, to put it in 21st-century terms, meant it would belong to the lingua franca of the time. But what is lost in the barter or, more simply, what's in a name? The Elgin Marbles as opposed to the Parthenon Marbles, Mount Everest as opposed to *Chomolungma* (or "goddess, mother of the world")? To answer my friend, I would say more important than the return of the marbles to the New Acropolis Museum is the acknowledgement of their authorship, the authority of their origins. The gesture of a loan on the part of the British museum only reinforces the terms of the Museum's ownership much in the way a husband might consent to having his mail-order bride visit her distant family on the condition that she be returned to him – her married rather than her maiden name being the legally binding one.

The deluge of articles that have sometimes conflated the Greek economic crisis, the mismanagement and corruption that led up to it, with broader cultural terms of how to read Greece haven't stopped since the country's deficit was made public in 2009. There was, for example, a piece in *The New York Times* by Michael Kimmelman titled "Who Draws the Borders of Culture?" that makes a case for the fact that no one ultimately owns the artifacts of culture, while upholding the argument for keeping the marbles in the British Museum. It reminded me of Andrew Waugh's explanation for naming the Himalayan mountain after Everest, so that it would become a name "among civilized nations." While Kimmelman thinks he is being "democratizing" as he accuses the Greeks of being "nationalistic and symbolic" his language gives him away: "To the Greeks the Parthenon marbles may be a singular cause, but they're like plenty of other works that have been *broken up and disseminated*. The effect of this vandalism on the education and enlightenment of people in all the various places where *the dismembered work* have landed has been in many ways democratizing" (my italics).

It is predictable, if reactionary, behavior that the desire to lay claim to, or reclaim, cultural artifacts comes on the heels of moments, or whole histories, of cultural disenfranchisement; a desire that often comes of having been looted, or as Kimmelman graphically puts it, dis-membered. It is something that Kimmelman, while giving the Greeks' wish to reinstate the Parthenon marbles a semantic nod with his verbs, nevertheless treats as compromised by "various motives." He cites Zahi Hawass, for example, "Egypt's chief archaeologist, who made the recent fuss about the Rosetta Stone," as being politically opportunistic for demanding "that Germany hand over Nerfertit, the 3,500-year-old bust of Akhenaten's wife" at the moment "when the Neues Museum in Berlin opened with the bust as its main attraction." All this happening after Egypt's candidate for Unesco was defeated. Kimmelman states that Egypt has used its "cultural patrimony, to lash out" at this loss of candidacy for Unesco.

While there are asides in Kimmelman's piece on how countries such as Egypt, or Greece, might "take advantage" of the "symbolic value of works like the marbles," he glosses over the implied violence of these gestures. "*Ripped* from its origins" (my italics) he says, an artifact may lose "one set of meanings, to gain others" such as the connections people make "across cultures through objects like the marbles." Fair enough, but for those caught in debates of cultural legitimacy, the "symbolic value of works like the marbles" is part of a very literal sense of belonging to a history undermined by powers which have robbed or disenfranchised that legacy – one set of meanings lost "to gain others" may very well have been critical to the continuity of cultural identity which, like the Native Americans, is now relegated to reservations no longer part of any cultural mainstream.

I am having this discussion with a Greek friend in a coffee shop. It is a very hot summer afternoon in August, and she is

visibly impatient. I'll call her Ourania, muse of astrology and astronomy. Ourania left Greece over a decade ago. She seems irked that I, in my Greek-American, or Greek-other, context should be harping on this issue in the heat of August when we could be talking about any number of other things. "This debate is so fraught," she begins. "As soon as you talk about issues of cultural authenticity you're implicated in the whole colonial discourse of whose reality is at stake."

Whose reality is at stake is all about how culture is read, whose gaze defines, interprets, fictionalizes, and finally "authorizes." Back to the threat of the "authorial gaze" – to borrow Heaney's idea – that complicates narratives that may want to tell other stories. The way Kimmelman, for example, reads Greece suggests a simple cause and effect relationship between history and the present that is a lot messier than his conclusion of the Greeks' demand of the return of the Parthenon marbles. The Greeks are, rather, asking for acknowledgement of a historical reality that gives them claim to the marbles' origins. Ourania agrees, "By referring to the marbles as Elgin's you're disempowering their being Greek," Elgin given priority over the Parthenon. We talk then of how "Greekness" is commodified, Zorba stereotypes or sea-blue posters of idyllic nature that gloss over the larger cultural schema of the country's complexities.

Like Elgin in his syphilitic body desiring those beautiful marble torsos on the Parthenon's friezes, the appropriation of cultural artifacts says as much, if not more, about the appropriator as it does of the culture out of which they originate. As Kate Holterhooff put it in her presentation of "Aesthetic Modernity and the Elgin Marbles" for the 2011 "Poetry and Melancholia" conference at the University of Stirling, Hellenism for Elgin and others became an idealization of an imaginary past. Writers and thinkers from Friedrich von Schiller to John Keats have, in Keats' words "On Seeing the Elgin Marbles,"

looked to antiquity to cast “– a shadow of magnitude” over what “mingles Grecian grandeur with the rude/ Wasting of old time.”

### #3, *Myths of Origin*

There was a heated debate over the translation of a group of poems written originally in the little known Vietnamese vernacular of Nôm; it carried on through three issues of POETRY magazine starting with the April 2008 translation issue. I was drawn to it as much for how it dramatized many of the assumptions, and presumptions, of identity politics in the culture wars as I was for the fierceness of the exchange.

The Scots poet Don Paterson notes some of the differences between translation and what he calls “versioning,” versions being freer to become “poems in their own right.” The primary aim of a version is not “to remain true to the original words and their relations,” but to “the *spirit* of the original.” Both translations and versions, when successful, manage to express “the *culture* of the age.” In other words rather than being circumscribed by “the time and the diction” of the source language, the poem in the target language can potentially enjoy “continuous cultural rebirth.”

Paterson’s argument for the possibilities of a poem’s undergoing multiple incarnations beyond its source language harks back to Walter Benjamin’s “The Task of the Translator.” Benjamin notes: “The task of the translator [is] to release in his own language that pure language which is under the spell of another, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work.” The differences between versioning and translating which Paterson discusses in poems is, for Benjamin, a similar distinction between “literal” and “free” translations, the free translation being the one that “bases the test on its own language.” What Benjamin means to say is best

expressed in his quote of Rudolf Pannwitz's: "Our translators, even the best ones, proceed from a wrong premise. They want to turn Hindi, Greek, English into German instead of turning German into Hindi, Greek, English... [showing] far greater reverence for the usage of their own language than for the spirit of the foreign works." Interestingly, Benjamin, Paterson, and Pannwitz consider something as nebulous as the "spirit" of an original work as the integral aspect the translator must serve. It was, I think, around this issue regarding the spirit of an original work, how and by whom it is best served, that the debate in POETRY raged.

The 2008 translation issue of POETRY published five translations of poems by Ho Xuan Huong, a North Vietnamese poet, by the contemporary Chinese-American poet Marilyn Chin. In her translator's note, Chin refers to Nôm, the language in which Xuan Huong wrote, as a "Chinese-Vietnamese fusion" and a "national vernacular" and speaks of Xuan Huong as a "modern feminist" who used her images and art "as arsenal against the patriarchy." In a Letter to the Editor in the June 2008 POETRY, Joseph Bednarik responded that anyone interested in Ho Xuan Huong's poetry ought to read John Balaban's translations against Chin's, citing Chin's choice of "*boo hoo*" for a Nôm word in her translation of "Lamenting Widow" as problematic. He criticizes Chin for a lax approach and uses the verb "noodling" to describe her method.

Chin accuses Bednarik of being "sexist, racist, imperialist" and defends her translation on the basis of gender and race as much as the "onomatopoeic, mimicking the sound of a woman's crying," when she asks "who, if anyone, should have the rightful claim to an Asian woman's poetry." Bednarik "and his press" are on the side of "white male patriarchy" and its attempts to "colonize the translation of Asian poetry" against what she "a dark-skinned Asian woman poet" is engaged, or "noodling" in. Chin's language is unfortunate for how it

reduces the “democratizing” (to use Kimmelman’s word) possibilities of translation to binaries that further reduce these possibilities: feminist versus patriarchal, Asian versus white, and so forth. What is most disturbing in this rhetoric is how the issue of cultural ownership raises the old dilemma of speaking for a person, or group, not in a position to speak back.

In “Real Fakes and Inauthentic Others” Alyce Miller makes a valuable comment regarding literary hoaxes, pointing out that they share “an eagerness to codify ‘otherness’” that builds “a commodified notion of ‘authenticity.’” This is also resonant of the Greeks, or anyone else, wishing to “own” antiquity, or in the case of the POETRY debate, a poem in a nearly inaccessible, or dead, language. To possess history in the way you possess your house, your children, your passport, brings us back to Mr. Elgin and his, or our, marbles. A passport, home, and children, are ways to authenticate identity and express legitimacy and cultural belonging; to have to prove that your children are not bastards, your house is not about to be taken from you, and your passport is not a fraud, suggests that cultural possession, or ownership, becomes entangled in *proof* of identity, and by extension, proof of culture.

So what if your children are un-legitimized, your house something you can no longer afford – are these grounds for cultural disenfranchisement, or a grounding of culture defined by moments of disenfranchisement? Something the German minister who suggested the Greeks start selling their islands seems to consider one and the same. For the average Greek there is true pride in the culture’s roots in antiquity that is simultaneously made vulnerable by that history. The vulnerability stems, in part, from the relatively new (in relation to antiquity) Greek nation-state, and the fact that its creation was one made possible by a confluence of foreign interventions and agendas.

From its formation at the end of the 19th century when Russia, Britain, and France sent their fleets to help fight Ottoman and Egyptian efforts to defeat the Greek navy, the Greeks have been indebted to foreign aid. George Canning of Britain and the Russian Tsar Nicholas joined forces and Greece achieved independence in 1882. After Ioannis Kapodistrias' brief governorship and assassination, Otto of Bavaria was recognized as the first king of the "Kingdom of Greece." All this is to say, that the culture that provided the western world with its founding ideas in the arts and sciences, while never having experienced a Renaissance or Enlightenment as a result of 400 years under Ottoman rule, continues to be sensitive to issues of "Greekness."

In Alyce Miller's essay on hoaxes she coins the phrase "composite invention" to refer to the "Japanese Hibakusha poet, eyewitness to the dropping of the A-bomb and Hiroshima survivor" whose example suggests something of the construct of collective imaginaries. Araki Yasusada (1907-1972) published *Doubled Flowering* to literary acclaim, poems that spoke of being an eyewitness to the A-bomb and the loss of his family, only for it to be found out that Araki Yasusada never existed beyond the imaginations of an American poet and professor and a Japanese professor in Japan. Miller asks the question: "What cultural desires and literary gaps produced the conditions that made Yasusada possible?" Miller cites the poet Forrest Gander speaking for "cultural empathy" and the more visceral reaction of John Solt, a professor of Japanese culture at Amherst who answers: "This is just Japanized crap. It plays into the American idea of what is interesting about Japanese culture – Zen, haiku, anything seen as exotic – and gets it all wrong, adding Western humor and irony." Gander and Solt represent opposite reactions to how history is being read. But the indignation on Solt's part is also that history is being rendered in the language of "a commodified notion of

‘authenticity’” to use Miller’s earlier phrase.

There is in Chin’s answer to Bedarnik’s criticism of her translations a similar complaint regarding the authorial gaze. The debate over how to read correctly or more to the point, “authentically,” implicates her gaze too. John Balaban, whose *Spring Essence* is a translation of Ho Xuan Huong’s poetry, points out, for example, that Nôm is Vietnamese, not Chinese, “the old ideographic script for spoken Vietnamese.” Balaban asks: “Given Vietnam’s troubled ancient and recent history with China, I can’t figure out why Marilyn Chin thought she had some entitlement to this poetry.” But he then suggests the answer to his own question with, “Perhaps because Ho Xuan Huong is so compelling, so contemporary, or as Francis Fitzgerald dubbed her in a blurb for *Spring Essence*, so much ‘the brilliant bad girl of eighteenth century Vietnam.’” This kind of textual appropriation is revealing of what Chin herself refers to as a colonizing practice. And like any colonizing project, the language of the host, or source, culture is so often silenced and distorted.

#### #4, *Of pain, lust, and its translations*

It is seductive to feel the other might be, or become, one’s incarnation of desire. Eros is Elgin looking at the marble friezes of the Parthenon, the gorgeous busts and torsos of antiquity, a way to forget his own ravaged body? The rumored syphilis had disfigured his nose in particular. He would eventually claim these artifacts for Britain as well. “Object lust” is what Jason Felch and Ralph Frammolino note in *Chasing Aphrodite: The Hunt for Looted Antiquities* led to Marion True’s controversial acquisitions for the Getty Museum. It is the Pilgrims landing in the New World in utter faith that the land in front of them was theirs for the taking. It is, finally, any colonizer’s fantasy reflected in the place or people or objects whose origins are subsumed in projections of fantastic, rapacious desire.

Lord Elgin presented a document to the British parliament to justify what he considered a legal purchase. An English translation of an Italian translation from the original Ottoman *firman* apparently gave Elgin permission to make drawings and moldings of sculpted portions of the Parthenon. His original intention, with the help of the painter Giovanni Lusieri from the Neapolitan court, was to do just that, but as lust will have it, he began in 1801 to remove entire friezes from the Parthenon, Propylaea and Erchtheum. According to the English translation from the Italian, the Turkish word “*qualche*” meaning “a few,” gave Elgin permission to remove “pieces of stone with old inscriptions or figures thereon.” The controversy revolved around Elgin’s having taken what amounted to more than half of the Parthenon sculptures (247 feet of the original 524 foot Parthenon frieze, 17 pediment figures, a Caryatid, and 15 of the 92 *metope* panels showing battles between Lapiths and Centaurs); the removals damaged the Parthenon irreparably, and Byron among others called Elgin a vandal. In Canto II of “Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage” he laments:

Cold is the heart, fair Greece! that looks on thee,  
Nor feels as lovers o’er the dust they lov’d ;  
Dull is the eye that will not weep to see  
Thy walls defac’d, thy mouldering shrines remov’d  
By British hands, which it had best behov’d  
To guard those relics ne’er to be restor’d.  
Curst be the hour when from their isle they rov’d,  
And once again thy hapless bosom gor’d,

To return to Miller’s insights, speaking in contexts of silenced and traumatized history is further complicated by those of the mediators, antiquities curators and translators, for example. A symposium on “Current Trends in Translation and Interpretation” held at the Hellenic-American Union in Athens highlighted this when the Greek poet (and translator)

Katerina Angelaki-Rooke said: “The Greek ‘*Ach!*’ is not the English ‘*Ouch!*’ It’s a different kind of pain in Greek.” Perhaps “*boo hoo*” is a different kind of weeping in English than it is in Ho Xuan Huong’s *Nôm*, as Joseph Bednarik suggests when he asks, “I couldn’t help but wonder: which *Nôm* character means ‘*boo hoo*?’”

If Paterson’s definition holds that translations fail when they “fail to honour the rules of natural syntax” while versions fail “when they misrepresent the *spirit* of the original...,” a view echoed by Benjamin in his quotation of Rudolf Pannwitz, the argument becomes one that asks who more authentically accesses that spirit. “*Ach*” and “*Ouch*” are one-syllable words, but sounds (and worlds) of embedded meaning. “*Ach!*” the Greek village woman says as she is asked to tell her story of years under the German Occupation, or told the day she is in Athens that there’s a transportation strike and that she must walk in the heat. One could not substitute “*Ouch*” for these situations. “*Ouch!*” is equally surprised but less dramatic, certainly without that heavy backward nod of resignation the Greek “*Ach*” can suggest. “*Ouch*” is a pinch, a toe stubbed, a reaction to someone’s bad (but not tragically bad) day. The linguist Juliane House notes there is no such thing as a neutral text: “There are sets of assumptions that underlie all texts whether the author is aware of them or not.” And the translator, the curator, the art collector, all lovers, bring to that body of the other, beloved or not, their rapt gaze that sometimes, also, rapes.

If “language is a blueprint for culture” as Alberto Rios said during a 2010 AWP panel discussion, what happens when the target language provides a different blueprint by which to read the spirit, or source, of an original artifact or text? I met América by chance in Athens. She was from Spain but taught in the U.S.; América edited a 2007 issue of the *Delaware Review of Latin American Studies*, in which a group of poems from

Gabriela Mistral's "Sonetos de la muerte" were interpreted as "Sonetos-lésbicos"; the writer argued that the gender of a "secret 'tú'" is left ambiguous. In an email to me América pointed out specific issues that she believed violated the originating text, noting that the article was written by someone "who definitely knows Spanish but who does not seem to have grown up in the culture..." Among the problems:

She quotes four lines as an example of the combination of eleven- and seven-syllable verses, but all four verses have eleven syllables (Is she counting English feet instead of Spanish syllables?)....She interprets "le siegas en flor" as the poetic voice asking that the person be blinded ("ciegas") whereas "siegas" means to harvest while in bloom (prematurely, before the fruit is even formed) not to blind him (ciegas)....For all that she says that there is no mention of the sex of the person being referred to, the "lo" in "Arráncalo" and "retórnalo" in the third sonnet refers to a male; if it had been female it would have to be (no choice here!) "arráncala" and "retórnala." If Mistral had wanted so desperately to hide the sex of the person, she could have easily written "arrácale" and "retórnale." This is known as "léismo" (using the indirect object "le" in place of the direct objects "lo" and "la"). Léismo is a very common mistake, and it would hide the sex of the person. As a matter of fact, Mistral could have used the female form "arráncala" to refer to the "loved shade" (sombra amada – which is feminine) or "retórnala" to refer to the boat (barca – which is female) instead of the "you." If Mistral had done that, we would never be able to know for sure whether she is referring to a female "you" or to a shade or a boat.

At the 2010 AWP panel "Writing the Mind's Wild Geography," Rios elaborated on language as a tool that "shapes perception" adding, "We don't always know how to use it." In that narcotic moment of *eros* as the Greeks define it and as Anne Carson translates it as "want,' lack,' ...The lover wants what he does

not have.” Eros is, of course, an unequal passion; it does not follow policy or any rule of law in its fevered craving for that other it believes will complete its ever incomplete self.

*#5, Radical Contexts*

Northwest of Kabul the Taliban, in 2001, deliberately destroyed two giant Bamiyan Buddhas that dated back to the 9th century; Bamiyan, was, we are told, once a common meeting place in antiquity for various cultures. These massive statues, the largest measuring 53 meters high were shaped out of the sandstone cliffs, and the Taliban in their lust to destroy non-Islamic artifacts blew up two of the ancient Buddhas. International outrage and the establishment of the “Cultural Property Law” created renewed awareness of what Corrine Brenner notes in the *Suffolk Transnational Law Review* as “Cultural property [that] forms social identity and, in some instances, embodies the highest accomplishments of the human spirit.” The Taliban action demonstrates this was not of any concern to them; their determining incentive (despite pleas from various museums that offered to buy and preserve the Buddhas) was to fulfill Mullah Omar’s order to destroy any pre-Islamic art, including the destruction of centuries-old manuscripts.

Such inconsolable losses to cultural heritage recall other analogous violations, the destruction of Russian Orthodox churches after the Bolshevik Revolution during Stalin’s regime, the Ottomans’ melting lead from inside the columns of the Parthenon to make bullets during the Greek War of Independence in 1821 when the Greeks, appalled, offered them free bullets to save the Parthenon. These examples clearly take us beyond a conflict of assumptions, raising profound questions about identity politics. Threatened by their marginality, if not their erasure, groups such as the Taliban retaliate in the way a primitive aggressor might. The vicious cycle is implicit in

any binary – the dropping of the A-bomb, for example, on Hiroshima and Nagasaki after Pearl Harbor, or more recently the destruction of Iraq and Afghanistan after 9/11. The single-minded obsession to destroy *anything* non-Islamic, *anything* Russian Orthodox, makes the potentially dangerous Other, always with its capital “O”, an obstacle the mania of single-mindedness will not stop at anything to remove.

But such horror stories in the culture wars are doubly silenced when the effort to lay claim to cultural trauma is framed, or appropriated, by dominant discourses. As Arudyhai Roy points out in her passionate “The Monster in the Mirror, 9 Is Not 11 (And November Isn’t September)” published in *The Guardian* and *Outlook India*, attempts to contextualize the 2008 Mumbai carnage beyond the reductive statements made by the likes of U.S. Senator John McCain who warned Pakistan that if it didn’t arrest the “bad guys,” India would launch air strikes on “terrorist camps...because Mumbai was India’s 9/11.” To which Arudyhai Roy answers: “Pakistan isn’t Afghanistan, and India isn’t America. So perhaps we should reclaim our tragedy and pick through the debris with our own brains and our own broken hearts so that we can arrive at our own conclusions.” Extremity is never rational, and a privilege of privilege is the equilibrium inherent in a state of rationality. After all, secure in its perspective, the authorial gaze takes its authority for granted, so that what lies outside the focus of that gaze is (an)other point of view altogether.

# 6, *Speaking to the Other*

“Aren’t we all forging identities out of stolen culture? Everyone taking what they need? What’s authentic, or real, when there are so many mixed strains...” Ourania is impatient again. “Authenticity is the Albanians doing the Greek olive pressing and gathering; isn’t that as authentic as travel writers who come to Greece and turn it into an Arcadian narrative?” I nod.

It is now evening instead of late afternoon. Pigeons fly into the café. The waiters seem unconcerned unless one actually lands on someone's table. Pigeons are not clean birds, so I doubt this is a scene that would be tolerated in, say, a café in the U.S., or in Norway. Ourania is not particularly bothered by them but I am, hoping that the pigeon eyeing me from the floor doesn't decide to make a go for the bread sticks sitting on the table. José, who is a sociology professor in the States, said to me the whole problem with dominant discourses is in how they categorize Otherness, what is other in those perspectives is what threatens to challenge their dominance; the assumption is that "the center is always right." Until groups like the Taliban hijack the domination of that dominance, stealing it to insist on their own centrality; a desperate and perverse theft that only reinforces reactionary perspectives.

Alberto Rios demonstrated this point when he suggested the more plural syntax of the Spanish language: "the pen fell from me," for example, "means we were both there...the pen had something to do with its being dropped, as opposed to 'I dropped the pen,' the imperial Roman I that conquers all." Rios quoted lyrical examples in poems, and also this: "The moment you have two or more words, it makes you tender and fragile...that use of one word is a failing. We use it for convenience and we should remember that, but we don't. More words mean more perspectives. It means we're in this together and no one wins."

I left Ourania and got on the metro. The strike had ended at 5pm, or so I thought. We stalled out of the EVANGELISMOS station, which translates into English as The Annunciation. The train started again, but at EVANGELISMOS the doors didn't open. It was crowded, and hot. There was no announcement over the PA. Someone yelled: "Open the doors so we can get out." We were considering the emergency door handle. The guy behind me said in English "What if something like 9/11

happened? Let's just pull the emergency handle." I tried to call out to the man outside in the station. Someone sitting on a station bench got up to see what the matter was. "They don't know what's wrong," he finally offered. "Great," someone else said in Greek. "Then why can't they open the doors?" It was a good 7 minutes if not a full 10 by the time the train moved forward, chugging hesitantly at first. An announcement over the PA finally let us know, "There's an engine problem, and we apologize for the delay." The American who mentioned 9/11 got on his cell phone to his girlfriend: "The driver seems to be playing mind games with us."

"What can anyone announce if they don't know what the problem is?" someone else was saying.

"Stop shouting at me!" the person yelled back. We were finally told the problem was irreparable; the train came to a full stop and opened its doors. Someone said it was probably another "white strike," workers deciding for themselves what they were going to do, pretending to work (so they got their paychecks) while in fact not working. I hailed a taxi going up Mesogion Street. He offered me a stick of gum as I told him I was going to "Agia Paraskevi." "It's watermelon, a new flavor" he said. I took the gum; he was listening to the news on the radio. The French president, Nicolas Sarkozy, was visiting. He had addressed the Greek parliament, a speech about what Europe owed to Greece. I asked the taxi driver what he thought about the French president. All the streets around Syntagma Square had French and Greek flags out. He shrugged. When he realized I spoke with an accent he asked where else I was from, I told him the States, and he laughed. "I gave an American a ride from Plaka yesterday." I nodded. "He was in a cowboy hat. He wanted to know if he could walk to Kolonaki. I told him he could but he decided to get in the cab anyway. Do you know what he told me?"

It had been a long day. I was also happy to be in a cab. “What?” I said for the sake of politeness. I noticed the stupid TRIUMPH ad again: “I am not SWEET, I am just dressed that way.” NOT sweet indeed. “He kept telling me, ‘If it wasn’t for the Americans we would still be riding on donkeys and picking olives.’” He chuckled, “Too bad, I told him. Too bad for us, we miss our donkeys.”

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# *Expertise*

Leora Fridman

There's a certain distance where his eyes focus when I know he isn't listening. It's close enough to where I am that I sometimes think he hears, but his irises aren't any tighter than they would be if they were watching headlights pass on the opposite side of a four lane highway. What he's looking at is diffused even before it gets to his lids.

"The hearing test was one hundred percent fine," my father tells me. "I just have a different listening style." I've been badgering him to get his hearing tested for months. I wonder if it is a "style" to know when is the right time to tune out – even public radio has commercials these days. He did not need a hearing test, he tells me. He is just too focused to hear me from downstairs, and I mumble, he says, and insert "like" where it confused him most. He can hear perfectly. He is just busy beginning things, I think, or recollecting where the old things start. I almost believe him that he can hear just fine, until I ask about a story and he does not respond.

"Have you thought of Adderall?" I ask, and immediately regret it. I can't have him thinking I've turned to drugs. He's always been hands-off, but not from miles. I try to raise my eyebrows, stretch the skin above my eyes with innocence, the blameless curiosity of those informed by pop-science features in magazines.

"I've tried it, but I was frantic all the time," he says. It's clear I haven't hooked him with the image of his daughter on pills. His tone is quick, the breath at the beginning of the sentence, and before

he is finished the comment is behind us. His forehead creases up and away, wrinkles folding into diagonals that point at the ceiling and backward. Either he is planning, or he is nostalgic, and they are almost the same. I see this in his eyebrows, which grow more brambly each year. They curl and then curve in, reminding us when we forget that our hairs are related.

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The day I learned the word “prompt” I knew it would be useful to me. The word reminded me of puffing out my cheeks on purpose, or the freeing feeling I got that first time a yoga teacher in wool socks told me to extend my stomach as far as it would go. *Don't hold it in*, she told me, *feel how much air you've got pushing out into that nice round belly*. Prompt, the idea, was somewhat the same. A word that said “breathe big in the belly,” “stick it to me,” and leaned forward into what might come.

*Think about a story you've been told more than once*, she told me. Her skin looked tougher than mine in more than one direction, like instead of just being a good ten years older than me she'd been wading through the Amazon a few months too long. She was my first writing teacher, and I imagined the color of the bottoms of her feet. *Think about a story you've been told more than once*, she said, *and think about why they tell it, what is their prompt*. She squatted next to my fake-wood desk. *What makes them tell it? Is it about where you came from, about why they are the way they are, about the shape of your nose?* I nodded at her next to me, eye-level and in moccasins. Her green eyes made slits in her leathery face and the cheekbones moved in single pieces when she smiled. I wondered if she'd ever heard lies in other languages.

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“The more complicated and specialized modern culture becomes, the more its external supporting apparatus demands the personally detached and strictly ‘objective’ *expert*, in lieu of the master of older social structures, who was moved by personal sympathy and favor, by grace and gratitude.” (Weber, Max. “Essays in Sociology” ed. Gerth A. Mills, Oxford University Press, 1949. 216)

*There was one specific moment when I realized my father could be wrong, my Papi told me. The moment when I realized that he was fully, ridiculously uninformed.* It could have been *uniformed*, or *unformed*, but *unformed* seems unlikely since the patriarch is always the most visible in the story, even if he dressed only in grey-tones and you don't get to him before his hair's gone white. He's formed, alright. Most likely it was uninformed, because he always talked about his father reading the newspaper and this read well as a case-in-point interruption.

My father and I were driving in a minivan when he told me. We were driving in the van with some cousins that we didn't like very much, not for any terrible reason like a blue wedding dress or an illicit affair, but more precisely because the cousins wore pink dresses from Macy's that formed cupcakes just before their ankles, and white stockings in the summer. They were the ones who had insisted that we go to Disneyland. Papi told me stories about his family on the drive to Orlando, mostly in order to remind me that our family was still on this vacation, even if I hated rollercoasters and had to pretend I was ten to save on the entrance fee.

He told me the story in the sweaty rented minivan, and the insides of my knees stuck to the leather and caught my sweat from dripping down my dangling legs to the floor. *I remember exactly that moment*, he told me, and so I never could leave behind the idea that *that moment* happened also in a large car under temporary insurance that you had to be twenty-three to drive and you didn't get to pick the color. Often in rented cars we ended up with a red one and laughed at its sheen, the opposite of our blue Civic hatchback that threatened to disappear in slushy parking lots.

I know, at the very least, that the moment when he found out his father could be wrong was a public one. *He was speaking to a whole group of people, and yet he was completely wrong*, my Papi told me. *It staggered me, how much he could be wrong.* I looked across at him from the passenger's side, palm trees dusty through the windshield behind him, and thought of just how lucky I was to be sitting up here in the front. *Oh, yes!* I said, *I know exactly how that feels.* My Papi blushed a bit and giggled, looked in his rearview mirror. I remembered for the first time that the cousins were there, and they laughed. *Oh, you know exactly how that feels?* one said,

her voice rising at the end, catching me with the fact that I'd already answered. Here I was trying to join the maturity club, and I had just gone and enthusiastically stated that I knew what it felt like to see my own father as an idiot. He pressed the gas pedal and, bringing his lips together, turned the wheel to the right.

That was not the only time I have tried to impress myself upon their histories by being an un-child. The danger for my doing things like this was always highest when I could feel their own resistance, watch the sweat down my father's neck and the regret of putting gasoline toward Americana, toward places where fluorescence reigns and migraines come true. This is the child I loved to be, the child who sniffs the air of Epcot for corporate sponsorship, toxic plastic, and artificial sweeteners. I knew Equal gave you cancer before the cousins knew how to spell "dismay."

\*

## Revolver

revolver

Function: *verb*

Usage: *Spanish word*

{89 }

*transitive verb*

**1** : to move about, to mix, to shake, to stir

**2** : to upset (one's stomach)

**3** : to mess up, to rummage through <revolver la casa : to turn the house upside down>

--*reflexive verb* **revolverse**

**1** : to toss and turn

**2** : **VOLVERSE** : to turn around

revólver

Function: *masculine noun*

Usage: *Spanish word*

**1** : revolver

(Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary © 2005)

I'll bet you and I don't see the same thing when we picture protective gear, especially not if I give you the prompt of dawn in Mexico City. You've already got sharpened metal on your mind, and you're turning it around in the first light through the blinds, looking for the blunt spots. When I speak of protective gear, I think of my grandfather Luis. Luis lived in Israel in the 1960s, and his comb-over was always rock solid. Abuelo Luis was the only Papi then, and would never have allowed his children to say his first name to his face. I can't quite call him my *abuelo* in my mind, because he was never my Abuelo, alive. I bite down hard on *Luis* and see his comb-over hanging slightly longer over one ear. I imagine he moisturized the crease of his neck, avoided all chance of blister. His hair was white by the time of this story and very rarely seen in any form other than the perfectly gelled flip over his bald spot. My mother usually chimes in at this point, and reminds me that she caught him once, leaning over the sink with two feet of hair hanging down over his left ear. He yelled *chingadamadre*, a warning of outrage, slammed the bathroom door, and gave the maids the day off. At times like this my Abuelita would search the refrigerator for last week's tamales and a few cans of salsa, and before Luis was even fully dressed the table was set.

Abuelita knows very well how to calm men, and will sometimes pull me aside at family gatherings, desperate to pass her knowledge on. This data has got a timer on it, and my older cousins have not been listening for the tick. Her fingers dusty from fumbling through her purse, from imagining habanero peppers and tomatillos, she'll tell me: "Go for the arteries. Food, and then the heart." Abuelita's world has two tones – there is the meandering pencil desperate to underline the family tree, and then there are the succinct phrases of recipe. These recipes come from the world where my father had just met my mother, and was years away from giving into whole wheat, raw vegetables or tofu. This is the world where Mexico City is only *La Ciudad*, because there is no other urban possibility. This is where the windows of apartment buildings lean into one another, reflect back at you browning photos crouching behind you on the mantel. Drawers are lined in paper, old stockings, and forgotten *tallit*. Next to Luis in this world there is always a handgun in an underwear drawer, tucked just behind the neatly folded greys, but there was never any talk of loading.

I dreamt once that he wrote to me about the comb-over. In the dream he sat at the kind of oak desk you're taught to crave if you grow up outside of Boston reading Louisa May Alcott and Henry David Thoreau. Luis was unrealistically tall in the dream and crouched over the desk with a single sheet of paper in front of him. He penciled in, "It keeps me sane to have my head covered, it keeps me Jewish." They tell me my grandfather Luis would never have veered into the range of the poetic for any price, but my dreams can afford to contradict them. I was born a year after the cigarettes did him in, but he is everywhere in the trickles of water boiled to erase Mexico City sewage, in the dust between piano keys he never touched, in the lineage, linaje, the words my father repeats, in the bad sex jokes I'm only now beginning to understand.

Once, by a pool, Luis' brother teased my mother to bring down her bathing suit strap just a little more, hinting at the idea of breast, and I wrapped my head in a beach towel and began to weep. I could not make out where propriety fit here. *Muñequita*, someone called me and put a hand on my shoulder, a distant relative who I knew only through the silver chain they'd sent me when I turned thirteen. I crouched tighter below the hand and wished for a smaller extended family, wished for nursing homes and cleaning fluid, a grandfather who played golf and had a jiggly knee. I could not understand why they said Luis knew when to talk, but never laughed or put his hand in the small of your back.

Yellow papers are the stale route to family history. No one wants to read a letter any more. As much as I want to hear her stories, my vision goes blurry when she pulls out the family tree. She doesn't know how to use computers, really, so the detailed diagram folds out from several uneven pieces of paper stapled into one long line. I've always wondered why she doesn't have more paper cuts. My grandmother wears plaid pants, and once you get her rolling on pre-1970, the smudged Xerox copies never stop. Someday I find my hands full of envelopes stuffed with color copies and illegible notations of relation and I wonder when was the last time she flipped the channel through VH1. It's almost as if she knew collage was in fashion.

Even though she admires Dr. Phil, I feel I understand Abuelita best when I read German philosophers. It's like the denseness of

her love, the amount of melted butter she pours into a bowl, the curtains she folds over the balcony, these are blocking out Mexico City pollution just like convoluted sentences around the nature of Being historical. Sometimes Heidegger seems to echo my Abuelita playing scales in A minor, especially in those sections when he begs us to peel back the layers of our own history. She read to me, “The elemental historicity of Dasein may remain hidden from Dasein itself. But there is a way by which it can be discovered and given proper attention. Dasein can discover tradition, preserve, and study it explicitly.” (Heidegger 1962:41) *This Das*, she said, pointing inward under her bottom rib, *that’s how you can memorize what Dasein means*. I tried to separate out the vowels of the proper noun, elongate its syllables into an almost-Southern accent, until I had something far enough from German that I could pronounce it inside my head. I’ve been taught so young to be scared by anything resembling the clipped syllables of Berlin that I can’t hear them without a physical image, a hand jerking out from a forehead in swift greeting, *Heil*. It’s hard to get away from concentration camps from back here, even when the language you’re peeling back is your own.

It’s best to write out quotes that long on old paper, the kind on which the ink won’t stop seeping until you look away. Write on oily paper – the kind of dappled greasy paper you get when you let a warm *churro* sit in a paper bag too long. Not that I can remember doing that, or can recall the smell of sitting churros without prompting, but I’m sure someone in the family can.

These days I allow straps to sag, and laugh along equally to butt-pinchers and salsa-scented flatulence. I’ve decided this is where our family’s tenderness hides. It is usually an aftertaste, centered in burnt jalapeños miles before you can see it coming. My Abuelita’s apartment in Mexico City is full of Luis twenty-some years after he died, full of him in the portions she makes for dinner, full of the furniture she chooses to dust, full of him still in the size of the beds everyone piled into during the mourning period.

*Your mother came to Mexico City for the week.* It is like a report-card when Papi talks about when Luis was around. The pluses and minuses save the both of us.

*I was sitting ‘shiva,’ and I was kneeling all the time. The last*

*thing I wanted to do was comfort other people, he tells me, and so they brought food. The plates were everywhere, and the maids had been dismissed the week before.* Why and where there were maids in my father's childhood is not worth discussing, like you wouldn't ask why he couldn't chew before molars. I also never ask about what other people's faces looked like, and for the only time in memory the other brothers are absent. My father sits alone. I see him crouched in the corner of a couch, knees to his chest, a position I've always favored but have never seen him assume in my life. I don't believe his bones bend that way. I don't believe he can curve so far into his own chest.

*And then your mother came, and it was that life again. We were together those few nights, before she had to fly back to Boston.* I know the rest, though I envision it in a seedy motel, the kind my father would never enter in Mexico. They were together for that one week, and it is nine months later when I am around and they start to tell me this story. It is *conception* to this family, thinking bursting upon you, more expected than you could know. *La concepcion*, a Catholic word sitting awkwardly cross-legged on my grandmother's antique piano bench. Conceptions around here are never immaculate – I sometimes wonder if my father's comfort with sexuality is mostly projection, a lifelong battle that he's always had against the pointed Catholic fingers that surround and pocket-in the Mexican-Jewish community. The rabbi tells us it is a mitzvah to make love on the Sabbath and even when I am eight, my father will not pretend he does not know where babies come from. We don't consider nakedness or any of this *graphic*, there is no back page to turn to for the appropriate illustration, no fully-censored photograph that I have to consult to be polite. We don't accept print-outs or fashion magazines. He *conceives* of me.

One of the first pieces of advice Papi gave me, way before *don't procrastinate*, was how to think of sex. I am a young chubby girl who resents having to buy her first bra, and he tells me *sex is the most beautiful thing human beings have*, he says, *and it shouldn't be dirtied*. Papi came up into sex around Luis and cockroaches, where sex was never mentioned but was always dirtied, I imagine, always hidden. In my head, Luis' pants crease only at the heel.

\*

I think most about pronouns when stretching, when I'm told my core is softening, when it is hopeless to believe that my nose will meet my knee. I've never been good at sticking to the full syllabic extent of proper nouns, and pulled "mom," and "papi," apart before I even learned 'dad.' I never say "my papi" aloud to anyone else, but only "paps" to him, fearing the edge of rap songs seeping in on Spanish paternal terms. Sometimes I say "papi-tus," adding the affectionate endings, the terms of endearment add-ons like "ita," that soften and lengthen anything at the same time, that draw out the word so that you can listen to that name in vowels longer. "Soften," "lengthen." I hear a dance teacher in the background, pausing at the stretch of the knee and my nose touches limb flesh, foreign air. I pull my weight toward the floor, the palm of my foot yielding oddly, flexed against wood, and the woman says, "Where, now, is your center of gravity? Come, soften, soften, and stretch."

I already have too many names for my own father and not enough opportunities to list. I have always referred to "my dad" to friends and, while speaking, pictured a different man. This man is more rumpled, his wrinkles so deep they look blue from afar, like soft substances could gather there, like skin flakes or coarse hairs could make roots in his pores. This man has darker skin that pales around the neck before it slips into his collar. I cannot picture my father's skin folding so far over his collar. This "dad" learned to drink earlier and grouped shot glasses in the sink. He has a strong accent in which the second person always sounds that Mexican prompt, like a religious accusation ("Jew").

"Abale," I said once to myself, calling not the name that he told me to call him, but relying instead on another language he wishes I spoke. Thinking maybe Hebrew will take us somewhere new, where there is no history of pincushions or Edward the Thirds. According to grammar I've got the subject on backwards, but we have too many languages to keep those uniform, a bright button down, a wilting collar and the springy consistency of pronouns.

\*

**Deciduous – a legend in two parts.**

Leaves fall fastest in New England, and become a legend before the sentence before. Colors crunch under foot until you've forgotten where they fell, first.

1.

Deciduous plants flower during the leafless period  
increase the effectiveness of pollination they'll tell  
upon the Wikipedian definition falling apart at the leaves  
of stemmed acorn crossing season, genre

From Shel Silverstein to Horror, god forbid, to Romance,  
the back of the video store, a familiar reminder of how our parents  
met  
or can meet (because we've thought, hard, if they made it up)  
over Judie's popovers and half-red leaves, a car slipping up Mount  
Washington

Whether that tire was last time we celebrated their anniversary  
or the actual November of 1978 I'd guess  
the figure of years before I was on the horizon speaks  
the power of western Massachusetts, college towns of half-leaves

(the power of leftover green beans, just as appealing, more  
as frosted chocolate cake if you've been jumping in)

The absence of leaves improves wind transmission of pollen  
so one could say they exposed their yellow uppers to me,  
to an audience on purpose of crunching under bare feet  
of frozen toes for the sake of desiring winter, gasoline.

2.

I practiced in the mirror how to remove, take a jean jacket off sexy  
how to pull a t-shirt, rustling, over my head instead of through  
each arm

*E&F V.X*

Keep my head still, without leaves the deciduous are more visible  
to insects

Pollination, you know, is not for everyone, a dangerous game,  
forget buttons

a risky strategy; flowers, fluttering edges, damaged by frost  
You've seen where the brown takes over from the borders and  
spreads

(Justification; by losing leaves during cold days, the deciduous  
reduce their water loss through ice, less branch and trunk  
breakage

They survive when a pine might split and block the trail behind  
Amherst

(Lemon 1961) improperly cited, missed magazine, published  
without cause)

Apples-to-apples upon last week's motorcar, mocked nausea  
I'd pretend we played driving games, counted elk, but  
really, we listened to tapes, we buckled our seatbelts and  
reminded,  
we rewound James Taylor's greatest hits twice

(Anatomy; Other body parts, shed, can be deciduous;  
antlers, old skins, family legends  
I Spy for the sake of Seventeen,  
Peter Paul and Mary for the sake of cool jazz)

Deciduous teeth, also called milk teeth  
the ones that fall out normal in the course of development  
only ones that hurt when we bite on ice, go sour  
when our mother overuses the term "my high-school honey"

teeth or leaves,  
kept in a small clear box to recall kisses goodnight,  
deciduous remain whitened by un-use, cavity-less

uncelebrated, wax,  
and on birthdays, broken candles, fed on spinach

\*

“Walk backwards and wipe your hands on the seat of your pants like they’re dusty,” you say. The backyard has us stumbling unfamiliar with the spots where the grass has caved in to pockets of mud. “They’re not dusty, they’re cracking,” I say. I refuse to follow directions when it is clear you’re only giving them to keep us moving. You lift your knees higher and say, “This is practice, see?” “Practice on a lawn?” I imagine I should have cleats on and handfuls of soccer balls, rather than compost clumps. “Clippers are not only for the garden,” you say. “Someday, you’ll learn garage tools.”

\*

## **Shrubbery**

I didn’t learn how to climb up to the shelf with the clippers until after I could already clip my own nails. Only until I could see the shelf from eye-level did I realize there were actually two clippers in that corner of the medicine cabinet shelf—one extra large, presumably for toes, glossy and never used. The other, the little one, was covered in thumbprints always in that way that glossy metal has of letting you down, even though Papi always wiped it clean with a Kleenex after each use. Guilt, I think, for the clippers’ baptism in blood.

Mom never used nail clippers, but rather stuck with the long thin scissors that curved and so could never be appropriated for anything else. I only watched her trim once, and that was enough to make me a clipper for life. The scissors arced into the center of nail bed as she cut, pointing neatly toward the wrinkle in her knuckle. The nail clippers were Papi’s domain, and he knew exactly how to place my fingers over the toilet bowl so that not one single clipping escaped the flush. We certainly couldn’t have a piece of nail flying off to get lost in the rug, especially after he installed the hairy blue one that snagged just about everything. He was always thinking of the potential to pierce when it came to us. Only I really knew why. It’s surprising that he told me the story, because even though it was

my vein he cut, I was young enough to forget. Instead I am stuck with the image of my father, the blood-shedder.

He tells this story each time he clips my nails, and only while my eyes are down, watching the slivers of nail pirouette off into the toilet water. He starts out sympathetic to himself; he was a first-time father and fell asleep after the second chapter of Doctor Spock. He mastered Lamaze breathing techniques along with my mother and cut the umbilical chord neatly. He just always had a thing with nails. Maybe it was his mother's days as a pianist or maybe it was the recent and rapid improvement in the hygiene of his home. Whatever the reason, he could never tolerate in-grown, and on that fateful Saturday, twelve days after they brought me home from the hospital, he decided to trim my nails.

My skin was extremely flexible, he says, and accepted the curves of the clipper easily. He had finished one foot and was on to the next already when I started to hum. He looked over, attentive to a fault. I was more pink than usual, and the hum quickly rose to a whimper. It was not until then that the specks of blood began to appear along my toes. As the specks quickly increased to a spread and then a flow, my father screamed. *Why don't they tell a young parent not to cut any part of their kid?* he always asks me at this point. He always answers himself with some lesson that he doesn't believe in, usually centered on the learning potential of injury or the poetry of scars. At the moment that he cut me though, he did not contextualize in any of these ways. He couldn't tell where my skin ended and the saran wrap of my toenails began. Everything was flooded in scarlet fluid. He'd cut his new born daughter and he'd opened the flow of something that he couldn't swab up.

I usually look up at this point in the story, whether out of a young child's embarrassment at the reminder of diapers or to save him getting to the panic section of the story and the shrillness of my mother's scream. I usually flush the toilet at that point, re-checking the porcelain bowl just in case some sliver hasn't gotten all the way down. Without the discipline of this bathroom ritual, I might forget and let my nails grow jagged. In our tradition, I kneel with my father once every ten days and I refuse to clip without him. I have no scars and do not believe that every father will make me bleed. I do, however, keep my clippers in that same spot on the top shelf of the medicine cabinet, and promise future daughters they will go

months without a trim.

\*

Sometimes when we end up at an amusement park I think he is making something up to me. When I'm afraid, he doesn't comment, just notes, his neck wrinkling looser these days, and sits down beside me, stares in the same direction. Like he knows I'm allowed to save my own skin.

One has to wonder why the other kids on the tilt-a-whirl enjoy the ride so much. They have the same digestive system, after all. I imagine their stomachs as strong and steely, the color of a well-used kettle that its whole life has only had to deep-fry. These stomachs will never admit to their tongues that vegetables are tasty. Other kids' stomachs see roller-coasters and think, hey, that'd be a good challenge, keep my abdominal muscles strong. These are the stomachs that can often be caught beaming at the world in midriff-bearing shirts, even cut-out patterns. When the kid says no, these stomachs do not take that answer. My stomach, on the other hand, is, regrettably, fully under my control.

We looked up at the tilt-a-whirl together and thought, hey, that is just not the way humans were made to be. Thought, being cool has less metallic taste to it than the security of sitting on the park bench while the other kids risk their lives. Just one cup of Dippin' Dots can leave as much excitement on the tip of your tongue, you sitting on the park bench, flattening your thighs against the metal slats beneath you and guessing at the different flavors as they pass to the back of your mouth. I like the taste in my mouth I get while waiting for brave people. I like the taste of remaining on the ground. It smells like wet pennies.

\*

**Belmont was: a ghost story in 3 parts.**

The way they read it,  
Belmont was where  
she swallowed him  
whole wheat bread and all  
and they became American.  
Eventually he took over the kitchen  
but suburbia reigned rough in  
ingredients. Cambridge and  
food stores labeled ethnic  
weren't far, but before he knew  
it there was jello in the cabinet,  
organic beans.

*1. We were chemists all along*

It's a polymer, he told me  
handed me a small envelope  
of threaded white dust.  
it held only three sheets of the stuff,  
thicker between fingers than  
backyard oak leaves before the mow

they let us touch what they did,  
science museum on call  
most of our fathers made super-absorbent fibers  
or other chemical experiments of the 1980s  
now in use in every Walmart in town

"There's a great future in plastics  
– think about it" films of a 1970s beginning  
that we pretended was our own,  
without the backyard swimming pool

as if we'd just escaped  
from Woodstock, too  
and were rearing our dreadlocks  
(freshly trimmed)

at the factory man

We were chemists all along

*2. Centerfold*

Sheets of polymer still lie lean  
along the edges of my father's desk  
without industrial context you slip  
out a leaf and want to see a red drop bleed

from the center of the sheet outwards,  
forcing an oblong shape  
onto the 8x10 rectangle of fiber

(all I understand about superabsorbents until  
the new house was they went into diapers,  
I pictured only body fluids in yawning colors  
mushrooming from here on out)

"It's my invention," my father told me,  
left it sitting next to the silverware speckled  
with last night's dessert

He laid on the table what he could bring  
home from the factory like any man  
it made a good centerpiece, the envelope  
and we were lax at keeping flowers on the table  
pollen flaked, and  
scattered before heat came on

I keep the sheets now behind  
old Playboys copyright 1974  
the threat of super-absorbent fibers rears heavy  
over my square kitchenette

I open sometimes when I drip  
a tiny droplet of sink water  
onto the sheet,

*E&F V.X*

it stops far too soon for me  
leaves just a centimeter-wide pimple  
in the top left corner

A small hill before the production of pride,  
like the warp in the neighbor's driveway.

### *3. Highway agriculture*

The corner of Oak and Acorn was far too close  
a full head wolf mask in a square back yard,  
kids picked it up, brushed off white grass  
and hid in fur for days

for play, we turned the other corner  
to the reservoir  
and its encasing in still blue rubber  
biking you said hold me and  
I thought perhaps you meant en route

Nothing wobbled in our neighborhood  
but the occasional aching tree  
they say of Belmont it is where you cut down all  
the trees and name your streets after them

Walnut before the Pike  
was the closest we got  
to root rings.

\*

I dreamt my father took me to a diving board. It was the old Deportivo in Mexico City, where I've only been once and all I can remember is that the cement on the tennis courts buckled, inviting you to pretend you weren't looking so that you could most legitimately trip. In the dream he took me to the Deportivo, the health club, where he used to sweat the sauna out with his father, soon before he took over the family money. I insert a bit of the mafia here, and see two unfamiliar men sweating in white towels, rivulets running down

the center of their chests. The older one puts his hand up against the tile and looks into both of his companions' eyes, which you are not supposed to do in the sauna without a really good reason. "*Mi hijo,*" he says, "*There's a lot I am going to need you to manage.*" My father is calm in this scene, though his posture folds. He always told me they called him too skinny. When I hear this memory I am a son, suddenly, and I imagine that my father wanted boys. In my favorite books there are always a million daughters and the father loves them but always imagines a son, like he could put him on a leash and carry him inside the subway on the way to work. The first time I read "All-of-A-Kind" family I ate saltines under my pillows for a week, because that was what they did, and when I was finished I asked my father if he missed having a son, because the father in there did. I almost didn't want to believe him when he shook his head and laughed easily. I wanted to hear him squeeze his throat tighter, "hem" or "haw," or in any way, really, make a noise I'd never heard before.

\*

## **Cousin speak**

Emma taught me the word  
onomatopoeia, she said, woof,  
she said through chewed lips  
streaked in horizontal teeth marks  
like there was something to be held  
before the chap

the small breath of the o's from her lips  
sending flurries in small tufts  
of the curve of her hair, wet  
segments orange estranged  
from one another,  
falling in front of her chin  
the last two inches a wave  
before her jaw bone

meow, Emma said, her small bones closer  
to the animal than the sound

Emma taught me how  
to make sounds with lexis,  
dictionary in hand at twelve years  
and yesterday announced she was a lesbian  
her mother called long-distance on a landline

meow, Emma said, ring, ring  
I am still not sure if my seventeen year old cousin  
is suddenly sexual or if her lips smack when she kisses,  
if she is gentle in sound, unlike an animal  
and wants to hear the future, birth wise

in the female minds of this family theories ripen long in gossip  
duplicity of hearing in which you can thank

and hear a wedding  
over Chinese dumplings,

still remember  
to pass the  
granulated

the female minds here reach horizontal for sound  
perhaps because we live too long, outlast our spouses  
and our singing voices, though I can't point quite  
to when I fell behind  
on that

I haven't heard Emma's voice since she could meow  
and qualify as a child  
but now she is a lesbian who  
creaks slightly over the phone  
in sweated winter celebrations  
older than when Emma shoved  
her face in puppy flesh,  
the brave cousin  
that had us all barking  
down the stairwell feet first

Emma taught me the word  
onomatopoeia, her high pitched voice  
skinny legs, she leaned into the "meow"  
shrill, firm-mouthed

I worried her calves would snap  
cracking staggered mid-bone  
if they got too close to  
a right angle with her thighs

I saw Emma last screeching sounds  
and now she is talking sex talk in my mind  
I wonder if there are animals in it

if she chirps or maybe ahs silently  
or whispers fuck me into the snow  
like a puppy or a cousin who stubbed her toe  
three seconds before turkey in 1992

*E&F V.X*

they say Emma may love women or sound, or both  
they say she's down to monosyllables  
so perhaps she loves  
the clarity of line  
shadow, plop, sucking sounds  
a stone into a pond

where the last three words  
complete, fold her body inward  
and wait for a frog

onomatopoeia, Emma licks haiku

\*

A praying mantis drops with a thud, doesn't forget his axes  
Discussing things called facts, persimmons lying around  
-Hōsai Ozaki, 1993

You asked for family stories, mocking high cheekbones like a new friend; I pulled up at my skin from inside and hoped it wouldn't show through. Freckles help there. *You're guarded*, you said, *but you get away with it by smiling*. I showed my teeth and I took from this your permission to steal a piece of hand fruit, a serving of one. That heady rush you force on yourself when you're trying to fast forward the getting to know someone, like how long will it take before you can liken me to my fourth grade teacher or, in the worst case, my grandmother. You eat away at those syllables that I say oddly, where you think I may have an accent but I am actually just holding my breath between letters, concentrating on which character speaks next.

Behind the one I said was the narrator there is a bowl of persimmons, browning on the bottom, waiting for permission to rise and turn their peels to the knife. In response to your plea for stories I reached back and told you she slapped me on the wrist for eating too many persimmons once. You said it was the tannin, and, if I think about it, the wrist slapping was probably a lie I've repeated myself so many times I can't quite tell anymore where on the spectrum it is now. I told you my diet last year consisted primarily of persimmons, figs and artichokes – also a lie. I don't even know when artichoke season was and assumed you were not in tune enough with crop cycles to check me.

As an excuse for the lie, I offer you an I-did-it-because, I-did-it-because you create a wrap around me, a sticky plastic that squeezes out metaphor and asks that the best symbolism comes out of me. If I don't supply it you might let me down and come back from market with the seedless. I told you she slapped me on the wrist because she was worried about my diet. Told you that the wrist-slapping was supposed to induce me to eat meat, I thought. Something about the flesh on flesh.

\*

**Rind**

Learned storyboards in third grade,  
am only recently beginning to see  
their use. Without them I have  
trouble starting where the *they* first met  
introducing the past you didn't know  
at first, her uneven skin tone, his  
vacation socks.

Am particularly bad at beginnings. You  
say I tell it best when  
so full of air and, leftover, body  
so empty of sleep that information  
can't slide in my pores any more than  
giant chunks of steel could slide in my mouth.  
Corners would catch  
lifeless and stretch  
against the tough scraps  
just inside my lips.

When telling only my stories I try  
to reach around the night  
when you bought  
the drinks and I remembered  
asking questions louder  
was something to be proud of. I  
interrupted

You were opaque,  
thick to me then, like melting rubber  
in a bright color, something sliding  
on the side of the palette with orange.

I asked first,

*do you know that eye trick where  
you put two fingertips together before the nose*

*cross your eyes and suddenly* (my voice is rising as your face opens, I am younger)

*the two fingertips overlap into a tiny ball with softened edges and* (your top teeth are showing)

*you can draw it apart,* (I breathe) *little by little,* and you laughed

before  
you even touched my hand you could see the spots, no liver, where we were sticking.

Then there was worn green felt on the wall behind us and we were drawing out of balls into un-focus, puddling our feet edges going viscous even while the middles still held.

Told you later it was like touching something wide and gooey like melted rubber, maybe, or hummus – touch your finger to it then pull away and when you lift your fingertip that paste comes up a little bit toward your finger and then, *blp*, sinks back down into the rest of the goo.

That's what it was, us reaching toward

*E&F V.X*

consistency that doesn't  
ever move without  
sound. That unusual sudden slow  
when a first night you don't feel fluorescent  
desperate rushed to get to know all  
of them at the same time - you can  
let the top parts of the stuff  
pucker, pull away  
from where you meet them,

wait to lie and say *first sight* is just  
a lack of oxygen and  
*first sight* throws  
off the storyboard,  
heaves a spike into the pyramid  
of where the bricks brown over time  
build back.

People are the thickest ooze, you laugh,  
highest boiling point, You  
are not a reporter, you said,  
over lemonade.

No wonder my fruit history is  
ooze, I'm a juicing lemon.

Tell you the story was  
a set of months  
watch closely for  
the right time of season,  
might slip on those thirty-  
firsts.  
You can't have a  
moment repeated  
fourfold under ice  
if the one time you stepped  
on me it was spring.

\*

The first time I sleep next to you I dream that I am a packet of papers. An alliteration, almost, and even when I know that I am fully awake the image does not sliver away from me. Your back curved away from me at night, full of more skin than I expected – I could only make out three vertebrae in the dim light before we went to sleep. You stated the hour and curled your back away, just like that. I slept echoing you, facing away from the wall full of window. I think that the packet of papers started as a dream, but when I am more than half awake I can still feel myself in sheets of recycled 8 by 10, with you turned away from me, ignoring the wholeness of the packet. My pages are dented in spots, like they've been shuttled around a few times in an old briefcase. Only the center of my pages is written on, like I'm clenching my stomach, holding my breath in and tightening my lungs for the sake of margins. There is something around my middle, tying me in, and I've forgotten that I can speak other languages. The binding around me is something less elastic than a rubber band but close enough to what you'd use to hold a set of papers together if you don't want to pierce. You had told me you hated staple holes, said that it finalized a version - if you returned to stapled stories you always had to cut, you said. I slid a fingernail under the staple in the top left corner of your latest draft and pulled upwards, the thin slice of metal unfolding and coming away from the stack before I expected it to give. The group of papers hung together in the top left corner, still, refusing to loosen from the staple spot until you picked them up and shook them apart.

The papers I am this morning are not flat. This morning I am a rustling packet of handled papers, loose and re-read, and you lie there with your back to me, rejecting the whole lot. Without moving, I try to feel around my edges for an excess appendage, a place where I am sticking out, bulging, where the paper might have pimped or ripped, but I cannot catch anything. We spent the afternoon talking of our own writings, our own histories and how to separate ourselves from our own writing, how to pull back and take critique of one's own limb. You toss questions from the shadows of the cab, questions that make me arch my back when the right angle of leather behind you has me expecting silence, or, at most, a wink. Still, suddenly, here I am now, just lying here in these sheets,

loosely bound and holding still so as not to rattle against myself, not to wake you. Why would papers be of use to you now? You have an old fashioned computer and a history with word processors, and what do you need with rainforest, anyway?

Starts are easy for you, you said, you just begin typing and the rest of the story awaits. You roll back eventually to those first lines and cut out the parts that didn't lead to where you were going, to the origin of the arc. I lie awake, naked next to you and think, *forget a hearing test*. You've fallen back to sleep and I can see in the slack of blanket that your knees have loosened at the joint. I roll to face the shuttered window. *Forget a hearing test*, I think, *you've got sheets and sheets to go before the binding*. My eyes, closed, shoot around the inside of my lid in squares, looking up left, right, down, left, and up, as if I am tracing the four corners of the paper, searching for the right-angled edges. I can feel the small muscles moving quickly under the brow bone, bouncing and holding sway for a few seconds at each corner they meet. I think, *there has to be a starting point*.

Someone told me once it was these nighttime eye dances and closed eye movement that left my eyes sticky when I wake, my lashes crackling with pus. It is that pus that I pull away from my eyes in the morning when I stretch my lids sideways from the outside corner and collect small bits of dust beneath my nails. It is yellowed like the flakes that peel out in stripes from the inside of the back covers of my favorite books, that peel away in flexible lines, reminding you that even if now they're just flakes, once they were glue. I can tell already this morning that when I open my eyes they will be murky and pasty around the lids, that if you place one thumb under my lid you'll feel the water weight and have no choice but to notice that I've been rattling here next to you, unbound but collected. There has to be a starting place.

8

# *Playlist*

## Michael Costello

### **I. A Mouse on the Wall**

She was required reading / Virginia Woolf  
was / when you discovered your *name* / on  
her pages / a literate alliteration / the sound  
of life's melancholy / sweetness found in  
the parting / of the sensory / at the dark  
center of your verse / Issaquah / 1993 / you  
began building / something out of nothing /  
it's history / now, a willful suspension / of  
disbelief / intention / nasty parlor tricks /  
contradiction / and invention / run through  
your songs / like a wild pack of family dogs /  
a soundtrack to a trucker's atlas / to the late  
night travelogue / the moon and Antarctica  
/ (inspired by novelist Cormac / McCarthy)  
is a triumph / in the musical pantheon of  
Isaac / slogged by years / cosmic *fuck you*  
do not deter / your guttural optimism /  
finding so much beauty in the dirt / brazen  
emotion / like yours does not readily exist  
/ in an age when / talking shit about pretty

sunsets / is hard to resist / you release the  
world's anxiety / in your barbaric yawps /  
the emotional purge / fiery surge / once fired  
up doesn't stop / living up to your name /  
is a claim no one else can boast / in scope  
greater than most / expanding beyond the  
coast / ocean and space / past this 3rd planet  
/ beyond youth / inside the mind and heart /  
every song touches truth

## **II. Bermana Americana**

Following random rules / and trains across  
the sea / from *Ectoslovakia* you came / in  
search of music / and poetry / with walkie-  
talkies / you and Stephen started out / at  
the Whitney / guarding art / writing and  
drinking / your indie philosophy / singing  
into answering machines / cassette tapes /  
of improvised sound surprise / your nightly  
escape / "You should go study with James  
Tate in Massachusetts." / good advice to a  
graduate / from Charles Wright / back then /  
scribbled on stationary / you coined "slanted  
and enchanted" / now you fuck around / with  
words all day / permission granted / with an  
MFA in hand / you honed your wits / devising  
psychedelic soap-operas / and the overlooked  
Starlite / Walker / to err is your write / as  
an heir / to Americana defined / as a cultural  
cul-de-sac / in the gated community / at  
the end of the mind / punk rock died / when  
the first kid said / "punk's not dead" / your  
signature listless monotone / and incidental  
acumen / changed and strangled / clichés  
turned / on their deathbeds / resurrected  
in literate country- / tinged nomenclature /  
never a side project / or an afterthought / in  
the beerlight / lyric to lyric / so much is in it

/ the actual air / and bright flight / into the  
good morning / of the new word / this Jew's  
world / trapped inside a song / the absurd  
is the mundane / unfurled / resist the MGM  
endings / and people who say / it's all been  
done / standing for many / you are / a limited  
edition / of one

### **III. Blacked Out**

Brackish boy that he was / John Lennon said  
/ "Scream when you can't sing" / so you set  
out / to go / leaving UMass / loaded like an  
angelic pistolero / his advice / exploding in  
your head / a sonic awakening / with the  
force / of El Niño / if you can take this town /  
I say good show / Charles / Francis / Frank /  
apocalyptic / modern age triptych / crashing  
against crowds / your acerbic surfer epics  
/ album by album / surreal you feel it / the  
strange space / in which Billy Radcliffe exists  
/ quirky punk and westerns / for you / pop  
narcissist / reflecting pools / on this planet  
of sound / you inhabit / Hermaphroditos / is  
a classic Lynchean affair / elsewhere aliens  
appear / in your Area 51-like career / call  
them oddballs all / your songs and lyrics /  
they're triumphant / characteristic / not  
anachronistic / these songs are gothic tales  
/ and music penned Black / ghosts in my  
headphones / every single track

### **IV. Every Song, the F Train**

From everywhere / you moved to New York  
City / where you studied with Sekou / at  
the New School / studying poetry and place  
/ nights at the Factory / knitting lines / in  
a tapestry of sampled sounds / cool on the

scene / on the scheme / to hipster stardom  
/ every stolen phrase / praise to influence  
/ obscure / or not / like Alan Dugan / your  
lyrics reveal / an idiom / of terse / sad /  
beautiful verse / the shape and nature / of  
words like / quantize / and decathecting /  
accompany / the syncopated gang-a-dank  
/ of your guitar styling / youth held magic  
/ you fulfilled skittish possibility / with the  
millennium / your first solo album / and  
miles / of touring / junked and de-junked /  
*the cough* defunct / you unveiled the acoustic  
side / of you / in the trunk / you kept CDs /  
selling them for / gas money / funny / how  
life gets revised / situations like a song /  
sometimes just life-support / for a killer line  
/ epiphany only comes / when you find it /  
the right home / along the way / “Is it soup?”  
/ Sekou would say / they all turn / into love  
songs / in the end / the anagrammatic one /  
rearranged arrangements / is every syllable /  
indelible / seeking to lose / that cloud that’s  
blacking out the sun / you owe no / allegiance  
to the facts / bridging more emotion / with  
fake words / smang’n’smofe / oon smatagore  
/ we ascend / undeniably / every time you  
sing / close to the close / of every show / on  
Janine’s / falsetto “wiiiiings”

## V. Reclusive Elephant Six-Shooter

In Ruston, Louisiana / there’s no line  
between / where one song ends / and the next  
begins / blistering free / becoming aware  
of punk / in ’83 / was a musical revelation  
/ that led you to fuzzy / guitars / shooting  
stars / like superheroes from the skies /  
above the moment / in constant movement  
/ you rhapsodize / it was then in ’89 / Jeff /

when you were seen / playing your first gig  
/ in a Laundromat / a sensation / you are a  
collection / of sounds / circling 'round the  
sun / in an aeroplane over / the sea / your  
head filled with combustion / discovered in  
the disjunction / horns and organs / riding  
cacophony / like a rollercoaster / into the  
ocean / you arrange dreamscapes / to  
unfold / like accordions / the interior / of  
your personal world / you're fiction / lyrics  
juxtaposed / quixotic / and melodically move  
/ in tangles / each record explores / the analog  
world / from all angles / unlike Anne Frank  
/ all we can hope for / is to languish / and  
live / with these soundtracks / of ecstasy and  
anguish / how strange it is / to be anything at  
all / it's true / this world will / never swallow  
/ all the halos / out of you

## **VI. Where the Pavement Ends**

From UVA / you found your way / to NYC /  
with David getting high / in Central Park /  
working at the Whitney in the early nineties  
/ when notoriety was earned / thus began /  
the mark / and march of the critics' / darling  
underground project / with your elliptic /  
cryptic / Anglophilic lyrics / crooked rain  
couldn't wash away / mainstream reject- /  
shun of the white noise / attracting indie boys /  
and girls / long before the pavement crumbled  
/ beneath our feet / the stars were under / the  
influence / of your picks / fun unpredictable /  
directions came with the millennium / songs  
sung solo / and the eponymously named /  
new album / wry and never lost / like the  
sky / you moved above / grave architecture /  
into non sequitur phantasies / saved / from  
the black book / its pages flipping past / your

irreverence / for rhyme and meaning cast /  
shady analytic speculation / and prophetic  
revelations / where neither fit the form /  
dabbling in liberation / inscrutable is / the  
unfortunate scribble / on the label / given  
your arrangements' / bewilderingly textual  
nature / face the truth / you're a pirate  
seeking adventure / in uncharted waters /  
with the cold eyes of a sailor / staring into  
the pitch / past terror twilight / you leapt  
on a whim / from a limb high above / into  
the unknown / for a swim / not just indie /  
you're old school too / a blueprint of a father  
now / who's still making music / cool for us  
now / grown-up kids / somehow

## **VII. Yip Unorthodoxy Music**

Eef / you are no longer "the professional  
asshole"/ culled from the catalogue / of  
hipsterdom's patron saint / for a Jersey  
Jew / chasing stars / with worried shoes  
/ like Chinese babies / we'd cry boo-hoo /  
if not for you / your ludicrous use / of pop  
culture reference / is like a mathematician  
/ counting crumbs / transcendence / can be  
numbing / something else beautiful blurs /  
desperation and salvation / yours are years  
/ of glockenspiels / true American deadpan /  
from the heart / smooth and hooky / sardonic  
lyrics that would outsmart / Descartes / with  
the earnestness of biblical verse / you cover  
Aguilera's hit / which is a favorite / despite  
rotten reviews / every song an epistle / that  
delivers / dreadfully good news / words like  
satellites / in a space / of luscious melancholy  
/ sparse and quaint / arrangements strange  
and intimate / a keyhole / view into the soul  
/ your meditations on lost love / echo the

*E&F V.X*

absence / of tempo from the first album /  
*You Were a Diamond* / beautiful brooding  
details shove / the snide aside / precariously  
balancing / the idiom / with Nashville in  
your heart / beating simple American songs  
/ you join happy / and sad together / like a  
diphthong

8

# *Get Me to the World on Time*

## *excerpted from DIS*

Bob Proehl

CONNECT ONE

### **We are all Aabam Sallah**

Video of peace protester Aabam Sallah being brutally tortured in police custody. Please repost. How much longer will we allow the Bakamar government to torture its citizens, even while the government's policies keep her people poor? Today it was Aabam Sallah. Tomorrow it could well be you or me.

July 24 at 7:23pm · Like/Unlike · Comment/Share

### **We are all Aabam Sallah**

A Khandaqi who is almost 60 years old has cut his hand veins today in front of the High Court. He works for the government and he earns 67 Khandaqi pounds a month (about 12 dollars a month) and he has not been paid by the government for four years!!! Some corrupt Khandaqi government officials own whole islands and have millions of Khandaqi pounds. Khandaqi government corruption has no limits.

July 24 at 8:07pm · Like/Unlike · Comment/Share

## **We are all Aabam Sallah**

Very Important: We will be doing a FULL live coverage of protests in Khandaq and all other protests that are taking place worldwide to support Khandaqi protests today Tuesday 25th. Please follow me on Holler (#aabamsallah) and on the InterEm page here. If you haven't already invited all your friends, please do this now. 25th July is our big day.

July 24 at 8:13pm · Like/Unlike · Comment/Share

## **We are all Aabam Sallah**

Now: Groups of youth are walking around the area shouting slogans: Freedom and Bread are every Khandaqi request.

July 25 at 5:25am · Like/Unlike · Comment/Share

## **We are all Aabam Sallah**

Large crowd in front of the High court in Shiruta now

July 25 at 5:45am · Like/Unlike · Comment/Share

## **We are all Aabam Sallah**

Three marches have started now from: Shiruta Univ Bridge, Magra residential district and the central police station, all towards the city square...

July 25 at 6:01am · Like/Unlike · Comment/Share

## **We are all Aabam Sallah**

Protesters at the High Court break down the Police siege and run towards Shiruta square. Our reporters say: Amazing scenes there.

July 25 at 6:23am · Like/Unlike · Comment/Share

## **We are all Aabam Sallah**

*E&F V.X*

Protesters moving to opera house from Shiruta square. Their number is well over 1000.

July 25 at 6:38am · Like/Unlike · Comment/Share

### **We are all Aabam Sallah**

Very large crowd. Police cordon is broken and police are now surrounded by protesters for the first time in Khandaq's history.

July 25 at 7:02am · Like/Unlike · Comment/Share

### **We are all Aabam Sallah**

If you are in Shiruta and you were waiting for something real to happen for you to decide to go to the protest. It's happening. Time now to join protest.

July 25 at 7:33am · Like/Unlike · Comment/Share

I.

There was work that needed to be done. This, Aaron had learned, was the fundamental truth of running a small business. He imagined once a business became larger, this was no longer the truth. He imagined Eric came into the office once a week, only to boost morale and check some report that informed him how much of the world he'd taken over. But as the single employee of DIS, there was always work that needed doing.

But something was nagging at Aaron. He knew he should be archiving four years of blog entries by a self-taught canning enthusiast in Pittsburgh who'd lost a battle with leukemia the week before, and there were the InterEm and ShutterBug albums of a New York City bike messenger who'd been blindsided by a UPS truck, which Aaron had been contracted to catalog and send to the messenger's mother in Denver. But ten minutes after he should have been at the office, he was buying coffee at Filter, one of the few cafes in Chicago that still bothered to have public computing terminals.

The coffeeshop had once been housed in the knifepoint of a flatiron building that stabbed into Wicker Park, but it had lost its lease to a Bank of America branch several years ago and moved into an old appliance store with unreachable ceilings crisscrossed by the heavy metal vents and pipes that remained a necessary vogue in Chicago design circles. Left over from the former incarnation were electrical outlets in the floor at radial intervals approximately the length of an electrical cord. Filter was a paradise for laptop users. Every seat at every couch, carrel or table was within reach of a recharge and the wifi signal was strong enough to pick up in your fillings.

In a retrograde move, Filter also maintained two pairs of public terminals: two Macs and two PCs. None of them were the sexiest models on the market. They were dated and dowdy compared to some of the pretty young things the clientele brought in, the weightless and cloud-based. But they were serviceable and difficult to trace. Aaron bought an Americano and two hours of access. He was relieved to see the PC in the furthest corner was unoccupied and set up at it. He tucked his coffee just behind the screen to cool and pulled a silver Walkman out of his messenger bag. He placed it on

the table next to the keyboard and fed it a tape of the Sonics, a sadly short-lived garage band from Portland in the sixties. He plugged a pair of dated headphones, foam gripped around low-rent speakers, into it and started the tape. The Walkman had developed a sped-up quarter turn every fourth time the pins made a turn, but Aaron had learned to incorporate this into his listening experience.

Aaron took a second to scowl at the Graphic User Interface, the agreed upon mediator between the person and the machine. Most people only felt annoyance with GUIs when they aggressively asserted themselves as talking paperclips, idiot puppies or condescending install wizards, but like most programmers and hackers, Aaron despised GUIs from the moment they presented themselves. The closest correlative he'd been able to come up with was the Latinate mass. GUIs were full of ceremony and spectacle while they obscured the real goings on from the common user and simultaneously assured her she was in full control as she swallowed the body and the blood, the file and the folder.

He rebooted the computer and before the startup could kick in, bypassed to command line with a series of finger contortions that looked like complicated piano chords. Here was communion. The blinking white cursor on a black screen greeted him. From here, it said, anything is possible.

With a simple *whoami* command, Aaron made sure no other users had access to the terminal. It was virginal white. He set up a triple reroute before accessing the internet through a simple telnet program: Filter's wifi linked to a mirror in San Francisco, remirrored somewhere within a massive server in Russia. Russian servers were notoriously unsecure but saw so much traffic that to find any particular activity would be like finding a needle in a needlestack. Aaron accessed 4Chan, the dark matter of the Internet. It was nearly unobservable but defined the physics of the Internet as a whole. It birthed memes and nurtured them until they were ready to assault the general populace. It spewed virals and antivirals like a geyser. It was the shadow of everything and most people who stumbled on it backed away from its fierce unintelligibility like the site was rabid, which it largely was.

Most of the traffic was pure text, and a lot of the image and video that moved through the site was porn, a statistically aberrant amount of it Japanese in origin and a statistically aberrant amount of *that*

involving cartoon women being raped by octopi or squid. One of the central tenets of the Internet, according to the weird hivemind god of 4Chan was that whatever you could think of, there was porn of it. Another was that if there wasn't porn of it, you needed to make porn of it. There was always some 4Chan user willing to enforce these rules.

Once onto the site through a pure-text portal, Aaron entered a search for Iktomi. He was skeptical anything would turn up, but there was one result. *IkChat*, the screen offered, and Aaron obliged. The system asked him who he would like to log in as. *DUMA*, he typed, using the name of the angel of silence. He waited for a password prompt and got none. As simple as that, he was in the chat room, which immediately introduced him to the rules.

- 1. We are Iktomi, the screen informed him.*
- 2. Iktomi is legion*
- 3. Iktomi never forgives*
- 4. Iktomi can be a horrible, senseless, uncaring monster*
- 5. Iktomi is still able to deliver*
- 6. There are no real rules about posting*
- 7. There are no real rules about moderation either – enjoy your ban*

Aaron had always enjoyed a good set of commandments, and there was something nice and concise about seven. The window showed there were almost six hundred people in the room, all of them with names of six characters or less. Someone going by the name No was holding court.

*i vote pizza strike, No said.*  
*cz its 2002 rite? asked REDX*  
*u hate on them cz they fked yr medz, said mmm.*  
*fked yr mom, said No.*  
*no info=no strk, said Kyot.*  
*pstrike needs no info, said No. they r the douche*  
*no info=no strk, repeated Kyot.*  
Against his better judgment, Aaron entered the conversation.  
*came late, he typed. who?*  
*duma short for dumass? asked hvncdy.*

*E&F V.X*

*bringing pn to bristol myers squbb*, said No.  
*4why?* asked Aaron.  
*4 bing fkers*, said No.

*best you can do?* asked Kyot. In the pauses of this conversation, a dozen others raged, most of them in strings of expletives. But any chat room had its backbone narrative and its chaff, and Aaron suspected this conversation was the one to follow. It had a lower tendency to fall apart after three posts. He was also coming to realize it was Kyot and not No that was in charge, to the extent anyone was.

*need info*, No posted.  
*info=yr mom is a whore*, posted oe.  
*info=fked yr sister*, added mmm.

*thomas.loc.gov/legislatedata.php?&n=Record/hr11785*, posted REDX.

The central conversation paused as the participants, including Aaron, went to the link, which Aaron built another window to read. The link was to a Congressional House resolution that enforced a strict trade policy in southern Africa restricting the sale of a line of generic AIDS drugs, a group of reverse-transcriptase inhibitors that had proven particularly effective in treating HIV, especially if it was diagnosed before symptoms set in. The policy was heavily lobbied for by the drug company Bristol Myers Squibb, who held the patent on the name brand version of the drug: azidothymidine, commonly known as AZT and marketed as Retrovis.

*vs.http://en.wikipedia.org/zidovudine#development*, posted REDX. The link described how the National Institutes of Health had created a powerful reverse-transcriptase inhibitor, zidovudine, which proved remarkably effective in the treatment of early stage HIV. The wiki entry carefully elided the fact that the government had gifted the patent to Bristol Myers Squibb, but both ends of the story, where the drug was developed and where it ended up, were quite clear.

*vs.securethefuture.com*, posted REDX to finalize the argument. The linked site was a pabulum from Bristol Myers Squibb about their dedication to the treatment of AIDS in southern Africa. The Secure the Future foundation had been formed by Bristol Myers Squibb three years after the house resolution to promote the donation of AIDS drugs to South Africa.

*crt case went three yrs, posted REDX. 3mil s africans dead on bms tab. mils more go fullblown and untreatable. now they are tx brk city for charitable wrk.*

*fk pizza strk, posted mmm.*

*fk bms, posted rvr, who had yet to be heard from. A chorus joined in, mostly fucks and yeahs.*

*fx bom?* asked titus. Aaron fondly remembered the days of fax bombing, where you blacked out a sheet of paper with a sharpie and faxed it to someone you wanted to piss off. Done repeatedly, it wasted massive amounts of toner and, on occasion, caused the fax machine to overheat and burst into flames. It was a childish prank, what he'd thought of as a hacker prank, back when he'd drawn a fine line between hackers and programmers and placed himself firmly on the latter side. Back then, hackers were poltergeists. Professional fuckers. Programmers were the ones who cared how things worked. Now hack was simpler slang. It meant the best way to get something done, in program or off.

*wek, said mmm.*

*dds, said No. uge*

*dds need funds 4bots, said Kyot.*

*get funds, said No.*

*get funds, said Kyot.* A flood of promises followed, amounts ranging from five dollars to five hundred. Aaron knew this drill well enough from his brief dealings with Yog Soggoth, a hacker famed for his Direct Denial of Service attacks. To bring down a website by traffic overload, you needed a daunting number of computers all making simultaneous service requests. One way to do this was to virally slave bits of unsuspecting computers' attention, so that unwitting users were helping to bring down a site. This was exactly the kind of activity a GUI blinded its user to: pay no attention to the man behind the curtain, even if he happens to be a three hundred pound Scottish hacker. Another was to purchase time on the same massive banks of idle Russian computers Aaron was currently using to reroute his signal. But access to those computers at that scale cost money. As Aaron watched, the money poured in.

Leaning back from the keyboard, Aaron wondered if Agents Strunk and White were somewhere in the six hundred users in the chat room, if they were jotting meticulous notes with impeccable spelling. He wondered how you could prosecute a viper's nest of

righteous anger. Most of these users would have taken even more precautions than Aaron to protect themselves from being traced to their home terminals. After all, he could stand up and walk away from this computer and be utterly untraceable, while their personal IP addresses were at the tail end of whatever serpentine series of bounces they'd set up.

Most frustrating was that none of them *was* Iktomi. Kyot seemed the most likely, but it also seemed Iktomi might be nothing more than a channel for broadcasting vitriol, a way to take anger and collectivize it into something that mattered.

Aaron picked up his coffee, which had dropped below the temperature of the air-conditioned room. He slugged it back, bitter and sharp, and shut the computer down.

## II.

Aaron walked into the Real World with the hood of his sweatshirt pulled down over his eyes, despite the heat outside. He needed bars. They provided him with the type and level of socializing he craved. It was a need he'd just as soon be rid of, but needs didn't work that way. Aaron knew how to operate in a bar. Not in the sense of meeting women. The more any interaction became isolated and moved towards something that might result in a sexual encounter, the more Aaron's ability to operate broke down. He worked well on the broad and shallow scale that bars provided; myriad points of light interface, each easily broken off in favor of another. He could move from point to point, gathering or dispensing information. The data that moved back and forth in bar chatter was unfraught, and behavioral expectations were simple enough to figure out. Socializing in a bar was not unlike the web surfing he used to do late at night, back in college and before the internet had become, as a medium, fraught for him. He controlled the levels of interaction, he flitted from one site to another, drawn by information and that thing that lay just behind it: the willingness to exchange. The web gave up its information because it had been programmed to do so. People chose to give up little bits of themselves into the social world, to one another. Partaking in the commerce of these microexchanges, even while hyper-aware of it as a sort of commerce, had a humanizing effect Aaron found he occasionally craved. It was a body need and it

was a comfort to him that he'd found a way to satisfy it in the thrum and rush of crowded bars. And the Real World, as much as he might hate to admit it, was his bar.

The Real World started with the Boom and managed to survive the Fall. Jonathan, the owner, had been a young turk at Apple during their years of high design and was credited as the sole designer behind all things *i*. A heavily tattooed south Londoner with a savant-like palate for gin and a dozen honorary degrees, he'd been wooed to the offices on Infinity Loop with an opportunity to change the world and left the company after more or less doing so. Drunk after last call, he'd complain bitterly about the way he'd been treated there, but at the back of each elbow, tattoos of the ubiquitous logo glowed an angry red.

The days when InterEm was barely a company but was adding a hundred thousand users a day were during the beginnings of the Fall. Call it the Stumble. Many of them knew they'd passed the tenable point a couple websites back, but the push forward was uncontrollable, even if anyone had wanted to control it. Bloggers were treated like Hemingways, designers touted as Picassos. Looking back on it, Aaron thought of Poe's Masque of the Red Death and wished he'd been around when the first overnight CEO saw the initial spots on his hand, the sign the fete was over and there was nothing left but to bleed out.

The Real World was different from most of the bars that sprang up during the Boom in that it was geared mostly towards techies. The grand opening invites had been sent as flawed bits of code, indecipherable to layout experts and content providers. With a series of deft fixes by the recipients, the code opened into an elaborately designed invitation. The bar felt sleek and sparse until you needed something, at which point you realized it had been close at hand the whole time. The seating was comfortable and gave groups of any size the feeling of privacy, the acoustics of the room keeping conversations focused in on themselves to prevent eavesdropping, while still creating the low thrum of a lively bar even on slow nights. The lighting was chosen to balance out the wan skin of the patrons, imbuing hollow cheeks with healthy glows. Most importantly, drink service was ruthlessly efficient, with cocktails mixed to perfection and poured into glasses that fit in the hand like the hand of a lover. The Real World took on a sort of mystique within the community

and managed to maintain it long after unemployed bloggers and busted dotcom entrepreneurs had decided the web was financially done for, and darkness and decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all.

Aaron and Alice frequented the bar during their time together, and the tech head clientele treated Aaron like a cross between a celebrity and a prodigal son. Everyone knew his story and everyone took his side. He was one of them. The Real World welcomed him with open arms.

Aaron ordered a grain alcohol, neat, and Jonathan graced him with a healthy pour.

“Alice around tonight?” he asked casually, as if he didn’t ask the same question every time he came in.

“Haven’t seen her,” Jonathan replied. Aaron shrugged and gazed deeply into his drink before thanking Jonathan and turning away. In a corner, he spotted his objective for the night: Takashi, hunched over a table fiddling with something, sweat already beginning to bead in his dark hair and trickle down the collar of his pressed shirt. Aaron started towards him when he collided with a woman a foot shorter than him. Through a series of deft motions, he managed not to spill his drink and took a celebratory sip before looking down at the pixie grinning up at him, pigtails striped bright blue and green.

“Hey, Aaron,” she chirped, touching his elbow. “Haven’t seen you in a while.”

“Yeah, Ganesha,” he replied, “I’ve been super busy with work.”

Ganesha was a few years younger than Aaron and carried the spark of a freshly-escaped undergrad. There was no weariness about her and she crackled with an energy and a righteousness. Her generation within the hacker community had adopted a pirated middle management fashion aesthetic, a storm front where professionalism and punk crashed. Ganesha’s khakis were cut off, the legs at different lengths, and ragged bits of her chambray shirt’s sleeves had been used to tie up her hair. It seemed to Aaron that generations lasted about three years, and though he’d been left confused when youngsters like Takashi had abandoned tee shirts and torn jeans for Brooks Brothers and Paul Smith, he was comforted when Ganesha and her cohort began taking scissors to their All-Cotton Dockers and spray-stenciling profanity onto Geoffrey Beene ties.

“What you working on?” Ganesha asked. She kept her eyes fixed on him, the irises so dark as to make the eyes seem cartooned, perfect black circles floating in white fields. Aaron had determined she was of Southeast Asian descent, somewhere humid. The fact she never seemed to sweat, even as Chicago’s heat index crept upward, was his chief evidence. He imagined if he touched her skin it would be cool as a clay pot.

“It’s nothing. Paying bills.”

“Really? I kind of assumed you were...all set. Bills wise.”

Ganesha had gotten subtler in her lines of inquiry, but it always amounted to the same thing. Since the moment she’d learned who he was, she’d been determined to get Aaron’s story. She’d once offered to sleep with him in exchange, an offer he’d politely declined but which had been the subject of numerous fantasies, especially since his breakup with Alice. Ganesha had appointed herself the official scribe of the Internet, claiming this was possibly the first major advance in human communication that could be documented as it happened.

“When all those cave paintings went up in Lascaux,” she’d explained to him, “no one was around to say, *Holy shit, we just made some cave paintings. No one’s ever done that before. We should totally write down how we’re feeling and why we decided to do this.* Or like, when Gutenberg made his printing press, Channel Zwei News didn’t show to say, like, *Hey Steve, how’s it feel to change the face of human interaction for all of history?*”

“I’m pretty sure it’s Johann.”

“I’m pretty sure that was a joke. But here we are, totally cognizant of the fact that we’re altering not just the way we communicate, but the way we cogitate. We are the Gutenbergs and the cave painters. And it would be criminal if our stories weren’t told.”

And when she said it, Aaron realized it was a central tenet of the Internet: the criminality of an untold story, the felonious nature of a feeling or thought undocumented. Ganesha didn’t see her questioning as invasive; she saw his evasion as an affront to the nature of culture.

All this Aaron was thinking now while blatantly looking down her shirt.

“Can I get you a drink?” she asked. “I had a question to ask you about InterEm’s shift in privacy policy. It’s pretty draconian, don’t

you think?"

"I don't know anything about InterEm's company policy," Aaron said curtly.

"But you must have had some say in policy when you were there."

"When I was there, there was no company. It was just me and Eric and Jaime working out of a shitty little apartment."

"But you've got to admit the way the site is built makes certain assumptions about privacy."

"The way the site was built makes certain assumptions about how the site has to work," Aaron said, getting truly annoyed at this point. "As for assumptions about privacy—"

She cut him off. "I'm sorry," she said. "I'm in reporter mode. Permission to treat the witness as non-hostile. Let me buy you a drink."

"I've already got one," he said.

"Aaron, I'm really sorry. We'll have a drink, we'll talk. Regular people, no interview." She smiled at him and he found himself smiling back.

"Can I ask you a question?" he said.

"You can ask me anything," said Ganesha. Her fingers brushed his arm lightly.

"Have you ever heard of Iktomi?" This did not seem to be the question she was expecting and she drew back her hand to scratch her head.

"Hacktivist collective," she said. "Started up around 2004, seems to go back to a couple chat rooms. Anarchist leanings, from what anyone can tell. Mostly harmless, although they've pissed some people off."

"But it's not one guy?"

"No, they're headless horsemen. Global brain stuff. Anyone could be Iktomi at any time." She waved her fingers in front of him in a spooky motion. "Even me."

"Not me," Aaron said.

"Do you have a minute to chat?"

"I've actually got to catch Takashi real quick," he said. He might not even mind a bit more interrogation; yesterday's run-in with the FBI had taught him there was a comfort in using Raymond Chandler novels as a conversational plug-in script. Under interrogation, he

might not feel as anxious around Ganesha as he did right now.

“Tell you what,” she said, putting her hand on his arm again, just above the elbow, “I’ll buy your next drink.” Aaron was unused to being touched and slightly pulled back from it before allowing his arm to relax against her hand.

“If you can find me,” he said, a weak attempt to flirt.

“Don’t worry, I’ll find you,” she replied, a much stronger attempt to flirt. She slid away as if on rollerskates, brushing up against him in a way that had to be intentional. Aaron wondered how bad it would be to tell his story, whether a few hours of baring his soul wouldn’t be worth a few hours of bare Ganesha. He even wondered how truthful he’d have to be to get her into bed, how much of the story he’d have to give up. He told himself this new surge of prurience would be eased by the application of marijuana and continued across the bar, intending to test his theory.

On the way, he was jostled again as someone bumped into his arm. He turned to look accusingly at the man in question, with stringy blonde hair, thick-framed glasses and a Ramones tee shirt.

“Fuck off, Angel of Death,” the Ramones fan scowled at him. Shocked, Aaron’s jaw worked soundlessly for a second.

“What did you—” he started, but the Ramones fan had already turned and walked away. Flustered, Aaron strode across the bar and crashed into a chair, a thing of plush velvet and plastic that was Jonathan’s personal tweak on Saarinen’s womb chair. Takashi, decked in a midnight blue pinstripe suit that made Aaron self-conscious about his own standard and somewhat slovenly attire, looked up at him through glasses that gave the impression his head was cocked to one side. One massive circular lens in a tortoiseshell frame and one small rectangular lens in an imperceptible wire rim made Takashi look as if one eye was wide with alarm while the other squinted skeptically. Before he’d moved to Chicago, Takashi had been based in Buffalo, running a cell of the Ephemeral Technology Application League, or ET AL. A collective half-artist, half-scientist whose credo was an inversion of Clarke’s Third Law: any sufficiently advanced magic is indistinguishable from technology.

Takashi had spent much of his time in Buffalo working with spiritual metallurgists to build radio transmitters out of scrap metal from abandoned factories that, Takashi insisted, still vibrated with a spectrum of emotional frequencies they’d picked up during their

time of use. If correctly stored, certain metals carried a form of hope and trust in the future that was near impossible to find in metal produced post-Watergate. He'd gotten his start in ET AL building a network of these radio towers, located at specific locations chosen by a group of cartomancers, who Takashi referred to as "the scary map kids", which linked together to blanket the country from Utica to Detroit with a loop of the chorus of the Velvet Underground's "Rock and Roll": *despite all the amputations, you could just listen to the rock and roll station, and it was all right*. The signal showed up on the fringes of other radio signals, like static in the pattern, but Takashi insisted it was also resonating constantly in whatever metal people in the blanketed area carried with them. Humming softly in their car keys. Whispering to them through their fillings. He scanned Aaron quickly over whatever he was working on at the table and then snapped off his glasses as he did whenever he made a point.

"You need drugs," he proclaimed.

"You don't even know," Aaron replied pleadingly, rolling his head back in relief.

"Finish your drink and come on. Noob!" he called to a chubby kid with bad skin and an ALL YOUR BASE ARE BELONG TO US tee shirt. "Watch this." He pointed to the device on the table in front of him. "Don't touch." The chubby boy snapped to attention and moved to a seat closer to the device. Takashi pulled Aaron out of the chair, which had begun to absorb his weight, and dragged him to the men's room, brightly lit and extremely well ventilated.

"That kid totally wanted to fuck you," Takashi said, once they had established the men's room was empty. "He wanted you to pop his noob cherry."

"You're off it," Aaron said.

"You're like ultra-leet. You sweat leet. Half these dough-facers come in here on wet dreams of talking to you. They want to catch your kung-fu like it's the clap."

"You're disgusting," Aaron said.

"I'm a *poet*," Takashi corrected. "I also haven't had sex in like a decade. The libido bubbles up into the syntax. What's up with you and Ganesha anyway?"

Aaron cocked an eyebrow at him.

Takashi began rifling through jacket pockets excitedly. "She

wants to fuck you. Leet or not. She's pretty leet herself, you know. You want smoke or something more...nuanced? I've got something here that'll take that knot out of your neck."

"Smoke," replied Aaron. With one hand, Takashi produced a bag and a pipe, and with the other a small vial of pills.

"You don't mind if I?" he asked, rattling the vial gently. Aaron shook his head and Takashi dry-swallowed an indeterminate number of pills. "Brain food," he explained as he set the pipe on the onyx sink, packed it, tamping it down with his thumb, and handed it off to Aaron.

"Light?" Aaron asked. Takashi produced one from another pocket and Aaron lit up. He took a deep hit, filling his lungs with heat. He blew the smoke in the general direction of a vent and passed the pipe to Takashi.

"You ever deal with a hack called Iktomi?"

"Aunt Nancy?" Takashi asked, throat clenched to hold in his inhale. "Everybody knows the spider. He's no hack, though. More of a...an info junkie. Practically a journalist, really."

"So you know him?"

"Never met him. Can't think of anyone who has. Yog Soggoth, maybe." They both shuddered at the mention of the name. "I hear he sits at the Emperor's right hand."

"Who's the Emperor?" Aaron asked. Takashi swatted this question away.

"But Aunt Nancy holds the world record for FOIA requests. Some of the Et Al folks think he can't be one guy, cause he's logged like a million of them. And he's put some information in our hands that's maybe not declassified. Tech, pharm. Some military."

"You guys are dealing in military tech now?"

He shrugged. "If we can get our grubby mitts on it. Tech's tech, man. Why do you want to know about the Spider?"

"No reason," Aaron said.

The pipe passed back and forth in silence, hidden once behind Aaron's back when another patron came in, even though smoke rose obviously from it and the smell, which would dissipate minutes after the two were done smoking, permeated the room. When it was cashed, Takashi handed the dime bag off to Aaron, who pocketed it quickly, and the two went back to their seats.

"You've got to come to this show tomorrow night at Lincoln

Hall,” Takashi said as he sat down. “This guy is using a bit of tech I built. You’ll love it.”

“Is he leet?”

“I love it when you try the slang thing,” Takashi said, grinning. “You’re like a rapping grandma.”

“I don’t do shows,” Aaron said.

“Do this one,” Takashi pleaded. “Think of it as me showing off.”

Aaron gave him a shrug. “How could I resist?” he asked. Relaxed now, he leaned forward to look at what Takashi had been working on. From this angle, it looked like two slabs of mahogany hinged together like a book.

Takashi turned the device on the table to face Aaron and he realized it was a sort of laptop, its casing made of oak, its screen glowing behind a green tinted glass that reminded Aaron of old Coke bottles, wavy and uneven. Its keys were an odds and sods collection of old typewriter parts.

“What is it?” Aaron asked, resting his fingers lightly on the keyboard.

“Don’t be thick, man. Use it if you want to use it.”

“It works?”

Takashi grinned at him. “I’m showing off for chicks, man. I wouldn’t bring it if it didn’t work. I call it the Lightning Box.” Aaron typed in a web address, the keys clacking with authority, a sound passing out of cultural hearing, like the scrape of needle on a record label. The page loaded instantly, graphics and type swimming in a sea of green.

“Every component has been struck by lightning. The casing? From a tree out in the burbs that was hit in that big storm last year, split right to fuck in half. All the glass, all the silica?” He chuckled to himself. “Fulgerite. This friend of mine, he’s a lightning harvester. Goes out to the beach during storms, shoots arrows into the clouds. Very Lear on the Heath. He attaches the arrows to metal filaments he grounds in the sand, so when the arrow hits the cloud, the lightning runs through the filament and bang: glass.” A waiter showed up with another drink for Aaron and one of whatever Takashi was drinking, a deep red cocktail that involved an infusion of beets. Looking over, Aaron saw Ganesha smiling at him in a way that was slightly predatory and not unattractive.

“I’ve got someone who blows it for me for the screen,” Takashi continued. “She needs a bit of practice. Chips and processors I’m making myself. They’re not where I want them to be, but they’d be on par with, say, Intel couple generations back? Pre-Pentium.”

“So, um, why?”

“See, this is where all those sci-fi guys, your Gibson and Stephenson, led everybody wrong. Everyone wanted this virtual reality thing, which was going to be like the real world only shinier. Sharper edges, higher res, higher def, whatever. All holodecks and light-up goggles. They thought the digital world was going to be phenomenal. Not in the sense of awesome. But literally: perceivable through the senses. We were going to strap on these prosthetics you could touch and see to access a whole other world you could touch and see.

“But what happens is, the digital world is based not on phenomena but on numena, right? Perceptions wholly other. It’s not held together by physics, it’s held together by concepts. Networks and memes and code. The hardware’s only the access point, but what it accesses is a numinal world. So it only makes sense to try to build numinous objects to access a numinous world.”

“I know you’ve told me this,” Aaron said, taking a long drink and thinking Takashi had only gotten him stoned so he would sit through this conversation, “but what is a numinous object?”

“Varies. Like you have certain things that are important to you. Lucky whatever. And they get imbued with this other energy and the energy stays in the object. And you could, you know, charge an object up with it or something. When someone gives you a gift, or brings you something from a trip? It’s all forms of resonance, right?”

“So lightning?”

“I’m not totally sure lightning is the way to go at it, but what else can you think of that bridges numena and phenomena at once? You can see it, right? You can see what it does, the houses ruined, the whatever. Wasn’t there that show where someone got hit by lightning and ended up with a streak of white hair?”

“It turned Barry Allen into the Flash,” Aaron nodded.

“Exactly, right? But have you ever been fully convinced it’s caused by differences in electrical levels between clouds and the ground? Doesn’t Zeus chucking bolts off a mountain make more

sense, Occam's razorwise? Has static shocking your little sister by rubbing your socks on the rug ever not been the coolest magic trick?"

"It is pretty cool," Aaron said, nodding slowly.

"The ultimate interface is direct. It's USB ports behind the ear and shit. Do you know the raw bandwidth of your optic nerve? Only about a hundred kbps. It's the encode/decode rate, the software, that's amazing. At some point, we'll be able to feed directly into the brain at a rate higher than the optic nerve could handle. But until then? Until the physical end of things is further developed? Shouldn't we try getting into a world of pure thoughtform with devices that have been touched by the gods?"

"What the fuck did you take anyway?" Aaron asked him at last. Takashi leaned way back in his chair, blinking his eyes rapidly as if to clear them. He took off his glasses and shook his head back and forth.

"I don't know. I think they were purple maybe?"

### III.

"Hello, Aaron."

"How'd you know it was me?" he asked. He was propped up inside one of the last working phonebooths in Chicago, which was about to teeter off to one side, never to be repaired.

"The number from that payphone's been in my cell under your name since the day you left."

"So I've lost the element of surprise."

"That's what happens when nothing changes."

"Nothing changes? Payphone's fifty cents now. That's double the last time I called you from here. It's a brave new world, Alice."

"You should join it sometime."

"*Still love my parents,*" he sang, "*and I still love the old world.*"

"Modern Lovers or Richman post-breakup?" Alice said.

"Lovers. Well done. Are you alone?"

"None of your business."

"Salt-N-Pepa," he slurred.

"Cute."

"You wouldn't have answered if you weren't."

“So why ask?”

“To hear you say it. Say you’re alone.”

“What were you doing in the Real World? Run out of weed?”

“Jesus,” he winced, “not on this line.”

“Christ, you’re so paranoid.”

“Is that what they’re all saying about me?”

“That’s cute,” she said, and Aaron imagined her grinning on the other end of the line, wearing maybe an old flannel of his she’d never gotten around to returning. “How’s Takashi?”

“Takashi says I’m leet.”

“What does that mean?”

“*Elite*,” he said, overpronouncing the *e*. “Hacker slang. Opposite of noob.”

“Well, I’m very happy for you then.”

“He wants a USB port installed in his skull.”

“Don’t we all?”

“I don’t.”

She sighed. “Honey, you still cringe at the sight of nose rings. I’d hardly expect you to jump into cyborg-level body mod.”

“Have you ever read Freud on the prosthetic man?”

“I was an undergrad too, honey. *I* actually graduated.”

“It gave me nightmares.”

“We’ll file you under ‘discontents’ then.”

“Not all technology is to be trusted is all I’m saying.”

“Even pharmacology?”

Aaron held the phone away from his ear and scowled at it as if Alice could see him. “I medicate.”

“Booze and weed don’t count.”

“Booze worked for Hemingway.”

“Yeah, right up till the end.”

“I don’t want my pain taken away! I need my pain!” Aaron said, deepening his voice.

“Honey, you can’t take your whole philosophy on antidepressants from *Star Trek V*.”

“The underratedness of the film doesn’t invalidate the sentiment.”

“We’re not going to have this argument.”

“Plus my Shatner’s getting better.”

“Passable.”

“What argument would you like to have?”

“That’s what I’m saying, Aaron. We don’t have to have arguments anymore. I can hang up and there’s no repercussion.

“You haven’t.”

“I should.”

“I’d be sad.”

“You’d be sad regardless.”

“We could have something else. Something...other than an argument.”

“Was that supposed to be a double entendre?”

“Not even close?”

“No.”

“People are calling me the Angel of Death, Alice.”

“I’m surprised it took this long to catch on.”

“I think people in the World know it’s me. Some of them I’ve interacted with during notifications. I think someone figured it out.”

“Did you tell anyone?”

“Not even Takashi. Only...” He trailed off. Some names were best not spoken over the phone.

“Yog Soggoth wouldn’t tell anyone,” Alice assured him. “A secret’s worthless if everyone knows.”

“I don’t know. Something’s wrong. I feel like the beginning of a Hitchcock movie.”

“*Rear Window*, maybe?”

“I’m not that close to your place. Plus I left my long lens at home.”

“Maybe *The Birds* then.”

“But I’m closer to yours than to mine.”

“You aren’t serious.”

“The El’s done and I’ll never catch a cab from here.”

“You could call one.”

“This was my last quarter.”

“Quarters.”

“Exactly. Who carries around a full buck in change?”

She sighed again, more defeated than exasperated.

“I’ll leave the front door unlocked. You can have the couch. You so much as crack the bedroom door, you’re on a park bench for the night.”

“I wouldn’t dream—”

“I’m serious, Aaron. You’re out before I’m up. I don’t want to see you.”

IV.

As he let himself in, Aaron wished the apartment were less familiar. After the break up, he’d rearranged everything in his apartment, switching the silverware drawer, moving the stereo to the other side of the living room, so if Alice happened to come by, she’d be disoriented, unable to find her way around the place on memory alone. But, still, every now and then when he went to get a fork, he was gobsmacked by the memory of Alice delicately removing a pair of forks from that very drawer when the Chinese had been delivered, neither of them quite as nimble as they’d have liked to be with chopsticks, or Alice naked at the turntable, dropping the needle on the A side of the *Zombies’ Odyssey & Oracle* one more time.

Alice’s apartment hadn’t changed a bit and it made Aaron think there weren’t enough memories of him floating around her apartment that it felt cluttered to her, the way his did to him. The same tapestries, maybe a little more sun-faded, hung on the walls, the same drug paraphernalia and bric-a-brac scattered on the coffee and end tables. Her CD collection, still in no apparent order on the wall. Her students’ drawings and paintings on the fridge. On the couch, a hounds-tooth pattern picked up on a curb in their college days, were two pillows and a folded set of clean sheets. With as much grace as he could muster, Aaron made up the couch for himself and plopped down onto it, taking in the room with his chin resting in his hands. At one point, a sliver of light shot out through the bedroom door, disappeared after a second. Aaron stumbled over to the CD rack and scanned, finally finding a *Zombies* disc between James Brown’s *Live at the Apollo* and the first Tori Amos album. Somewhere else on the shelf was the one they used to dance to, whiskey bottle in his hand resting against her back, but this one would do. Careful to turn the volume way down first, he put it into the CD player and started it up.

Alice came into the room immediately.

“You’re a real fucker,” she said.

Alice’s hair was violent red, shooting out from her head in

corkscrews at all angles. She was as tall as Aaron and by modern standards big, although proportioned in a way that made most men wonder what they'd ever seen in the waifs that paraded across TV screens and magazine covers. She came out of the bedroom wearing a faded Who tee shirt, his, that showed off an ample length of leg. Aaron sputtered.

"I'm sorry, I usually go to sleep with music on, you know."

"I know. I thought maybe tonight you'd pass."

"I was feeling nostalgic."

"Yeah, no shit, Aaron," she said, rolling her eyes. "Are you sober enough to have a drink?"

"Probably."

"Well, at least I don't have to drink alone then." She went to the kitchen in long strides and took down two glasses and a bottle of bourbon. "Hope you don't mind," she said insincerely while she poured.

"No, that's fine. Takes me—"

"Fucking stop with it, Aaron. Please?" She handed him a glass and sat down on the couch. "So what's the problem?"

"There's no problem," he said. He sat too.

"There must be one or you wouldn't be here. Knowing I wasn't going to sleep with you."

"Maybe I didn't know."

"I'm not."

"Oh."

They both sat in silence, staring down into their drinks.

"Two FBI agents showed up at my office yesterday," he finally said.

"What?"

"Something's wrong and I'm not sure what it is."

"The FBI showed up at your office and you're worried someone at the bar called you a name?"

"It's connected. I know it is. Something I can't see yet, but it's there already."

"You can ask, you know."

"I don't believe in that stuff."

"You're here and you're tap-dancing around asking so I'll insist on it. I'm not going to, Aaron. If you want me to do it, you're going to have to fucking ask."

He hung his head, lifted it to finish off his drink and said:

“Will you throw cards for me? And can I have another drink?”

She pursed her lips and thought about it. “Yes,” she said, “and no.”

Alice opened a wooden box sitting on an end table next to the couch and took out a deck of oversized cards, which she passed to Aaron. “You remember the drill. Think about what you want to know and shuffle the deck, then hand them back to me.”

Aaron furrowed his brow, trying to cut through all the smoke and booze and concentrate on the dots he was sure connected somehow. He shuffled one half of the cards into the other, then, trying to bridge them, sprayed most of them onto the coffee table.

“Should I start over?” he asked sheepishly.

“No,” she said, “pick them up and keep going till you’re done.”

Aaron gathered up the cards and continued shuffling until he felt like he’d reached some sort of endpoint. He handed the deck to Alice, holding her eye for a little longer than either of them wanted. Alice cleared a little space on the table, then turned her attention to the cards. She dealt out one and then another across it, half obscuring it. Then she dealt out a card above, to the right of, below and to the left of the first two cards.

“I’m only doing a six for you,” she told him. “You’re too drunk for a ten card spread anyway.” Lowering her voice, she pointed to the first card, the one mostly covered by the second.

“So this is your present situation. The Moon. It’s the path between two towers, a point A and point B. It’s waxing towards the right. Towards its goal. Generally taken to mean it’s gaining in mercy. I don’t know why. Matter of direction. See the two dogs there, howling at it? Actually, one of them is a wolf. They’re fears. They try to subvert the path. But the biggest thing here is this.” She pointed at what looked like a blue lobster, crawling out of the water at the bottom of the card and up a path that intersected with the moon. “It’s something coming out of the depths, something unexpected. From the past, maybe? The other cards might say.”

She pointed to the second card dealt, laying across the first. “Eight of pentacles. The trophy maker at his work. Your employment is the most immediate influence on you right now. Which is fucking hilarious, really. But not necessarily in a bad way. Craftsmanship is going to be related to your path from A to B.

“Your goal,” she said, pointing to the card above the first two, “the Hanged Man. Huh.” She paused. “Interesting stuff. Major arcana. Waite and Crowley disagreed on it. There’s a rumor even Levi didn’t know what to make of it. Check him out. He’s hanging, but by a foot, not the neck. The tree is living, you can see the leaves, so it’s not a cross. A lot of people think this card is about martyrdom, but look at his face. He’s not in pain, he looks comfortable. It might mean stasis. Contemplation. He’s also the card between Justice and Death, so there’s that to think about.

“The Two of Wands,” she continued, “for your distant past. Makes sense. He’s a king of some sort, looking out on his kingdom, but also contemplating a small globe. It implies having riches. Losing riches. Accepting the loss. Maybe even preferring it. See how really he’s looking at the globe and not the kingdom?”

She looked at Aaron. “That’s you going to the mountain. After everything with Eric. That’s you leaving it all and never wanting to come back.”

She looked back to the card below the initial two. “Ace of Swords,” she said. “Your recent past is marked by excess, the hand out of the cloud holds the sword, thrusts it upward until it pierces the crown.” Aaron crooked an eyebrow. She glared at him for a moment. “I’m still not going to sleep with you.”

“But it’s in the cards,” he said meekly.

“It’s in the cards as excess in your recent past. The sword crosses from that past into the future. Not the future of tonight.” She glared at him again. “Did you fuck Ganesha?”

“Of course not!” he replied shrilly.

“Huh. You probably should.” She turned back to the cards. “The last one is future influence. The Seven of Swords, the thief. Another one that’s pretty disputable. He’s carrying off five of the swords, but the camp is close, there’s the implication he’ll get caught. Plus, he leaves two of the swords behind. Could mean a couple things, especially in this spot. Either you’re the thief, and whatever you’ve planned is going to go south. Or you’re in the camp, in which case the two swords left are what’s important. Let’s try something.”

She dealt three cards face down, then one face up, being careful to place it to the upper right of the others. Once she saw it, she nodded slowly to herself. “That’s what I thought, although it doesn’t make much sense for you.”

“So what is it?” he asked.

“It’s the Two of Swords, the two left by the thief. She’s blindfolded and balancing the two swords, with the water behind her. There’s a lot of water here, by the way. All over the spread. You’ll be traveling soon. If it were a different suit, she’d stand for trust, tenderness, intimacy. But the swords don’t always mean anything good. They might mean all of those things will be subverted. End in harm.”

“So what spot is that in?”

“That’s your final destination.”

V.

When she was done, she went back to her room, closing it loudly and clacking the lock. Aaron lay down on the couch. He dreamed he was suspended off a post on Navy Pier by his ankle, Lake Michigan lapping coolly at his forehead and a woman on the pier polishing a sword.

The next morning, the coffee grinder woke him. Alice was in the kitchenette, already dressed for work in one of the brightly colored dresses that bounced the sun onto her pale skin and gave it a pastel glow.

“I’m making you a cup to go,” she said as he sat up. “I’m running a little late. Do you mind locking up when you leave?”

“No,” he said, “of course not.”

“Aaron?” she asked, staring rather intently at the coffee maker. “Don’t get yourself hurt, okay? I won’t be there to pick up the pieces of you this time.”

She snapped a lid onto a travel mug and left the apartment, the smell of fresh brewed coffee bright in the air and the tarot cards still spread out on the table.

# *The Deportation Begins at Midnight*

David Nelson Pollock

One evening I reached a new height of political consciousness while surfing the internet. It was early or mid February, and the Republican primary debates were sinking the country into a state of anguish. The president had just signed NDAA 2012. What I had always believed to be true – that they are trying to build a prison – was evident in the political language of the age. My sister, Annette, assistant manager at Kid Koala Convenience Mart, was drinking to escape knowledge of our political emergency. At one point I cornered Annette in the kitchen. She was drinking her gin sweeties. Maybe her girls were coming over. I simply had to disseminate political knowledge on her. I said to her that someone's friends in the Fed were benefiting then probably I said something about the revolving door and how the deportation will occur at midnight and then something or other. I started to draw a map with ground black pepper on the counter then I spit into it, mistakenly thinking that the addition of some wet would help me better to mold the ground pepper. She shook her head with violence then threw a plastic glass against the wall so that there was a puddle and some scattered ice cubes on the floor, a slice of lime. She screamed my name: "Jasper!"

Then a terrible fog occupied the kitchen, and here came Annette stumbling out of the fog, and I saw that she was not my sister, but perhaps the shell of my sister, manipulated by a third party. She said to me: "Jasper, create a hairy orifice in the attic above our heads. Broadcast yourself there. It can be ... it can be ... it can be your

situation room. Take a microphone to your mouth and broadcast an image of yourself on a television monitor. Then you can tell yourself what you already know about the American political scene and keep your politics from getting in the way of Annette's life, okay? She is about to have a breakdown. The calluses on her hands and feet, the grease in her hair, the oven burns on my wrists and forearms - she cannot take your constant blathering about prison, deportation, Republican fuggbuggery, and the foul drone of sorrow and violence that flies overhead tonight. You have lost your mind."

So for this last week and a half I have come up to my hairy orifice at the top of the house and I have broadcasted myself in the situation room. This is a story of the futility of such actions.

*I. Here is how I operate in the situation room and how I incorporate poetic visions into my dissemination of political knowledge to break free from the implosion of the American scene. It begins with my broadcast then I become bored, agitated, and scared, due in no small part to the green and yellow image of me on the television monitor.*

The microphone is attached to a chord that has a blue input bullet, and the camera is attached to a chord that has a yellow input bullet. The television has a blue hole and a yellow hole. All I have to do is put the blue input bullet into the blue hole and I can speak into the microphone, and the monitor speaks back to me. Then I plug the yellow input bullet into the yellow hole and suddenly I can see a pixilated, rainbow damaged image of me who trembles and who speaks through the monitor as I speak, though actually his voice is a second behind my voice, so a jagged echo reverberates in the situation room. It sounds as if there is another me with a deeper, icier voice who is overlapping with what I say.

The image in the monitor screen doesn't look like me, by the way. He's swirly at certain parts and a cloud of black static respirates above his head. Mr. Fritz Image is leaning over the TV table where his fuzzy puddle, a Dell Inspiron laptop, sits open, though the laptop in his world of images is but a poor, expressionist rendering - he's straddling the computer with his arms. I'm wearing a black sweatshirt and I see visions because I am a poet. I use a certain almond scented humidifier tablet in my Bemis. His scene

on the television monitor - Mr. Fritz Image's scene - is static. It's like modern art. It causes me a kind of distress that seems almost relevant, considering how we don't know who we are anymore. I look for the metaphor in things. The drone of sorrow sings terrible songs of violence. The image has not turned away from the screen because I have not turned away from the screen. We are looking right at one another, me and the image, holding our mics as if to interview ourselves. I can't see my heat in his eyes, though. I am the drone of violence and sorrow, and he is not.

"I have to fire up this machine of political knowledge," we announce. Into our microphones we are narrating the motions we perform here in the situation room. We're logging onto our Dells - the image and me - but we don't seem alright with it this afternoon. We seem uneasy, maybe nervous. We feel it's possible we're being watched by a third party and that they will come hammering on the door any day now. Within about a second, or maybe a little less than a second, the monitor says each motion back to us. It repeats everything we say in a deep, icy voice. Here are some of the motions we announce and which the monitor announces back to us: enter the 4 digit numeric code at the log-in cue; double-click the Firefox icon on the lower left hand corner of the desktop - it's the one that looks like a fox on fire who is about to swallow his own tail; once the web browser is open, click the red tab, upper left hand corner, that says Firefox; a dropdown menu will appear - click on "favorites."

Then aloud we read the list of our favorites, which the monitor reads back to us. It includes: *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Salon*, *Pundits Corner*, *HuffPo*, *Lakehouse*, *Naked Capitalism*, *The Drudge Report*, *The Tame Three*, *RT*, *Politico*, *Gawker*, *The Hub*, *Fox News*, *The Atlantic*, *CNN*, *The French Existentialist Novelist and Philosopher Albert Camus and His Ideas Digest*, *American Heritage*, *N+1*, *The Deportation Occurs at Midnight*, *The Roosevelt Institute*, *The Raw Story*, *Info Wars*, *Congressional Hearing*, *Truth Dig*, *The Political Life*, *The Daily Kos*, *The New Republic*, *Canaan*, *The National Review*, *The Spectator*, *Bloomberg*, *Business Insider*, *Is That You Moon of the Night of American Liberty?*, *Forbes*.

Here are some of the things we see. You'll understand now why the fires of hell burn in this house and why I must take the role of drone of sorrow. We see: Greece Bailout Funds Could be Split; Plans to Drug Test Welfare Recipients Gaining Momentum; Is Occupy Wall Street Behind the Philly Conference?; White House

Struggles to Contain Up roar; Truth, Lies, and Afghanistan; Iran Unveils Advancement in Uranium Enrichment; Rick Santorum Attacks Mitt Romney and the president in Michigan; The Atlantic's First Post-NDAA 2012 Freedom and Civil Liberties Survey for the Public; The Deportation Occurs at Midnight; Cheerful Color Blocking is What's Hot for Spring; What It Means and Why It Matters; A Las Vegas Man Pleads Guilty to Kidnapping a 7 Year Old Girl; Mitt Romney Has Been Glitter Bombed; Repulsive Progressive Hypocrisy; The Doctor of Camus Looks the Sickness in the Eye, or Does He?; J-Lo and Mark Anthony are Still Friends; Shock Poll – 20% of Republicans Leaning to the President; 2.2 Million are Losing Benefits this Month. Welcome to the dark night of the drone. The owl watches from his steel tree.

We know that I am a poet, so it should be clear that I am guided by my visions. My visions are black. One thing that interests me and which makes me see a black sky in the monitor right above Mr. Fritz Image's head is The Atlantic's First Post-NDAA 2012 Freedom and Civil Liberties Survey for the Public, co-authored by James Fallows and Esther Wheathouse. I click it. The image doesn't click it because there is no internet in his world of images, but he mimics my actions.

Into our mics we say: "How would you rate your current state of safety consciousness? Are you in more danger now than you were five years ago, or are you in less danger? Which do you consider to be the greater threat: terrorists or the United States government?"

A little firecracker is smoking inside of me. This hairy orifice makes me feel restless. I'm not interested in the program I'm broadcasting today. It makes me bored. When I'm bored I become nervous. Mr. Fritz Image won't look at himself. This is a potential problem with how I have been summoned to spend my time. Annette fumbles around downstairs. She's doing what she calls cleaning, which is really where she talks on her cell phone while she rearranges the furniture in the living room, making a controversy of the space. I'm the drone. I'm in the orifice above her head. I must have said that aloud because the monitor says it back to me.

"Have you heard about the NDAA controversy?" we say, pretending that we can make the heat. "Is there any way the president could not have signed the defense budget bill? Do you ever hear the sorrowful singing of the drone overhead? Do you believe

we are at war or would you say that we are engaged in a number of humanitarian interventions?”

Mr. Fritzy Image is getting muddier. He’s making a buzz sound. In a number of hours there will be a knock on the door. A loud intimidating hammering on the door. The girls will come over. They drink and snuzzle. I hide. They haven’t called me into work in weeks. They are disappearing us. I used to mop at the Tompkin Shopper. I have found myself breaking a sweat in the situation room, getting worked up. It’s so hot and wet up here. Mr. Staticy Discolored Image is breaking up too. I can’t stand him.

“Annette,” I holler down to my sister. She’s terrified to come into the situation room. She was up here just once before. She says she could feel heat coming off me when she was up here. It’s a wet, almost tropical place, and it smells like almonds, and there is a muddy, vibrant, destroyed image of me on the screen. It’s so hot, she told me, that it made her want to punch a wall or even someone’s face.

I call down to her because she is my sister and because she must know that I am electric with political knowledge this afternoon and that I will not let her rest. I don’t want to be alone, but I also don’t want to leave the situation room. Annette is a member of the management class. She manages Kid Koala Convenience Mart then comes home. The girls come over. She rattles ice cubes in her glass and says, “hairdo makeover.” I, on the other hand, went to college, where I was a bright young poetry student. Nevertheless, she is my sister. She hardly ever listens to me.

“Annette,” I yell, feeling all frantic inside, “please attend an emergency session in the situation room. ASAP.” She’s walking around down there. She can hear me. Anyone can hear the drone’s whispers of political violence. Annette wants to ignore political theater. Everyone in my life has wanted to ignore political theater. In college, the poetry co-eds told me to write in the style of Rilke. “Bah, no,” I told them. Have you ever read *The Plague* by Albert Camus? In this novel, each man must choose his role. Here’s the co-eds’ idea: politics aren’t as glimmering as the angel of Rilke sitting on a windowsill and, from a great height, watching people walk funny down the sidewalk.

Here’s Annette’s idea: politics smother her sensibilities, which include management strategy, gin sweeties with lime slices for the

pucker, and television. Politics cause her stress, unneeded stress. Politics get in the way of her enjoying her life, and there are other things that she needs to think about too, like if she should get on the general manager track at Kid Koala or if middle management is too big a commitment. She busts my balls because she says I should look for work at the Staff Kings. Unlike many people in America today, I hold the firm belief that they are trying to put us all into a giant prison.

I have to get down from this situation room and find Annette. I cannot be left up here with this muddy image. Hello, Mr. Fritzzy Image, but you are not me. Plus there is something I need to ask her. There is something that she and I need to discuss. She won't want to discuss it. When she's not at work, she hobbles around the house, rattling ice cubes in her glass, playing synth music. The girls probably will come over. They'll take shots of green liquor and blow vicious horns of laughter through their snozzles. "Hardy-har-har" they go and push one another playfully. The fuck of the fuck, I think and get out of this place. You have to open the floor, climb down the ladder and close the floor over your head. Annette is an escapist while I am like a doctor, straight from Camus, who faces the sickness out of duty. He is an unsung hero - it only makes sense this way for me. The drone flies over our house this afternoon.

*II. Here is where I attempt to disseminate my political knowledge on Annette. I look for her, I find her in the kitchen, cutting a lime while her food cooks in the oven, I confront her, and then I flee.*

"Oh sister, where art thou? Art thou on the sofa eating cheesy mac? Art thou in the kitchen preparing cheesy mac? I know that you are preparing food, for I smell your ovenwork's toasty fragrance. Here I am, the drone who has come to find you as if remotely operated. I come to shoot my missile of political knowledge at thy brain. Resist and I will corner you to show you how liberty grows from soil moist with political discussion."

We find her in the kitchen. You can see her. She is standing at the counter by the sink, slicing a lime with an overlarge knife, making thuds. She's doing drink prep for when the girls come over while her cheesy mac gets hot and crispy in the oven. A long, wide woman with an inverted bowl of grassy, overworked hair on her head, she

wears a purple blouse, jeans that are light – faded – sandals on her sock feet. She doesn't want to talk to me because she believes that I will smother her with politics. Her fears are not unfounded.

Annette, thud of the knife on the cutting board. Annette, thud of the knife. Were she to turn and face me, you would see why guys from the convenience mart pursue her. They buy her chocolates, cigarettes, beer, all for a chance at her plumper parts. Poor Annette, weakened by her desire for affection and success, yet caring all the same. You would be able to tell by looking at us that we are of the same line. She has the round sweet face of a cherub and we share the same vertical crease down the center of our forehead. She won't turn because she knows that I am behind her. I witness her from the back and say: "I know that you are preparing your gin sweetie, Annette, and that now might not be the best time to talk about the implosion. I know that you have no interest in the knowledge I disseminate, even though it affects your liberty, even though it dictates the boundaries of your freedom, but I urge you this once to listen to me. The deportations begin at midnight. Right now as we speak, there is a controversy developing over the military budget for 2012 that our president has signed and it might mean that men in suits soon will march these very streets -"

She stops slicing. I can tell she's breathing deeply because of how her back lifts and falls. Then suddenly, as if to scare away a small animal, a cat, she shouts: "Boogadaboo" and swings her slicer through the air. "The girls are coming over, please. Have you called Staff Kings?"

"Yes, of course, Staff Kings. The girls are coming over. By the way," I note, "a fly is in your hair." It is true. I witness it. A fly buzzes around her grassy hair. Funny to see a fly in February.

She swats at the fly. "Why don't you do Annette a favor and get her another lime from the fridge," she says. "This one has a spot. Annette won't take a lime with a brown spot inside of it."

I get her the lime, like she says, and she huffs at me as if I've done something wrong, but she takes the green fruit just the same, she rather yanks it out of my hand.

*III. Here is the part where I escape from the kitchen and retreat to the living room, where I can rest with the television off - with the idiot box shut off - and I may look deep into that black screen*

*The Deportation Begins at Midnight*

*and let my head do the talking for me, but not before sensing that as I flee the kitchen, Annette is frowning at me so sadly that even I feel that the shell of the drone has been pierced and her sadness trickles in.*

The television screen is black so that it creates a perfect mirror image of my visions. Oh, sweet meditative state, I see the future of America in my head, I do, but I only wish that I might have Camus' poetic soul to communicate it. I don't know if you've read *The Plague*, but I have been in love with that novel ever since I was a bright poetry student in college. Let me explain that the vertical crease in my forehead throbs as my mind conjures images of our disease. For example, I predict the Santorum surge, I see his face holographically projected onto a map of the flyover states. The surge is real, the corn fields murmur his name. I see that the NDAA 2012 military budget will be used to justify not only the indefinite detention of various foreigners who may or may not pose a threat to the United States and who will be attired in orange suits, but also justify the indefinite detention of American citizens, who will be attired in orange suits. Feet up on the couch! Feet up on the couch! They are trying to build a prison! You see me now. I am the owl, a blind and strong observer who may or who may not be sleeping. I feel the hot sizzle of a firecracker inside of me and green smoke does emanate. Cover your nose. The pigs have come. When men in suits and black helmets break down our door, I'm afraid we won't know whose side they're on.

I am not a right wing policy rider who wants to police a woman's body; nor do I toe the Democratic party line; nor am I a liberal who believes that our president secretly is a Republican, who is not so secretly promoting a free market agenda. If you have read the work of Yves Smith, Matt Taibbi, and other voices from the left, you would understand what I mean. I am not one of them. I have a situation room – in my mind, I meditate on the political scene. A mother loses her baby while vacationing in the French Riviera, a couple disappears in Mexico City, the Santorum surge occurs in the Midwest. Do you understand? I witness various situations from the steel perch in my mind so that I am like the owl. Though when I sing from overhead, I am like the drone. No political affiliations this way lie. It is possible that one reason Annette turns against me

when I attempt to disseminate political knowledge on her is that she fears I'm trying to convert her. On the contrary, information only informs. I don't know if I've made this clear, but I am a champion of Albert Camus' novel *The Plague*, and I see myself as the doctor in that book. His name is Rieux. Or Reix. I am like him. In the same way in which he confronts the illness in the town, I confront the truth. I am the drone of sorrow. The owl is perched in his steel tree tonight. With sealed eyes he watches.

*IV. Here is the part where I return to the kitchen to confront Annette again and then to speak about a metaphor. An uncanny fog occupies the kitchen and Annette delivers a prophecy, a warning, and a plea.*

March I do into the kitchen where Annette sips her slippery drink, and I say, "You and the girls may get your laughs tonight, I know about that, but the world burns around you."

"Oh Jasper," she says, "you know?" She uses her hand to swipe violently at the air. It's almost as if she wants to slap me. Poor Annette, inarticulate, frustrated, infected in an organ she doesn't even know she has.

Goddamn this place where we are forced to cohabitate. That's what I say. It's a house where we have lived our lives, and the damage and residue of our lives has devaluated it and made it an extension of that same invisible organ that is infected in Annette. Look at the gray walls. You go over here in this corner, in the hallway between the kitchen and the living room and you see where the wallpaper is peeling and where the yellow wall beneath the wallpaper is exposed. You understand poetry and the preeminence of the metaphor, so you understand that this peeling wallpaper is more than just a spot that should be fixed with some creamy adhesive – instead it is revelatory.

Look, my sister won't listen to me. I'm squatting in the hallway now on the floor where there are clumps of hair and dust in the corners and a curvy orange stain with a tail of orange drippings on the floor, and I'm looking at the yellow wall that I should not be able to see since it is supposed to be covered with wallpaper. Green smoke of the firecracker rises inside of me. I know that war is coming, I know that the war drum beats. Hey, Assad, what do you say? How

many insurgents in Homs have you killed today? Well, that's just it - according to some, no one knows. The world may never know. How do I spend my life doing it? How do I spend my life chasing after the naked truth, which is a terrible, terrible pastime. Oh Jesus, one puts one's head in one's hand, one sweats, the war drum beats. "I'm sorry," I'm yelling to Annette, "but I have to return now to my hairy little hole. I have to take action in the situation room. The drone of sorrow howls overhead."

"You're completely insane," she tells me. "When's the last time you left the house?" she says.

I don't have to answer her questions. When she is at work, she is not here. When Annette and I spend time off together in this house, doing what we desire, that's when the fires of hell burn in this house, and that is when I unfold strategies for political dissemination.

Something uncanny occurs then. Annette says something about Staff Kings then a giant fog occupies the kitchen. Out of it stumbles Annette with her grassy hair raised like Frankenstein's wife, and she says: "Jasper, get thee to a situation room. Look at your destroyed image in the television monitor and know that it both does and does not represent you. The drone of sorrow does whisper tonight. In circles it flies around this house announcing the implosion that shall occur. It may no longer even be safe to broadcast to yourself. Please leave me alone, for tonight I wish to drink the grease and the burn and the calluses from my memory."

*V. Here is the part where I return to the situation room and confirm what I already believed. I then retreat from my hairy orifice to find Annette, who watches a program about interior design. I comment that this kind of programming is escapism offered by the American media machine. Then I take a nap and suffer terrible visions.*

I climb up through the ceiling then lower the ceiling shut behind me. I have the blue input bullet for the microphone and the yellow input bullet for the camera. You know how it goes. You understand that once the camera and the mic are plugged into the television monitor in the situation room that the static mud appears on the screen, that image of me, Mr. Fritz Image. When we speak into our mics, the monitor repeats what we say back to us. His eyes of static mud do vibrate in the pixilated greens and yellows. This is a space

of unfortunate self-identity for me. I am not in control, even though I should be. This is my situation room. It is a way to bring me into existence. This is straight from Camus.

“I have some things I want to say about the job rate,” we announce – the image and me – into our microphones. “According to Flashlight Anderson at the Daily Kos and Petra Dillinger at The Tame Three, the unemployment numbers are looking better than prominent economists might have predicted, but still far higher than they were before the crash. Robert Reich on Salon predicts that this can end up backfiring for the president this election year.

“One thing you have to be conscious of,” we continue wiping sweat from our forehead creases because it’s getting humid in here with political knowledge. “One thing you really have to be conscious of is the rate of unemployment,” we continue. “It has dropped and the goddamned service sector has created thousands upon thousands of new jobs. You wouldn’t believe it,” I feel my forehead crease throbbing in the heat. The crease on the forehead of Mr. Fritzy Image looks messy. “You wouldn’t believe it,” we say, “but it would seem that even manufacturing is taking a turn for the better in the American arena. Of course, there are thousands who have disappeared from the labor market.”

We are feverish up here. There is no metaphor to understand the interactions that occur in the situation room. Annette didn’t know that you would turn out the way you have, Mr. Fritzy Image, when she suggested the situation room. Of course, there is the underconsidered notion that Annette was infiltrated by a third party. I’m thinking just how obvious it is that a silver drone is soaring above our heads right now. There are going to be deportations in the night. They will hide us in its hot wet orifice. They are building camps right now. They are going to turn the whole world into a prison.

I leave the situation room to confront Annette. She is watching a television program. That’s what she does on her days off. I know she’s getting drunk already. She has the residue of the workplace in her grassy hair. It’s the grease that emanates into the air from hotdog and dessert pie drippings in the pans under the rotisseries at kid Koala’s. She’s a shiny cherub. Sometimes she smells like beans. Get your sister Annette a lime. She has weaknesses. Let her have her gin drink. It’s a gin sweetie. Let her have a slice of lime. The girls

will come over. We pay no attention to the whistling of the drone overhead.

“How much longer,” I’m asking, “before your girls come over to snort the place up with apolitical humor? There’s a good chance the drone will strike tonight.”

She ignores this part. “Going to Staff Kings is going to be just like getting a job interview. Why don’t we get you a hair appointment,” she says. “Call Gretchen. I know you remember Gretchen.” Snorty-snort-snort.

I’ll explain: It’s commonly believed in this palace of pain that is about to implode that I don’t take care of myself, and Gretchen can help me. I’ve got what you might call a shag helmet which threatens my eyes so that I need always to be pushing my hair out of the way.

She has removed her socks and has her pink feet up on the coffee table and she’s watching one of those shows about how a poor family’s house is being redecorated by charitable interior design experts who have a taste for ethnic zeal. I don’t sit down to watch it with her because I won’t let myself be taken in by the escapism offered by the American media machine, but I see what is going on at the moment, and I can see that there is a small brown dog running around in circles on a candy cane-colored carpet and that a Chinese lantern hangs overhead and that slants of light come in through the window and that a boy and girl clumsily are using chopsticks to dip dumplings in a brown sauce. Sometimes my ankle hurts. When it’s been days and days since I mopped and my ankle hurts, it seems pretty obvious to me that the best thing to do is to lie down and to take a nap.

I do it in my bedroom. The president is locking up civilians. That’s what I dream. I see them lined up in orange suits and getting onto a bus. I see a firecracker that is trembling on the sand and emitting green smoke. A drone whistles overhead – its missile is that of sorrow. I see brown foreigners from all over the world riding candy cane-colored rugs right up to the front doors of ordinary American families. I see snorting women who are allowing great atrocities to occur. I see the falling of night and a bright silver Dell that seems to grow like the heart of man in the horizon. I see the day rising and I see the floors I used to mop. I see that they are slippery and that light itself, a glare, is reflected in the wet floors. I see the president with sweaty forehead, telling us that the air is full of flies but there

is nothing that can be done. I see those men in their blue uniforms and shiny black boots busting into my situation room to smash my Dell to fragments with long sticks because I have chosen to stay apart. I am like Camus, but I am not on the side of the executioner or the executed. No, I am a doctor called to see about a sickness. I see young people, young Americans, black scarves wrapped around their mouths, knocking on the windows of different storefronts – banks, cafes, and retail shops - up and down Main Street, knocking on the windows with long silver shovels and making sure that the glass all breaks.

I hear the sister downstairs when I wake up, and I know she's setting the table for when the girls come over. She puts out glasses and bowls of nuts. One of the first thoughts I have when I wake up is that Rick Santorum, the Republican presidential hopeful and ex-senator of Pennsylvania, has accused the president of not being a Christian. Why do the girls, Annette's friends, believe we can go on pretending that we have not reached the moment of true political emergency? We live in a world in which the owl always is perched in his steel tree, watching. Madness descends over us all. I can tell you something: there will be riots in the streets before long. The Occupiers, the Tea Partiers, and even new parties that we don't know about yet - teenagers done up head to toe in black with black masks and black pants and black gloves and black padded vests, splattering the walls and windows of their communities with political messages. Alas, like a bird overhead, the drone sings us messages of violence.

"Because you're all liars," I say aloud when I am talking to myself on the bed. "Because you don't want to know what's what." And then I see clearly that a fence might be built and that there will indeed be prisoners hanging onto the inside of the fence with their fingers. They are put onto a bus. Camus and I would say that most people will pretend that these deportations in the night are not actually happening. We play roles, we fill roles.

*VI. Here is the part where I confront Annette about how damaging her music is. Then I admit that I commonly fall into voids. I discuss the nature of the void and reminisce about something I once did that was inexplicable yet perfectly sound.*

She has her music on, the drum machine stings, the impassioned diva sounds strangled, synthesizers moan like digitalized prisoners who are in a hairy orifice in the wall. We can't think in this kind of environment. I live with her because we like the house and we can't make enough money. When I go downstairs she is out of her jeans and blouse top and in a green robe and swaying around in circles, and the ice cubes in her glass are rattling, and a slice of lime is on the floor - probably it fell there - and she is singing that she doesn't want to wait for her life to be over. Oh tender evening, the drone flies overhead. "I see you," I holler over the music. I must make my voice heard. The damage of the music on my brain is terrible. The booze stinks.

"Could you please play in your room when the girls come over," she shouts over the music.

"Gababa," I mock her loudly over the music.

The owl watches from a steel tree. One waits for the fatal knock on the door.

There are many voids in my life. Nomadic-like, I roam from stage to stage, and there are voids in between each stage: on the one hand, I go into the situation room where I broadcast myself, I see myself, I become as one with the diffuse political perspectives that I harbor inside of my head; on the other hand, I might do something like clean the floors at the Tompkin Shopper and make those floors slippery and let them dry and I smell the chemical lemon and I imagine that a sun is there rising in my head and that an owl is in a steel tree and that the drone sings overhead; and on the third hand, there we have the voids into which I fall, phantom orifices into which we all can disappear, and by which I regularly am haunted. Just like the great philosophical novelist who penned one of my favorite books ever, *The Plague*, Albert Camus, I am forever shadowed by my concern for moral behavior in the modern era in which we all live in prisons. This is my political philosophy. Political visions do occur to me: I see those which were, I see those which are, I see those that can be, and I see those which will never be. You wonder how I can possibly traverse that in which it is impossible to be conscious?

The void traverses itself.

The owl is in the steel tree. The Republican primary is happening in all states at once. The dirtiest and nastiest negative campaign ever. Will an effective capital gains tax be implemented? How

does the body lay to die? Sometimes in the morning I wake up and feel terrified that I have gone wrong somewhere. One time I did this when Annette was still sleeping and I went to see her in her bedroom. I peeked in my head. On her side she lay, and the room smelled of farts and mints and like booze and cooked eggs, and her breathing was a fleshy motor and her head was a pile of hair and the fears of the world did soar over her like an invisible drone – the political phantom haunted that room as in every space because the fires of hell are burning - and I said to her: “You are under arrest” and then I escaped so that I could return to my room without her knowing. Never was it spoken of. This is how the void takes us. It is something uncanny. It is the frosty breath of the human soul.

*VII. Here is where I listen to the girls downstairs from my bedroom then from the top of the staircase. I suffer what might be described as a moment of unreality. Out of frustration, I return to the situation room.*

How do I know when the girls come over? It begins with the doorbell. The doorbell will ring a few times throughout the night, and with each ring I will hear a few more women tumble in. I'll hear their shoes on the floor. They tap and snap, they shuffle across the floor. They snort, they get drinks, they rattle ice cubes in their glasses. They don't think for one instant about the imminent collapse of the Eurozone. Armed soldiers frolic in the streets, gliding white paper drones from hand to hand. There is blood on their lips, their faces are of many different colors. Some predict that in the future, we will live under a diverse, multicultural socialist government.

Quietly, with ear to my bedroom door, I listen to the women downstairs. Their gathering has begun. The girls have come over. Hello, oppressed ones who do not know that the drone flies overhead.

Body length mirror on my bedroom wall, tell me about myself. I look at myself. I am being broadcasted on my mirror. Tell me, mirror on the wall, who is the silvery drone? I look like a shaggy brother bum, a janitor, but in many respects, I am the figure who is most like the owl. The steel tree does not whimper in the wind. The air in my lungs is political. My blood is poisoned with political vision, which compromises my mental faculties. How many politicians

actually keep their campaign promises? More than you might think, according to a recent study. Republican presidential hopeful and Libertarian Ron Paul had dinner with Storm Front white supremacist organizers. Investment bankers make all the decisions in this country. They lobby for loopholes. What if my sense of safety is but an illusion? Armed soldiers, they say, might be coming for us any day. One imagines a tank waddling down the street, knocking into cars and things.

Flames, Annette, I think, flames. One imagines oneself as I imagine myself now, at the top of the stairs, listening to the girls who sound to be occupying both the living room and the kitchen. One imagines oneself listening to their giddy snorts and the ice cubes rattling in their glasses. The ice rattles in the glass. One can hear their drunken singsong conversation that veers from the men who sex up the convenience mart by circling it in their hogs and mod scoots to which booze flavors are the sweetest and the most affordable, from what booze go well with certain beverages then back to the men on their hogs and scoots and how they lift their sunglasses up on their heads when they see something they like (suggestive giggling ensues). The conversation veers again – or perhaps one picks up on another conversation among another small gaggle of girls – it veers from a television program, a show about the British aristocracy, to the possibility that a new cashier has been taking pocket change for gum out of the Kid Koala register drawers. Then they discuss how they might suddenly disappear, vanish, travel upwards into the invisible orifices above their heads.

Of course they don't actually talk about how they might vanish, even though it seems to me this is quite likely considering how little they are involved in the world. From the top of the stairs I hover over them, the drone, the owl, the hysterical political agent who pulls data from the internet on the silvery Dell and who spreads imperative data around the room, that is me, the drone of sorrow, and I have been infiltrated. They are downstairs squawking right now. Would it be too much for me to insinuate that the girls downstairs, who are getting hairier now and louder and who are foot stomping – would it be too much for me to insinuate that their thunderous booms, screeches, and squeaks are infiltrating my mind? The women could be punching at the air. The night blackens as armed forces are unleashed into a field where patches of grass

sprout from breasts of dirt. Flashes frighten the silence, explosions gurgle in the background. Our true landscape – the landscape in which we are and in which the great novelist and philosopher Albert Camus encouraged us to assert our existences – our landscape is surveyed day and night by the drone of violence.

“Annette, upstairs please, the world is on fire, and tonight is not the night for self immolation or pony talk or whatever it is you call it that you are doing down there with your drinks.” At first I was loud when I called her name “Annette” then I might have broke off into quieter tones or even just mumbling. One feels that one is confused and that one has never quite woken from a nap. One suffers the impression that doors on all sides, doors that are not even there but which really are just walls, are opening and closing by themselves, making a real controversy, a real racket out of our house.

The music starts. The synths, the strangled divas. They are playing a card game now where they take turns slapping their hands down on the table. I don't know what the game is called: Hearts of Slap? The Joker Cometh? The Jester Laugheth? Slap your table, Annette. I reckon there are six, seven women down there, and keep in mind that more may be on the way. They're porky, they have obese heads, except for one who is tiny with the startled eyes of a nocturnal little beast, and one of her ears is deformed so it looks like a growth of fleshy flaps. All their heads are full of pinkly imagery: a new bisexual rap queen from Brooklyn, Azelia, who rides a bicycle and who wears cutoff jeans – I know her from the HuffPo entertainment blog. One must return to one's situation room in order to process. The world burns, and yet the ladies infiltrate with gin sweeties, foot stomping, escapism.

*VIII. Here is where I retreat to the situation room and suffer an epiphany regarding the ways in which I have been infiltrated. I then venture downstairs to disseminate fiery political knowledge and warn that the drone of sorrow whispers songs of violence tonight. I encourage one of the girls to listen then she asks me a question to which there is but one answer.*

The blue bullet goes into the blue input hole and the yellow bullet goes into the yellow input hole. You know how it goes. The Bemis hums and generates almond scented moisture into the air. The

political heat is on. Mr. Fritz Image looks back at me. We hold our microphones to our mouths. He is a green and yellow pixilated mess. What fear we feel. It does not make sense to me this evening. As the girls hissy fizzy downstairs, groove their pumpkins to the aural monstrosity that blaes, shaking our house, something occurs to me that causes my forehead crease to throb and which causes Mr. Fritz Image to turn messy and staticy and to buzz.

You see, my memoryworks at this point operate at full throttle, and I have not even turned on the Dell Inspiron. On the contrary, I am remembering. I see the giant fog occupying the kitchen and Annette stumbling from it to order me to this hairy orifice above her head as if some mission awaited me here in the situation room. Though I have been infiltrated, as I previously have mentioned. It occurred to me once that a third party might be influencing my actions. A story appeared in Truth Dig, penned by the forever gloomy Chris Hedges, in which he spoke of police infiltration of the Occupy movement. And yes, it doesn't take a scholar to see that the same can happen when one is the owl in the steel tree, the drone of sorrow and violence. When one takes the role of the doctor in Camus, one can expect resistance at each and every turn. The American scene is about to implode because it rests only on lies.

"Hello Mr. Fritz Image," we say into our microphones. The monitor repeats what we say back to us. "Hello there, you staticy representation of me. I hate to tell you, but I believe that you have been had. We are not doing any good here. From our situation room, we are not able to disseminate political knowledge. What did Camus once say, in his novel *The Plague*, about how information can be controlled or about how ..."

No, something indeed is wrong. We have known it is wrong for quite some time. I lift the floor, climb down the ladder, and close the floor above my head. Then we inch step by step down the stairs, into the den of lady lions who pony talk and snort and hardy-har-har, all while stomping and slapping and whinnying up a storm. Who is the drone of sorrow? Who brings messages of political violence? Who is the owl perched in his steel tree? It is me. It is my duty. Into the living room I step and I see them there.

I don't recognize them. Two ladies with hair that is frizzed and greased with product. It smells fruity down here, the music burns my aural canals. Hardy-har-har, they go. Snorty-snort-snort. There

could be a knock at the door – an intimidating hammering on the door - at any moment, but there is not. Not yet. The president has provided a signing statement in which he promises never to use NDAA 2012 to detain American citizens, but civil libertarians are outraged nonetheless. The moon of American liberty has risen. The night has fallen. The deportation occurs at party time, Annette. Their boots march down the street. Hardy-har-har. Glass shatters. A gigantic fog moves from the kitchen into the living room. Annette stumbles from the fog. Annette swipes her hand through the air. She is all done up in a strawberry dress and she wears green lipstick. She wears the same sandals as before, but instead of sock feet, she is barefoot and her toenails too are green.

“Look who it is,” she says. “Bridgette, this is my brother, Jasper. He’s very political.”

One of the women with greased hair whom I do not recognize stands to shake my hand, but I will not take it.

“Annette says that you’re very political,” she says.

“I am the fiery of drone of political information,” I correct her. “The drone of sorrow whispers songs of violence. Listen,” I encourage her, cupping my hand around my ear even though the synthy music does blare too loudly to hear the delicate and imperative messages. “Listen and you will know that the night of American liberties has befallen us. No one knows who we are anymore.”

“Oh,” says the strange lady, “is that so?”

“Yes,” I say with the frankness of the owl who knows for he has watched, perched in the steel tree. “I’m afraid that it is so. I am very afraid.”

“And what do you recommend we do about that,” she ventures. Annette snorts behind me, though when I turn, she is frowning – she is frowning oh so sadly. A gigantic fog thickens behind her. I suffer a terrible sense of unreality. Must one retreat to the situation room even though the broadcasts in that hairy orifice are futile? I shan’t answer the lady’s question.

Instead I tell her what Albert Camus once wrote in his novel. Perhaps you have read it. It is called *The Plague*, and it says that the only way to be free from the prison they are building is to be aware that you are inside of the prison all of the time, but no one listens when the doctor speaks.

*IX. Here is the part where the deportation occurs at midnight.*

# *Tattles and Titbits:*

## *A Poetics*

Will Cordeiro

When I grow up, I want to be a wunderkind.

\*

Whatever objects we see are actually opaque, and so the act of looking itself is a form of blindness.

\*

If writing is a calling, it's the *writer* who does the calling, crying out, "Oh, Muse, why hast thou forsaken me?"

\*

One lover to another: "I have begun to have faith in your solipsism."

\*

My heart is like a delicate, ancient manuscript—if I read the words, I might damage the text.

\*

Whims go at me, and I wimble along at one go.

\*

We riddle ourselves to be rid of our ids.

\*

I was desperate enough to try telling the truth.

\*

Some poems act like antibodies, which attach themselves to the infections in language so that others can come along and destroy them.

\*

I don't want to be redeemed; I don't want to *need* to be redeemed.

\*

I would try to speak in prose, but it always seems too posed.

\*

History will erase you—history will *keep* erasing you, with any luck.

\*

Of course there are many sides to each truth; we should emphasize the one that's turned away from us.

*E&F V.X*

\*

Poetry is what resists *translation* almost successfully.

\*

Edison failed thousands of times to make a light bulb; but, eventually, one went off in his head.

\*

All poems are one poem—what rubbish!—unless it means that each poet is still trying to redact her predecessor’s work back to the Neanderthal’s first utterance of “ah!”

\*

A morality: evil is more exhausting than good.

\*

To make poetry one’s bread and butter is to eat caviar for breakfast. Poetry should be as wholesome as moist lunchmeat.

\*

Prose is another word for spiritual laxity; poetry helps us get the skinny on the soul.

\*

Meaningward the language wends against its windy words.

\*

Perhaps few people really look because they've been taught  
it's impolite to stare.

\*

The eyes see the world, but the soul sees sight.

\*

Only through small effects do we get large designs.

\*

In order for something to have many meanings, it must first  
have at least one.

\*

If you see through too much, you risk going blind.

\*

Why do people write fiction? To make sense out of reality.  
Why do people write poems? To make reality.

\*

Poetry is language in a supersaturated state.

\*

Don't take the idea of your "self" too personally.

\*

Without language there can be sense, but no nonsense.

*E&F V.X*  
\*

Revise away, the last draft remains as impulsive as the first.

\*

Humor is the recognition of terror at one remove.

\*

It is our distrust of narrative that has made narrative interesting again.

\*

The cells scream and the galaxies whisper.

\*

We only exist as the occasion to be other than we are.

\*

I'm never sincere. I mean it.

\*

An editor is required to examine each manuscript with gynecological indifference.

\*

Don't find your voice—*throw* your voice. Identity is the soul's ventriloquism.

\*

We speak a dead language, which only the continual vivification of poetic activity can resuscitate.

\*

Keep on writing your odd odes to obsolescence and maybe something will keep.

\*

An author, like a hangman, should probably remain anonymous.

\*

A small town is, like the mind, a whole universe: a prison where the doors open outward all day.

\*

Oblivion has kissed my open mouth: O, the abyss has whispered sweet nothings in my ear.

\*

We are all minor characters about to get written out of our own lives.

\*

Ignorance is nine-tenths of the law.

\*

A poet is someone who takes pleasure from putting his footwork in his mouth.

*E&F V.X*

\*

The heart gets broken until it's broken-in.

\*

Does idiosyncrasy result from being in synch with one's self?

\*

What's usually on the line, in poetry as in law, is what's *between* the lines.

\*

Take your time or it will take your life.

\*

A poet doesn't write for an audience, but to create an audience. Every good poem teaches you how to read.

\*

We are an age without a saving vice.

\*

Out of squibs and squabbles, babble and baubles, drips, dribs, and dabbles, a poet makes a life.

\*

Our habits make up half our habitat.

\*

I spend hours trying to begin. I bite my tongue, and yet my tongue keeps growing back.

\*

How many wise books weren't written because their authors had learned to keep their mouths shut?

# *Three Seasons of Meat Pie Selling*

Emily Culliton

## PROLOGUE

Thomas is a poet. Lucy is a law student. Lucy has moved from the home the two shared in Madison, Wisconsin, to a small apartment in Brooklyn to attend NYU Law, leaving Thomas and their friends and family behind. They don't break up. Thomas speaks to Lucy every night on the phone. They both think about marriage. After six months of solo living in Madison, Thomas declares that he is ready to move for Lucy to New York. After all, he is a poet. He can live anywhere he wants.

Lucy does not seem excited enough.

Thomas arrives and moves into Lucy's apartment. She has a roommate, Doug, who has bad teeth, but other than that is a very nice guy. They live on Prospect Park West, but their windows look out onto a rare Park Slope parking lot behind the building. All three roommates declare the apartment to be more than large enough. With the odd hours that Doug and Lucy keep, they may never even see each other. Thomas decides to get some odd hours of his own, and applies for a job at the shop around the corner. The owner hires him because of his affability and proximity.

"If anything goes wrong, if there's a health inspection or a fire, you'll be here," the owner says. "That makes me feel very safe."

SPRING

Thomas sells meat pies. Lucy, a vegetarian, hates them. Thomas likes them. The owner says that they are real New Zealand meat pies, and stresses the real with his accent and with hand gestures. The real comes from the butter which is real New Zealand butter. Foolish fake American butter couldn't make that flaky a crust. With this assertion, the owner puts his hand in the pie-warmer and pulls out a steak mince and cheese. The meat pies are individually sized, meant for quick and quiet consumption. The owner takes a large bite, almost half of the meat pie, chews a bit, then stores the meatpie in his cheek and speaks.

"It's the crust that makes our meat pies the best. We got a write-up from a prominent Brooklyn blog."

The owner's halfway out the shop, when he rushes back in.

"It's also the organic beef!"

The owner of the shop is a big New Zealander named Declan who is involved in a custody dispute. The child in question is large for his age, and both father and son have unruly hair. In the basement of the shop, Declan keeps a drum set for his son to play on, and when he does, customers complain. Thomas hasn't mentioned this to Declan.

Thomas is soon promoted to assistant manager—a strange title because there are only four employees. But he makes one dollar an hour more than two other employees, and Hazel, the manager, makes one dollar an hour more than he does. Thomas is surprised that the one dollar an hour more gives him a slight stirring of validation.

The shop is a small corner storefront with large windows from the floor to the ceiling that look out onto the intersection of 16th Street and Prospect Park West. The film *Smoke* was shot in there. About once a week a customer tells Thomas this, and he learns to say, "Really? Wow. That's so interesting!" It is a joke between him and the other employees.

It's just a room divided in half. There is the side for making the meat pies and the side for buying them. The room is narrow with a small bathroom in the back that doesn't work as well as it should. The fridges are large and secondhand. The oven is also large and secondhand. Each appliance needs to be learned for its quirk, for

its inconsistency. The sink in the back is brand new because it is really the only fixture customers can see clearly.

In the front of the shop, there are two tables and little invitation for the customers to use them.

“We’re not Starbucks,” Declan says. “Customers shouldn’t live here. They should get their meat pies and they should go.”

If the customer does want to stay and listen to the music and chat with Thomas and eat a meatpie, Thomas gives him or her a flimsy paper plate. The plate will be soaked from the grease of the meatpie. The customer will not be able to use the plastic knife and fork. Thomas sometimes wants to chat, wants to learn the customers’ names. But he’s afraid of being too friendly, he’s afraid it will make him stand out. Some friendliness is appropriate and some is not. Some kinds of openness earn you smiles and a tip. But he’s offended others by acting like an equal, taking too long with a coffee, or admitting too much of himself.

The grease of the meat pies stays on his fingertips, and at the roots of his hair. He doesn’t smell the smell of the shop, just as he doesn’t hear the constant dub music on the speakers. Lucy, however, smells the meat on him, and refuses to let him in her bed after he’s worked. He starts to enjoy the post-meatpie shower. It feels good to wash away the grime of a hard day’s work. He’s never done that before. He’s worked in book stores, he’s been an SAT prep tutor, a reader for the university press in Madison. He thinks it’s strange that he had to come to New York for a job to make him sweat, to make him stink. The Brooklyn presses won’t pay him anything, the editors laughed out loud when he asked for a salary. This isn’t Wisconsin, they said. We pay rent here.

He comes out of the shower thinking about a small ache in his lower back, about the arch supporting shoes he should buy, and Lucy sniffs the air and then him and says, “You used my body wash.” He smiles and feels a large angry pimple on his chin. He hasn’t had one of those since college. Lucy pops it while he sits on the toilet and then he lets her give him a mint julep facial mask. It takes a while to get the green out of his beard.

The meat pies begin to consume Thomas’s poetry. They enter everywhere, as do Declan and his son. He spends 50 to 60 hours a week in this small room, so it makes sense he is influenced. But Thomas is concerned when Lucy reads his poems and laughs. She

thinks they are jokes, a parody, something to do when not writing serious good poetry.

Rachel, one of the other employees, one of his subordinates, teaches Thomas to prime the tip jar. He adds a few dollars of his own money every morning to suggest that previous customers have been pleased with his service. The next customers, the real customers, will then be more likely to tip, not wanting to seem less generous than their fictional counterparts. It works, and Rachel's wisdom is proven. Rachel has been working in cafes since she moved to New York, about three years ago. Thomas wonders when she learned all the rules, how long did it take. He wants to ask her about subway maps and tipping in cabs and where and what exactly is Williamsburg, but he isn't able to admit how little he knows about his new home.

Even though Thomas is naive about things, Declan likes Thomas better than Rachel. Declan says she has an attitude, which is true. She is the first to bound outside to yell at the homeless men who like to rest on the shop benches. She tells them that they have their own goddamn benches a block away, and then a whole fucking park. She rolls her eyes with each diminutive paycheck and tip. At night, when she cleans the dishes, Rachel gets water everywhere as she scrubs the soup ladles and cutting boards and the coffee urn. She sometimes doesn't wait until the meat pies are fully cooked before selling them to the customers. Thomas makes more money than she does.

More than anything, Rachel hates the cop bar across the street. The cops make her nervous, more nervous than the homeless people actually. She feels she can yell at the homeless people and they can yell back and it is a fair fight. Rachel is all about fair fights. The cops, on the other hand, drink too much and carry guns. Rachel even hates the short beat cop who sometimes stops in on windy days. Thomas always offers him a coffee, but the beat cop puts up his hand and shakes his head. Thomas can't figure why, whether he's had too much coffee, doesn't like coffee, or if he thinks the coffee will interfere with his policing. Thomas has never seen him enter the cop bar, but the cop does stare at it often. Thomas thinks the beat cop is lonely. Rachel thinks the beat cop is creepy.

"Never takes his hand off that nightstick," she says as she scrubs the screens from the espresso machine.

Lucy doesn't like Rachel. She doesn't like the pie shop in general, but she really doesn't like Rachel. It's because Rachel gave her a curry vege to try, and it turned out to be a steak mince. Lucy coughed the meat into her hand and gave Thomas this destroyed look.

"It's difficult sometimes to tell which pie is which," Thomas explained. Lucy still had her tongue sticking out with bits of gray meat on it.

"I'll get you a glass of water," Rachel said, and she never apologized.

There are three homeless people that Thomas watches every day. Billy is the most consistent. He wears a New York Jets parka all the time. He has a shopping cart filled with junk that he collects and sells so he can buy single cigarettes and glue. He likes to sit two doors down from the shop on an empty milk crate. When night comes, or when it is cold or raining, he covers his head with an old blanket. Sometimes when it is very cold he moves into the 15th Street subway station, but most of the time he sits in the doorway of an apartment building. Word on the street says that Billy's daughter owns a brownstone nearby and keeps trying to convince Billy to move inside. He won't though. He prefers to live off the grid, one customer tells Thomas.

Thomas meets Billy when there is an altercation between Billy and another man with a shopping cart. The carts are in the middle of the intersection blocking traffic and the cops from the cop bar come out to settle things. Thomas goes outside when he sees Billy spreading his big arms, the parka gaping open. He shouts, "Search me, search my pockets." It seems that one of the policemen has suggested that Billy is high and carrying. Billy insists that he is not. Thomas almost comes to Billy's defense, feels a certainty that this is wrong and sad, that Billy is being taken advantage of for some purpose, possibly entertainment, but the cops give up. It ends as quickly as it began and only Thomas is startled, emotional. He watches Billy go into the intersection and get his shopping cart back.

"What about the other one, Billy?" Thomas asks. It is the first thing he's ever said to Billy and he doesn't know if he has the right.

“Not mine,” Billy says.

Thomas learns that homeless people are very proprietary about the things that belong to them.

The second homeless man is Joey. Joey is a ravaged individual. He walks in a dazed shuffle. His clothes hang off him, and then fall off him. He exposes himself routinely to the neighborhood. The children of the neighborhood, borough children, ignore him like their parents and their babysitters. Joey does not mean to expose himself, it seems. Rachel has suggested that he likes the feeling of fresh air. Thomas doesn't disagree.

Joey is a heroin addict. He's lost the ability to speak, or speak coherently anyway. He doesn't seem to know where he is, walks out into the intersection, fingers gripping the waistband of his filthy jeans as cars swerve to avoid hitting him. He is picked up often by an ambulance and strapped onto a stretcher. He follows the orders (or perhaps the arm movements and intonations) of harassed looking EMTs and cops, and never seems troubled that they are there to take him away. The ambulance is always for Joey. It arrives without sirens. There is no hurry. It arrives when a concerned citizen makes a call on Joey's behalf. They are worried for his health, or Joey has done something particularly foul, has become particularly foul. Thomas learns about these mild anonymous calls and knows that someday they might be his responsibility. It isn't much to do, to make a phone call.

The cops of the bar like to make fun of Joey, buying him a bottle of cheap vodka every now and then to watch him gulp it down. When Joey drinks, the liquid in the bottle just disappears, as if his throat has opened up like a drain. When Thomas sees this happen, he thinks he understands the nature of Joey's addiction. A strange thing. Joey no longer seems human.

The third homeless man does not look and sound like a homeless man. In this neighborhood he could be confused for an artist. He wears Carhartts, and Rachel remarks once that he is handsome. He has broad shoulders and a defined, weathered face. He comes into the shop asking for food, and he looks tormented by it.

“I went to Iraq, and when I came home, I was all screwed up. I wish I could hold a job but I don't seem to be able to. I don't like asking for food, but I'm hungry. We're all hungry out there.”

Thomas is ready to tell him to come back when they close, that

Thomas will give him all the extra meat pies in the oven, the meat pies they throw away each night anyway or give to the cops at the cop bar, but Declan is there.

“Sorry, buddy,” Declan says. “That’s a sad story, and I wish I could help you out, mate, but we can’t just give away free food like that. I’ve got a business to run.”

Declan’s accent gets bigger when he says things like that.

The homeless man nods, understands that this is a business, and goes back out onto the street.

“That guy,” Declan says. “He needs to get a fucking job.”

Thomas thinks about piping up, saying a job like mine? But he doesn’t.

Thomas doesn’t know the third homeless man’s name.

## SUMMER

Lucy has two weeks free before her summer internship begins, and spends them running and watching television. She likes home improvement shows and thinks about building and staining a bookcase. Thomas would like to be involved in the project but she gets irritated with him when he goes out and buys the two by fours. The planks live under the coffee table, jutting out so the three roommates are always stubbing toes. Thomas tries to get the project started by putting newspaper down in their small hallway, laying the planks out, buying cans of primer and wood stain. Thomas comes home after work one night and finds everything back under the coffee table. Eventually, he takes the supplies down to the curb, hoping the homeless men will be able to make use of it all. The stuff disappears within an hour, and Lucy never asks where her project went. She just whispers small thanks that night in his ear when they are lying in bed. “I can’t begin anything right now. I wish I could.” She throws off the thin sheet that’s covering them. “It’s just too hot.”

At the shop, the oven is set at 375 degrees, and must be on all day for a steady supply of hot meat pies. The open windows take in the sunlight of June, July and August. Declan has bought an air conditioner that hums loudly and leaks fluid onto the street but doesn’t seem to do anything with the air. The employees sweat and know this can’t look appetizing to the customers.

Sales go down as the temperature rises. Declan has an idea that meatpie picnics will come into fashion, and Thomas does not dissuade him. The optimism is nice. Thomas likes to be part of the exchange about business. But it's misplaced optimism, meatpie picnics are not popular, and the employees are left with more free time to clean, perfect their coffee making, and tell each other everything about themselves.

Thomas, so far, has worked most of his shifts with Rachel. He knows a lot about her from their mornings. Then Rachel wants to change her hours. She wants change in general. Hazel, the manager, begins to open with Thomas in the morning. Hazel makes one dollar an hour more than Thomas. She is a strong woman with tight gray curled hair who roller blades to work every day.

Hazel always introduces herself to customers, and the customers divide themselves into two groups: those who give Hazel their names in return and those who do not. The ones who openly say, "Hi, I'm [insert name here]," will never forget Hazel's name, and will greet her on the street with big waves and big laughs. The customers who do not give their names can be divided into two sub-groups. There are ones who are taken aback by this display of open friendliness, and so do not know how to respond. They smile awkwardly, and are eventually won over by Hazel's loud monologues about her life. The other sub-group hates Hazel and avoids the meat pie shop when she is working. Hazel treats each group and each sub-group the same, never noticing any difference at all.

She recommends meat pies that she likes with gusto. She makes coffee fast and expresses the love with which she is making it. She has lines she repeats, standard jokes, and is free and easy with her history. She explains quickly to customers that she has just moved to New York for the new woman in her life. She explains that the studio apartment is fine for her and her girlfriend, but that the girlfriend's golden retriever seems a bit much. She is a cat person.

Thomas likes Hazel a lot at the beginning. She reminds him of people from Madison. They have the same notions about conversation, primarily that it should keep going. She seems to be a giving person, and doesn't think too hard about the words coming out of her mouth. She also likes stamping paper cups and restocking the napkins. When Thomas makes a joke she laughs hard, doubles over girlishly, and ends the laugh with a satisfying sigh.

Thomas falls in love with Hazel a little. It's good to be around her.

She announces that when she first moved in with her girlfriend, she had to bless the space.

"I'm a pagan!" she says, arms akimbo, knuckles to her hips. Thomas pumps his fist in the air when she says it and replies: "Heck! I want to be a pagan too!"

She gives him a necklace and a long explanation of the rite. Thomas writes a poem about Hazel's religious beliefs.

A week into their friendship, during their shift, Hazel announces: "I was raped when I was twelve."

Thomas falls out of love with her because he doesn't know what to do. He is brokenhearted that she has told him, that she is the type of person who tells that sort of thing to a relative stranger. She says it, and Thomas does not entirely believe her, and then feels worse.

He later hears her tell a customer, and he forgives her. She becomes a woman with no filter, someone who cannot help but declare her personal tragedies. That it is sexual makes it more wrong. If she had declared that her mother died when she was twelve, she wouldn't alienate so many people. But it is rape, and the rape of a child, and it is terrible and not nice to talk about. Thomas realizes it isn't fair to bring niceness into the exchange, but it's the way he was raised.

Thomas does not tell Rachel about this at first, but she brings it up.

"Hazel told me she was raped when she was twelve," she says.

"She told me too."

"Christ. I wish she hadn't."

Thomas tells Lucy about it. Lucy, naturally, has the appropriate reaction.

"That poor woman. At least it seems she's come to terms with it."

One afternoon walking by the cop bar, a small drunk swings out, hanging onto the big wooden door, and calls Thomas a fucking queer. Thomas is walking with Doug at the time, Doug of the bad teeth. Thomas's reaction is to laugh high and loud, and the man shakes his finger at Thomas and sails back into the bar.

“Did he come out just to tell me that?” Thomas asks Doug.

“It would seem so,” Doug says. They walk on. Thomas’s feelings are hurt, but Doug doesn’t seem aware. The two men are on their way to the butcher, to buy two steaks (a portobello mushroom, already purchased, will be grilled for Lucy). At the butcher, Doug takes his time with the order and Thomas feels the eyes of the butcher linger over them both, together. Assumptions are being made, Thomas feels. He looks at the sawdust covered floor, thinks about how much he used to like this butcher shop.

Thomas tells Rachel this story during a shift together, he makes it into a joke. Rachel is cleaning the window above the door, and stands on a chair holding Windex and a wad of paper towel. She looks at him with raised eyebrows and when Thomas laughs, she laughs. Then she shakes her head, stops laughing and goes back to the window.

“I’m sorry about that,” she says, and it seems she’s apologizing on behalf of her neighborhood.

Thomas feels himself confide too much in Rachel. There they are in a small room on a corner in Brooklyn, for eight or nine hours at a time, and he feels himself giving away too much information. Part of it is the heat. Where is his filter? As he stocks frozen meat pies, sorting out the vege from the mince meat, putting the newer ones in the back and the older in the front, he tells her that he read *Eat, Pray, Love* because his sister asked him to. Rachel sits on one of the counters and eats carrot sticks with salad dressing and raises her eyebrows again.

He tells her that when Declan gave him his own desk in the basement next to the drum set, he wrote a poem about how the desk made him feel.

“How did it make you feel?” Rachel asks, and she means it, and so he reads her the poem. She doesn’t laugh, and says she gets it. She likes it.

He tells her he is embarrassed to be going bald. Rachel dismisses that, tells him it doesn’t matter for men. Then she talks about a girl she’d gone to high school with who had started to lose her hair when she was seventeen.

“She had a gorgeous face, but you could see her scalp. It didn’t help that she was such a bitch.”

Thomas wants to get back to himself, to his own insecurities

about hair loss, but Rachel has moved on. Rachel's eyes are untrustworthy because they are always moving. She has classically shifty eyes, like the eyes of petty thieves in westerns or minor villains in Shakespeare productions. She can't look people straight on, although Thomas catches her staring at him sometimes.

"How old is the soup?" she asks, swirling a ladle around with her nose all wrinkled up. "I think it's over."

That night, Thomas goes home to Lucy and confides to her his panic about his hair loss. She doesn't look up from her tort law text book but tells him she doesn't mind.

"I mind!" Thomas says.

Here is how the homeless men act in summer:

They take over the Bartel-Prichard Square, which marks the intersection of Prospect Park West and Prospect Park Southwest and is actually a circle. There are benches that curve around the Bartel-Prichard Square War Memorial, and the homeless people sleep on them and languish. Traffic circles around, children are forbidden from playing at the center, and the homeless people declare it their own. They have arguments, and they make each other laugh, and they urinate on the war memorial. Everyone else moves around them and ignores them.

Joey cannot remember which benches are his and which benches are not his. One afternoon, he lays himself out on the shop bench with his pants around his ankles. Rachel rushes out there to tell him to move on and Billy helps, translates. The two manage to get Joey to pull his pants up and to shuffle towards the park. When she comes back in, Thomas asks what happened. Should he call for an ambulance? Rachel shakes her head and looks back out the window.

"I just told him this was a family place," she says. "I'll tell you what's weird. He doesn't have a single pubic hair."

Thomas finds a website with pictures of all the homeless men of the neighborhood with needles in their arms. That's all it is. He finds it when he is bored, when he is interested in writing a poem on the history of his neighborhood. The website has a black background and it's just pictures of men and women shooting up. There is one of Joey next to a bush. Joey looks healthier. Less gray.

Rachel says it is the methadone that has done this. There is a clinic nearby. She finds Joey irritating, and likes Billy. She says:

“Billy has made a choice, not one I would make, but still. He’s living his life on his own terms, he isn’t bothering anyone, and he seems happy. Not happy happy. But happy.”

Thomas has been doing his research and knows that the health risks during the summer in the city for homeless men and women are substantial. They dehydrate. They can burn their feet on the cement. The subways which save them during the winter just trap the heat, generate more, and act like ovens. There is a good chance that Joey will die soon.

The third homeless man is worse, but only emotionally. Thomas sees him screaming at Joey outside the drugstore on 18th. Joey leans against the doorway with a puddle of vomit by his shoes. The vomit is gray, and Thomas learns that a healthy person has healthy vomit and a person who is near death has deathly vomit.

“You’re fucking disgusting,” the third homeless man says. “You’re disgusting. Look at you. I gave you money for food. Look at yourself.”

The screaming goes on for a time, and Joey can’t escape. The third homeless man stays with him, about eight feet away, and berates Joey all afternoon. The third homeless man’s face is twisted with anger, and he does not look handsome anymore.

When Thomas locks up the meatpie shop at the end of the night, Joey stands in the middle of the intersection again, alone, chewing his lips. The third homeless man has gone.

Thomas tells Rachel about Lucy when he has run out of stories about himself. Somehow they seem like his stories too. Lucy is working as an advocate for women who have had their children taken away by social services because of allegations of abuse. It is not a good job, even though it is nine to five. He tells Rachel about the latest phenomenon. Lucy never walks anymore. He sees her on the street, running to the grocery store, running to the pharmacy. Walking is too slow for her now. At home, she rarely wears anything else but her running clothes. Thomas complains once. She gets embarrassed, then angry. Thinks Thomas thinks she isn’t being feminine enough. That isn’t it. It’s just that when Lucy eventually peels off her t-shirt, running tights and bra, there are fierce red

marks around her rib cage, stomach and her ankles like she's been tied up. But Thomas doesn't tell Lucy that. He does tell Rachel.

Lucy was a fleshy girl when they first met, round-assed, round-armed, round-everything, and he'd been very attracted to her. She was just beginning to become interested in law and interested in arguing, arguing with no emotion was what she liked and he liked it too. They argued in bed, interspersed with frantic, happy sex. There were things about her body that, yes, Thomas would have changed, but she made up for it with her smile which was big and toothy. Thomas was tall and thin, and had usually gone for naturally tall and thin girls. He was charmed by Lucy's body which was so different. Thomas also thought she liked her body as much as he did. He was wrong.

He stayed with her, and he loved her, but he did have to watch as Lucy cried about her dimpled thighs. He hadn't considered the thighs until she told him to and brushed his hand over them. There were crevices and lines in her skin caused by cellulite, she explained. After a year of dating, Lucy decided to change everything about herself. She was accepted to NYU, and for her first semester, she lost about thirty pounds.

She got smaller, more muscular around her middle, and in bed, she would guide his hand to her stomach, as if to say, "See where I am not?" She now confesses that, at first, she felt too exposed to the world after losing the weight, but got used to it. And all she has to do to keep the weight off is run for an hour and a half six days a week. Simple.

In spite of the weight loss, Lucy's thighs are exactly the same.

He confesses this to Rachel. Thomas expects the raised eyebrows and no comment, but instead she throws mashed potatoes at his forehead and calls him an asshole.

"I don't even like Lucy and I feel sorry for her," Rachel says. She doesn't talk to him for the rest of the shift.

After this, she doesn't seem so interested in him anymore. She reads magazines or does *The New York Times* crossword puzzle instead of talking. Thomas tries to help with the clues, but he doesn't understand the logic and Rachel won't teach him.

"Just figure it out, it's what I did," she says.

Thomas turns to Hazel with the stories about his love life. They begin to talk about the difficulty of loving women. At first, it's

strange to relate this way, to a woman about women, but he gets used to it. He's even a little thrilled by it, by the strangeness and the commonality all at once.

Thomas tells Hazel that the first girl he fell in love with had perfect thighs, but he hadn't known at the time. He liked her thighs, was entranced by them when she wore her provocatively short skirts. But he did not have enough of an arsenal of images to know the loveliest thighs when he came upon them. Muscular, smooth, thin. The first time they'd kissed lying down, she squeezed him with her thighs so hard she left bruises. She had long brown hair and brown eyes. An unremarkable looking girl except for her body which was so taut and long. Her name was Chelsea.

Thomas tells Hazel that Chelsea works at a female-friendly sex shop in Madison. Hazel writes down the name of the shop on a slip of receipt paper because she has friends in that area.

Thomas falls in love from time to time with customers. He is fairly monogamous in his attractions, and tells Hazel about each one as they occur. Hazel tells him which women she likes, and the attractions are different but not remarkably so. Thomas's latest is a thirty-something freelance graphic designer. She likes the steak and mushroom meatpie, the heaviest meat pie they sell. The graphic designer has light gray hair, and Thomas puzzles over whether she has gone prematurely gray or if she dyed it. It does matter to Thomas because he hopes that the gray hair is an affliction to be borne rather than a fashion statement. The graphic designer is kind and always tips. Hazel likes the smaller, pixie looking women, the ones who bring Hazel their coffee cups from home for their lattes, flat whites and cappuccinos.

Thomas asks Rachel what her type is and she says she likes the young fathers of the neighborhood who wear their children on their stomachs and backs. She does not like the children as much as the fathers. She does not like Declan even though he has a son.

“He's too large. And he thinks meat pies are too interesting.”

Thomas begins to write love poems that involve the meat pies. He writes poems of the gray-haired graphic designer, and then of the perfect thighed Chelsea. He imagines both women taking deep bites into the meat pies which they hold with unnapkined hands. Chelsea would like the curry veggie but she would have liked the shepherd's

pie more. Chelsea likes classic things. The graphic designer, of course, would be eating a steak and mushroom. Thomas writes a poem imagining the women eating the meat pies, and quickly throws it away, recognizing that the irony isn't there, it is simple fantasy. Also, it's a bad poem.

Thomas goes home to Madison for his cousin's wedding and he meets Chelsea again. She takes him out to a bar. He sits at a table with the other women who work at the female-friendly sex shop. He finds them to be confident and down-to-earth and when they do talk shop, they do not change the tones of their voice. Chelsea takes him from the bar to her home, and the sex is short, it doesn't live up to his expectations. It seems to be because of the sex shop.

He returns to New York and confesses everything to Lucy. He expects her to break up with him, so he makes arrangements to sleep on his friend's couch in Harlem. Lucy, however, does not break up with him, does not make him move out. He has to sleep on the couch in the living room for a few nights, but Lucy soon lets him back under their quilt. Lucy does not hate him. She hates Chelsea.

Rachel says this is a common reaction among women. She's been hated a few times herself and it never seemed that fair.

"I never cheated on anyone," Rachel says.

Thomas tries to write a poem about Rachel but is unable. It ends up being a poem about himself.

## FALL

Hazel tells Thomas the story about Declan and his son and his ex-wife. Thomas isn't supposed to know about the story, and neither is Hazel, and neither is Rachel, but soon they all do.

The ex-wife is Ukrainian and a born-again Christian. The relationship between Declan and the Ukrainian was short-lived and volatile. Rachel asks what is it about crazy women? Why do men fall in love with them so quickly?

Apparently, the Ukrainian became born-again (was born again?) after she and Declan split. She began to raise their large son as a born-again Christian. She enrolled him in a school in Brighton Beach that, Declan claims, has some cultish undertones. The large

son began to spout religious phrases to Declan, and Declan decided he wanted full custody.

Thomas knows this, and isn't so surprised by Declan's phone call.

"Listen, Mate, I'm in Long Island," he whispers. "I'm not going to be back for a while."

"Do you mean like the weekend..."

"I'm not sure. I just can't be sure. And I can't give you my number and I can't tell you where I'm staying."

Thomas hears the son in the background. There's a crash, something has been knocked over, and the son cries.

"Jesus, stop it. No, later. Listen, Thomas, I'll be back when I'm back. In the meantime, I'm putting you in charge."

"What about Hazel?"

"She won't understand, and I don't know. I've not been happy with her work lately. In fact, I'm planning on moving you up soon. Don't tell her yet, though. I need to have a talk with her about her performance."

Another crash.

"I really think I need to tell Hazel that you're gone."

"All right. All right. Just make some excuse. No one can know where I am."

Thomas pauses, then asks:

"Declan. Have you kidnapped your son?"

"My lawyer told me to."

Declan hangs up the phone.

Thomas tells Rachel and Hazel what happened, and that Declan put him in charge.

"He put you in charge?" Hazel says. "But I'm the manager."

"I'm sorry," Thomas says.

Hazel screws up her face, and it's clear she's upset.

"Fine," Hazel says. "I'll be back later." They are working the shift together, but Thomas doesn't make her stay. Hazel doesn't return for an hour and a half, and when she does her eyes are glassy.

"Hi," Hazel says, and she goes to the back of the shop to eat a mince and cheese.

The short beat cop is in love with Rachel and the cop bar. It seems an incongruous thing to happen but it does. The short beat cop

drives a three wheeled vehicle through the streets, and likes to park it catty-corner to the shop, outside the Korean market. From there, Thomas and Rachel deduce, he can look into the windows, and watch her as she refills the coffee stirrers and the mustard packets.

“He’s in love with me,” Rachel says.

“So is Joey.”

Joey loses his pants most often when Rachel is working.

“All of them are. Who wouldn’t fall in love with a meatpie proprietress?”

“No one that I can think of.”

There is one woman with a great dane service dog who is in love with Thomas. The first time she came into the cafe, she asked Thomas if she looked crazy and Thomas stupidly said no. A relationship formed. She comes in now regularly, and takes too long to order. She changes her mind, she keeps ordering more, and in the end charges about forty dollars worth of meat pies to her debit card. Thomas is not sure she eats the meat pies she buys. She is small, and indeed, crazy looking. She is in love with Thomas. She looks at him with intention and tries to prolong their conversations. Of course, she could just be lonely. There are many lonely people in the neighborhood.

The woman with the great dane comes by one night just as they are closing, and finds the shop impossible. She’s unable to open the door. She taps at the glass until Thomas opens the door for her.

“I can’t come in there,” she says. “You’re using chemicals, too many chemicals.”

He has just washed the floor with a bucket of water and a capful of bleach.

“It’ll kill me,” she says.

He takes her order from the door, and the order is confusing and long. She keeps sending him back into the kitchen for more meat pies, and exchanging the steak mince for the steak and mushroom. She wonders out loud if she will like sausage rolls, and takes Thomas to heart when he says she might. They are good with ketchup. Finally, she is satisfied with her order, and gives him cash, and he goes back in to make change. He returns with her change and she takes it all, not giving him a tip. The woman leaves with her dog and her meat pies, almost steps in front of traffic. She’s so

upset. Thomas feels he has done something very wrong, something with the bleach. He feels he has broken her heart with the bleach. Wounded, the woman with the great dane still shows up at the shop the next night. She refuses to enter the shop, because she can always smell the bleach now, but she wants her meat pies.

Rachel tells Thomas to stay in the back, she'll take care of the woman with the great dane.

"First of all, I've never seen a great dane service dog. That dog doesn't look like a service dog. It doesn't act like a service dog. I think you just got that tag and that jacket from somewhere and put it on your pet. Second of all, I want your whole order only once. And it has to be more than ten meat pies, or else it isn't worth my time. We have other customers, you know. You only get to make that order once and what you choose, you are stuck with. No more switching things around, got it? Lastly, and this is the most important, I get at least a twenty percent tip. I'm taking it out of your change. Do you understand?"

The woman with the great dane nods and she may have understood or not, but she follows Rachel's rules.

Thomas listens in, thinks Rachel is abrupt and almost cruel. So he gets to give Rachel a look, gets to raise his eyebrows at her for a change. Rachel does not give in.

"Just because they're crazy, it doesn't mean they get to do whatever they want," she says, and then she goes into the basement to get more cups. Before she goes, she puts ten dollars in the tip jar.

Declan returns from his adventures on Long Island and doesn't tell Thomas what happened. Thomas suspects that one day Declan will, but as of now, Declan must attend to business. The fourth employee, a quiet boring man, quits. Thomas has never worked with this fourth employee, mostly because Declan likes there to be one man working with one woman for safety. The quiet fourth employee quits to tour with his band, and Declan must hire a new fourth employee, and fast. He ends up hiring another woman. Thomas suspects that not many people showed up for their interviews.

The new fourth employee, Annabel, is the strangest of them all. She is a tall thick girl with thick brown hair she keeps bobbed. She likes to wear long dresses with floral patterns and to give weird

compliments.

“I love your baby’s eyes,” she says in a monotone to a young mother holding her infant.

Thomas expects Annabel to say next: “May I eat them?”

She is not a good employee. She has the habit of starting projects and then forgetting them. Or doing them wrong. She stamps all the paper cups with the logo upside down.

It is her first job ever, and she wants to do it well, and this seems to make her worse.

Annabel orders shoes online and has them delivered to the shop, then models them for whoever is working with her. She wears them with white socks scrunched around the ankle.

Rachel likes to yell at the new fourth employee and make her cry.

Thomas never writes a poem about the fourth employee.

Lucy is back at school and seems happy to be there. She’s been running longer and faster. She’s talking about the marathon more than law school. She’s talking about the marathon more than anything. She’s stopped asking to see Thomas’s poetry, and Thomas doesn’t have the will to force it on her. Lucy’s thighs are finally changing, and she stands in front of the full length mirror analyzing them. She used to hide this behavior from Thomas, and would move away from her reflection when he walked into the bedroom, pretending to have just stopped there to examine the hem of her skirt. Now, she stays planted, looks at Thomas once, and then returns her gaze to the mirror.

The new fourth employee can’t be trusted with the cash register. She can’t make change and she can’t remember the prices (for instance, a steak and mushroom meatpie costs fifty cents more than the standard meatpie). The daily total is now off by forty or fifty dollars a night.

“I don’t understand,” Annabel says. “I was trying really hard.”

“I know you were,” says Thomas.

“I know you were,” says Hazel.

“Try fucking harder,” says Rachel.

It’s getting colder. Thomas watches the homeless men, wants

to see how they adapt to the new conditions. Billy is up and about more, spends some days opening the door of the bank vestibule for spare change. Joey shits himself. The third homeless man rarely shows up at the corner anymore, but sometimes stops by the neighborhood to kick garbage cans. Thomas wants to give him the free meat pies now, but is too scared of him.

Hazel is stoned at work most of the time. Her customers can tell, ask her what is wrong, ask the other employees what is wrong. Can they help?

Rachel has a new boyfriend she refers to affectionately as assface.

“He’s really terrible,” she says.

Lucy has begun to leave notes around the apartment for Thomas. PLEASE get more milk. Can you do the LAUNDRY? Can you please SHAVE? At first she leaves them on the refrigerator under an I Love Lucy magnet, but now they appear in the bathroom, on his pillow, on the remote control. Will you just ASK Declan for a raise? He finds this note at the shop, because Lucy has left it with Annabel.

Hazel has not been demoted yet. Declan has big plans for Thomas, but Thomas can not yet assume his post. Declan must talk to Hazel, get her to see that the shop isn’t working out for her. But Declan is away most of the time, dealing with his ex-wife. Hazel has begun to hate Thomas, and Thomas understands. She’s stopped doing her work, stopped doing inventory, making orders, and stopped chatting with customers. She spends too much time in the basement, checking her email on the computer, and then she plays the drums. She’s teaching herself, and she’s not terrible.

The cops get into a fight at the bar which other cops must break up. It’s a strange scene that Thomas watches from the shop. Lots of low baritones telling everyone to “just calm down.” No one is arrested. The fight disintegrates, all the drunk cops getting into their cars and driving away. The beat cop isn’t there or Thomas doesn’t see him. Thomas is standing by the window, staring out, when one of the drunk cops comes in the shop. He enters and carries the smell of the bar. The whole room smells like beer now, and not like grease.

“Did you see that?” the drunk cop says.

“Yeah, is everyone all right?” Thomas asks.

“Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. You know how it is. So what have we got

here?"

"Meat pies."

"Are they good? They look fucking good."

"I think they're good."

"Okay. Okay. I'm going to buy a couple. For me and Mother. How much are these things?"

"Two? That'll be nine bucks."

"Nine fucking bucks? For two fucking pies? Sheesh. This neighborhood."

"We use organic beef."

The drunk cop laughs.

"Of course you do."

Thomas remembers when he was called a fucking queer as the cop fumbles for his wallet.

"What kind of meat pies do you want?"

"You decide. Do what you think is best. Hey, who's that in the back?"

It's Rachel, sitting and flipping through a magazine.

"That's Rachel. She's on her break."

"Hey, sweetheart, what meat pies should I get?"

"I don't give a shit," Rachel says.

"What?" the drunk cop says.

"I don't give a shit."

The drunk cop is about to say something, seems about to lunge.

"I think you're very pretty," the drunk cop says.

Rachel looks up from her magazine and gives him a hard look. She is not very pretty, she is simply young.

"What do you say? Aren't you going to say thank you? When someone gives you a compliment, you should say thank you."

Thomas gives him two shepherd's pies.

"Don't you think she should say thank you for the nice thing I said about her ugly face?"

"I hope you and your mother like the meat pies."

The drunk cop pauses and laughs. Then walks out the door, waving goodbye.

"It wasn't his mother he was talking about," Rachel says. "He meant his wife."

It's cold out now. The sun sets at five. Joey goes to the hospital and returns in a pair of freshly laundered overalls. It's a nice idea, but once more Joey unworks them and they are drooping down around his knees. The pants had a chance of staying up, but the overalls are too complicated for Joey to refasten.

Billy has a warmer blanket, and wanders through the 15th Street subway station with it draped over his shoulders like a cape. Thomas says hello to him now on the way to work, and is happy when Billy smiles back at him. He doesn't show any teeth, he may not have many left, but it's an unmistakable grin. Thomas feels part of a neighborhood again.

One night, after work, he decides to head into the city for a poetry reading. He texts Lucy to see if she can join him, he's sure she won't, but wants to extend the offer. He even invites Doug, but Doug isn't interested. That's why Thomas invited him. He wants to be alone, and it feels good to put on his coat and head out by himself. He writes down the train directions on the back of an envelope to the small downtown cafe. On second thought, he copies out a small map as well, and folds the envelope into a neat square and puts it in his pocket. He won't take out the map, he just likes knowing it's there.

It feels good to run down the stairs of his apartment building, to go out the door, to be going out as the sky is getting darker, grayer. He casually jogs down the stairs into the subway, and it's warm again. He hears a train coming into the station and it might be his, but he hears shouts coming from the other exit, the exit closer to the shop. He walks over through the tunnels, doesn't go through the turnstile, ignores his train. He turns a corner, and sees a body tangled on the bottom stairs of the other exit. It's Joey. The shouts are coming from outside the subway, no one else below has noticed yet. When the next train from Manhattan comes, it will be a different story. Joey will be mobbed, stepped over by the young professionals returning home. Or, one of them will run to the tollbooth, one will find a policeman, one will make the attempt to help Joey, or simply to get him off the stairs. Thomas is about twenty feet away, and Joey is still. His lips aren't moving as they usually do in that continuous sad way. Then Joey's shoulder jerks as if with a jolt of electricity. The body has restarted, and he crumples down the stairs a little more.

How does Joey keep living? Thomas wonders. He knows the body is frail, he's read enough poetry about that. But how does the body, Joey's body, keep heaving on? It's been through so much, and it's useless now, why does Joey's heart keep beating? The body is miraculous and terrible.

When the EMTs come for Joey, Thomas has missed two trains, his poetry reading, and his chance to call for help for Joey. He could have been the one to get the policeman but instead, he just watched. It's his expected behavior, this watching, it's what he's trained himself to do, he's proud of it. And this is a natural occurrence in the life of a writer, the watching has consequences. Thomas does not feel guilty about it yet because he's been expecting it. And besides, Joey threw himself down those stairs. It's what Thomas would do if he were in Joey's situation. He would also stand in the middle of the intersection of the dark street.

Lucy doesn't come home one night, and the next morning stops by the shop during Thomas's shift. She tells him she was studying with a friend.

The oven cuts out and doesn't want to work sometimes. The refrigerator leaks. The speakers have a tinny sound. The shop needs repairs, new appliances, but Declan buys instead a tiny security camera to point at the cash register, and doesn't tell his employees. This is how he discovers that Rachel is stealing.

Declan tells Thomas before firing Rachel. He seems excited when he calls Thomas into the basement.

"I've got the proof, and she can either return the money or I can call the cops. It's that simple. What do you think?"

"Are you sure it's Rachel? I mean, she's been working here for a while."

"I've got the tapes," Declan says. "I saw her take twenties out and put them in her pocket. I mean, I knew there was a reason business was so off. So, can you go up there and tell her I need to speak with her? Right away."

Thomas says he will, and climbs up the stairs. Rachel is serving a customer, and he tells her that he will finish up, Declan needs to speak to her.

Rachel nods, and takes off her hat. She goes downstairs.

She rushes out thirty minutes later, taking her jacket and her

bag, and doesn't say goodbye to Thomas.

All the women are fired. It's a bold move, one that Thomas doesn't see coming. Rachel is of course fired for thievery. Annabel is fired for incompetence. Hazel is fired for being a misery guts. Thomas is given three new employees, and he is the manager and they are all from New Zealand. They are all more attractive than he is. They all know all about meat pies, and can say with Declan's fervor and authority that these are real New Zealand meat pies.

### EPILOGUE

Thomas completes a book of poetry and gets it published by a small Brooklyn press. They like the gimmick of the meat pie poetry more than the poetry itself. He sends the book to his friends.

He sends it to Lucy, even though they have broken up. He sends it to the law firm where she is a first year associate. Lucy looks at it, flips through the pages, then throws it in her waste paper basket.

Annabel thinks it's cool when her name is mentioned and shows it to her mother.

Hazel sobs deeply after reading the poem about her rape, and her girlfriend consoles her. It brings them closer together.

Declan likes the poems because they are a good advertisement for his meat pies. He wants copies to sell at the shop, only without the bits about him, his divorce and his son.

Rachel thinks that poetry doesn't look that difficult, and starts writing her own. When people ask her what she does, she says, "I'm a poet!" and laughs hard.

Thomas has some success.

Joey dies.

# *Love in Vain*

Atar Hadari

Looking around on-line, I came across a recording of the Robert Johnson blues classic “Love in Vain,” made by the Rolling Stones in 1995. When I say “looking around,” I mean that I looked up the title and went through each recording there, usually abandoning them after a moment or two as unsatisfactory. How unsatisfactory? Well, herein lies the question. “Love in Vain” is one of Johnson’s simplest and most plaintive lyrics. There is only one recording of it by him extant – unlike the two or more takes available of other songs – and he nailed it once, cold, simple and stark – without any of the extra lyrical asides (“Oh Willie May”) that support his treatment of other lyrics. Such asides in this case appear only at the end of the song, when the lyric is over. He trusts the words to do their work.

I refer to “his treatment” deliberately. The author of a song does not necessarily give it its most effective treatment. Janis Joplin indisputably gave the most memorable rendering so far of Kris Kristofferson’s “Me and Bobby McGee” – though he and many other men and women recorded it before and after her. The Byrds famously sold many more records of “Mr. Tambourine Man” than the Midwestern born bard who penned it. A word is like a hammer – whoever throws it furthest, with greatest accuracy, will plant it in the language. But the question remains, what makes Robert Johnson’s version superior to nearly all others?

A clue is in an earlier recording made by the Stones, in 1972

and also on-line. Also perhaps in one made in that same era by Rod Stewart. In case of any suggestion that the difference was instrumental rather than one of phrasing, it must be noted that with the exception of Eric Clapton, who can aspire to play the guitar as well as Johnson did, neither the older nor the younger Jagger do, nor does Rod Stewart, and most pertinently to this comparison, the singer was in both these cases supported by the same master instrumentalist, Ronnie Wood (who actually did the playing). So what's the difference? The Jagger version of 1972, like the Rod Stewart version, lacks authority.

What is that?

Larry McMurtry remarks in a review of Garrison Keillor that he himself, like Keillor, comes from "a small town with one traffic light"<sup>1</sup> and that much as he'd like to write about the big wide world, he finds that "my authority as an author diminishes with each step I take away from that one traffic light."

Does that mean "write what you know"? Not exactly. Peter Hall, the first major director of Harold Pinter's plays, remarked that the way Pinter's characters speak is the way Pinter speaks. He also recounts a tale of Pinter taking him for a walk in his old neighbourhood while Hall was preparing to direct "The Homecoming" and walking him into a house which appeared to be occupied by the very living family depicted in the play.

How is this not "write what you know"? Well, it's not, because Pinter wrote equally well about things he knew little about directly. His monologue "One for the Road," for instance, which he performs himself with relish, brings the same pressure of authority to the role of the torturer that he brought to the roles of the family he knew. What is the source of authority? And how can it be extended beyond what is known?

In 1972 Mick Jagger was about the age Robert Johnson was, 27, when he recorded the song. Why does he sound so callow next to Johnson? Jagger in '72 skulks next to the microphone and sings the opening verse:

"I followed her to the station

<sup>1</sup>"Leaving the Lake," *New York Review of Books*, November 3, 2003.

with a *suitcase* in my hand”

laying stress on the word “suitcase,” as if it were a violent object, using the word to strut for credibility, a lad boasting among men. There is a toast tradition in African American oral culture – the culture of the street corner, where the heroic talker wins kudos. This is not the register used in this song. Jagger cannot pull it off at 27, the age of the original performer, because he’s trying the wrong register, because it’s *not his voice*. Much the same can be said of Rod Stewart’s version, which is also strutting and also fails to bring the requisite authority to face down this lyric. (As a comparison, in a recording also available on-line, when Sting attempts Bruce Springsteen’s “The River” in the presence of its author he starts off singing instinctively in a Geordie (Newcastle) accent: “I come from down in the *valley*” – his own valley – and thereby stakes a claim on the song which is his own, and authentic to his own experience. That done he relaxes into the American accent the lyric is written in. But Sting knows. When establishing his authority, his right to own the song, he reaches into himself, into the ground under his feet, not into the role. The authority lies within *him*. His experience.)

In 1995 Jagger approaches the microphone like a withered lothario, not a pretend gang member. He treats the lyric like a lovely piece of lace and works his hands around the air of the microphone as if caressing a feather, or working the threads. He is, in short, a showman, and an expert one – he is, by now, himself. Not only does he not stress “suitcase” as if the prop made him appear tough (he throws that line away in this version) – but when he gets to the final line and its crucial image, he has the nerve and the self-knowledge to change it.

Johnson sings:

When the train it left the station/with two lights on behind  
The blue light was my blues/the red light was my mind.

Jagger sings:

When the train it left the station/with two lights on behind  
The blue light was my baby/the red light was my mind.”

Does Jagger in 1995 not know the words? Is senility starting to stalk the strut of Jumping Jack Flash? I don’t think so. Jagger’s authority is in knowing what he is not. He is not a bluesman. He is not in

jail, talking to cons. He is a noted twentieth century playboy, more famous for his marriages, divorces and dalliances than his dance. So he does not commit the pretension of singing “the blue light was my blues.” He knows himself and he knows we know. He sings, “the blue light was my baby,” and in that, we believe he sings whereof he knows. Is he singing what he knows about? No – he *believes* he knows, the rest does not matter.

The failed attempts at authority are just that – attempts. Self-conscious, insincere – they are about the singer and not the song. Which brings us to Eliot’s remark: “Immature poets imitate, mature poets steal.”<sup>2</sup> By stealing, the mature artist makes it his own.

How does the singer (or writer) make the song about itself? Ironically, by making it about him. But, crucially, the movement is one of pulling the song in to him, not trying to fill himself out to it. The suit must be cut down, so it does not flap. If Jagger cannot sing of blues, he’ll sing of babes, and that will make him comfortable.

What makes for authority in art? Avoidance of artifice? Hardly. Authority is the ability to act in harmony with one’s surroundings and without doubting one’s ability to get it right. It is knowing who one is and what one can do. If you know that – you can do anything. There isn’t anything at all the world of words does not speak – if you listen and are confident of who listens along with you. And if you sing a song without that confidence your love, alas, will be in vain.

<sup>2</sup>“Philip Massinger,” *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*.

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