

Essays & Fictions

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Top of the World

Anthony Di Renzo

September Eleventh wiped out my Rolodex. Many former classmates, colleagues, and clients perished in the attacks. My sister, a vice president at J.P. Morgan, was spared because she had cancelled a presentation to take her infant son to the doctor. But Windows on the World, the elegant penthouse restaurant in the North Tower of the World Trade Center, was destroyed. During the Reagan era, my parents used Windows on the World

as a deprogramming room. Whenever I read too much Dorothy Day, criticized Milton Friedman, or thought of chucking advertising to pursue a PhD or to write the next *Grapes of Wrath*, they would wine and dine me at Windows on the World. They wanted me to know what I would lose if I stepped off the velvet treadmill.

Designed by Joe Baum, who had created such landmarks as the Four Seasons, La Fonda del Sol, and the aptly named Forum of the Twelve Caesars, the restaurant spanned an entire acre, 50,000 square feet of velvet, tile, and glass, and specialized in New American cuisine. Three words, three lies. Only an idiot, I groused at our first luncheon, would trade a simple bowl of *pasta e fagioli* for this pretentious wild mushroom bisque. As for the Caesar salad, the Romaine had been printed at the Federal Mint but the croutons were soaked in oil. If a Yuppie had devoured a *zeppola* at the San Gennaro festival and then wiped his mouth with a paisley tie, I could not have been more appalled. Supposedly, James Beard and Jacques Pépin had developed the menu, but

it tasted like airport food, designed for a frequent-flyer class whose world fits into a briefcase.

The food was irrelevant, Papa explained. People came here to eat the money.

With annual revenues of \$37 million, Windows on the World was America's highest-grossing restaurant, so its cachet surpassed the Sky Club's or the Rainbow Room's. For this reason, claustrophobic publicists endured a sixty-minute elevator ride, unkempt bohemians submitted to a corporate dress code, and snooty wine critics paid \$3,000 for a dubious bottle of 1928 Chateau Lafite-Rothschild. A six-month wait for a reservation was routine, but Papa's Seventh Avenue clout always secured a table.

I preferred Angelo's on Mulberry Street but still admired the panoramic view: New Jersey, the Hudson, Midtown, Uptown, the Bronx, the East River, Brooklyn, and Queens. From 107 stories up, the horizon actually curved. On bright days, the skyline shimmered and east Long Island was a polished emerald. On gray days, snow

fell up and clouds tutued the Empire State Building. Below Olympus, the Wall Street traffic was a Matchbox set, and traffic choppers hovered like dragonflies over Roosevelt Drive.

All this could be mine, Papa preached, if I wised up and stopped knocking America. Didn't I know this was the greatest country in the world? Where else could a shepherd boy from Abruzzo, who had never owned a dress shirt until his Confirmation, create haute couture for politicians and starlets? The wait staff nodded and beamed. Coming from Angola, Bangladesh, Colombia, Egypt, Guyana, Jamaica, and Thailand, they believed in the American Gospel. Their faith, hope, and charity sustained them and made tolerable the boorishness of their so-called betters.

Often, I wanted to hurl the beautiful people off the South Tower observation deck. Junior brokers from Cantor Fitzgerald jockey to break in American Express cards. A shapely Republican fundraiser smokes a

Montecristo and explains how Ayn Rand can change her Mexican busboy's life. Norman Mailer threatens the wine steward with an ice bucket. Mick Jagger orders a waiter to snatch a camera away from Andy Warhol, who insists on snapping pictures. A drunken investor baits the Ugandan ambassador: "What did the cannibal say when he threw up the missionary? You can't keep a good man down!"

When I glower, Papa chides me. If the staff were being such good sports, why couldn't I? Yes, these people were swine, but swine dig up truffles. You don't need good people to have a good society, thank God; only good things. Ignore the jerks. Instead, admire America's beauty and power.

Che meraviglia! What a wonder!

Ten years later, Italian newlyweds uttered these very words when they entered Windows on the World. Arriving at 9:00 PM on Monday, September 10, 2001, they were seated at table 64, the last in the dining

room. Thrilled by the view, the starry-eyed bride asked about the bridges and buildings. The groom, who ran a cheese factory in Parma, showed his business card to the steward Carlos Medina.

At 11:30, the couple asked for the check. The captain presented the bill, but when Carlos retired to the kitchen to process the credit card, the company denied payment—a common problem with foreign cards. Very politely, in Italian, Carlos informed the groom, who asked if the 107th floor had an ATM. The only machine was down in the lobby, but Carlos escorted the guest in the elevator. When the pair returned, it was past midnight. After paying the tab, the newlyweds had little left for a tip, so the groom gave Carlos \$20 plus 100,000 lira. Suddenly, the couple realized they had no money to return to their hotel. Carlos chivalrously returned the twenty for cab fare and accepted another 50,000 lira.

The grateful newlyweds would be the restaurant's last surviving guests.

On the morning of September 11, Windows on the World was serving breakfast to its regular patrons as well as members of the Waters Financial Technology Congress. Risk Waters Group Ltd., a London firm providing risk management, market data and computational finance, had arranged a splendid buffet for its 16 representatives and 71 conference participants. They had barely tasted it when at 8:46 AM an explosion ten floors below rocked the restaurant. American Flight 11 had crashed into the North Tower. Waiters and coordinators probably tried to maintain order, but panic and confusion surely spread. What was happening? Was it a bombing? Only seventeen minutes later came the answer.

United Airlines Flight 165 hit the South Tower and within less than an hour the building imploded. At this point, the trapped guests and staff must have known they were doomed. With the stairway blocked and the smoke and flames rising, some couldn't wait. The jumper in the news photo *The Falling Man* is probably sound engineer Jonathan Briley. But most said farewell to their

loved ones. They emailed from laptops, texted from PalmPilots, or used the restaurant fax. The transmitter on the roof sustained the mobile phone network until the last minute, despite the deluge of calls from downtown. The sardonic joked it was the first time Verizon Wireless had never dropped a call.

At 10:28 AM, the North Tower collapsed. The 360-foot antenna and a dozen broadcast offices crashed through the ceiling and crushed the restaurant's 73 employees and a Muslim security guard. Six more workers building a new wine cellar in the basement were buried alive under the rubble. Nothing remains of Windows on the World except a menu, a uniform, some china, a champagne glass, and a grill scraper, preserved at the Smithsonian like artifacts from Pompeii.

The WTC attacks and the resulting recession devastated New York's low-wage and largely immigrant hospitality industry. Citywide, over 13,000 restaurant workers were displaced, including 250 from Windows on the

World. The families of the fallen went begging. Using actuary tables, Kenneth Feinberg, Special Master of the September 11 Victim Compensation Fund, patiently explained why the life of a Dominican dish washer was worth only a tenth as much as a Wharton Business School graduate's. Hotel and Restaurant Employees Local 100 raised relief money but would not assist the non-union workers who comprise 90% of New York's restaurant workforce. Accordingly, two former Windows on the World employees, Fekkak Mamdouh and Shulaika La Cruz, established an advocacy group, Restaurant Opportunities Center of New York (ROC-NY).

The immigrants thought this measure was temporary. Like a cargo cult, they expected Windows on the World to rise from the ashes. Owner David Emil had vowed to rebuild the restaurant and to rehire its staff; but despite press conferences and come-hither offers from Marriott, it never happened. In fact, when he opened Noche, a Times Square restaurant and nightclub described by one reviewer as "Ricky Ricardo on steroids," an outraged

Emil showed ex-employees the door. These ingrates actually wanted a union! Bowing to curbside protests and bad press, Emil hired thirty-five of his old crew. The rest started Colors, a co-operative restaurant honoring the memory of their dead comrades.

Located on Lafayette Street near Astor Place, between Greenwich Village and the East Village, Colors reflects the diversity of its owners. At the January 6, 2006 opening, *Wall Street Journal* subscribers feasted on ceviche, avocado soup, mango pepper citronette, and panko-crusted tofu. Global capitalism, they toasted, had found a silver lining in the cloud of Ground Zero. But within a year, the publicity and goodwill faded, and the co-op's idealism collided with a crowded and competitive market, where 70% of New York's 26,000 restaurants closed or changed hands within their first five years of business.

"The place just stopped making money," admits Jean Emy Pierre, once line cook at Windows on the World, now executive chef at Colors. "We're dead, doing ten,

twenty, thirty covers a night," he sighs, referring to the number of customers. "That was the point where I was like, 'What's going on? Why aren't people coming? What did we do wrong?'"

Windows' former blue-chip clients do not patronize Colors for auld lang syne. Instead, pining for the glory days, when the price of gold and oil soared even on Nine Eleven, they mourn and name-drop on the WOTW memorial website. Meanwhile, the market has suffered the worst meltdown since the Great Depression. After publishing a chortling autobiography, in which he admits that his Delphic pronouncements during the boom years were gobbledygook, ex-Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan practically wept before Congress: "Those of us who have looked to the self-interest of lending institutions to protect shareholders' equity are in a state of shocked disbelief."

As for me, I teach business writing in an upstate Rust Belt, can't afford to take my wife to the local Italian

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restaurant, rarely visit Manhattan, and avoid Wall Street. Downtown makes me ill. Grief, my father suggests over dinner. I'm still mourning the colleagues I lost six years ago. Airborne toxins, an EPA buddy explains, sharing a sub. Ground Zero remains peppered with carcinogens, even if the government claims otherwise. They both may be right, of course; but I have my own explanation.





B65

David Pollock

Early one Wednesday morning, six and a half years after graduating from the university, Jerome woke up hung over from a dream in which his old friend Wilson was rolling on the floor, throwing a temper tantrum among a scattering of empty wine and beer bottles. Jerome was more hung over and depressed than on other days. He decided that he didn't feel well enough to work. He picked up the bedside telephone. The store manager,

whose name was Fat Steven, answered in a voice that had the texture of wet gravel. Fat Steven probably wasn't feeling well either. Pillow's Hardware, he said, we don't open for another hour. Would you mind calling back?

No, this is Jerome. Listen. I'm feeling sick today. I'm feeling really sick.

Fat Steven was quiet. When's the last time you didn't come in?

This made Jerome nervous. Three months ago was the last. I don't know, he said. It was last year.

You plan on coming in tomorrow?

Sure. Yes. I will most certainly be in tomorrow. I can work extra hours.

I think it's important that you come in tomorrow, said Fat Steven.

I don't feel good, he thought. Then he said it out loud as if to validate it. Camp B65 was on the outskirts of his mind. It had been growing larger recently, a brown vague assortment of squat brown buildings with milky windows. And a barbed wire fence with a hole large

enough that one could escort an elephant through it.

When Jerome was a second-year student at the university, the government of the ideological awakening erected Camp B65 to serve as a holding tank for the emotionally debilitated. The growing population of young people who were giving up too quickly was perceived by the authorities as a sign of decay that could in no way convey a sense of confidence. The young people were *cared for*. The broken economy and thinning job market were reasons, but there was also a more ominous, metaphysical reason, a historical influence of turning one's back to the absurd notion of a future, which can be nicely illustrated by a short anecdote from old royal Bellehoppe. Jerome had hoped to be a Bellehoppean scholar.

The first son of King Samuel of Bellehoppe, Prince Lee, was alone one afternoon in the deep forest surrounding the kingdom, learning to track mammals, when he was startled by a thin whistling that sounded like wind blowing through a metal pipe. Prince Lee lifted his

sword and turned slowly, fearing an ambush by thieves, and found instead an angel with a child's head. He recognized the face that had once belonged to him ten years before, when he was a child and only pretended to be a hunter on the floor of the royal nursery. That was his face, preserved. The softness of the angel's eyes caused him sadness. The angel whistled again. Prince Lee remembered a time he had enthusiastically chased an imaginary elk into one of the seldom used drawing rooms and ran into the mantle of the fireplace, cracking open his head. He had fallen unconscious and awoke snug in his mother's arms, his face buried in her heavy bosom. This was the first time Prince Lee had suffered euphoria. The angel with his own face of time past whistled once more then turned into an elk. The elk stood before him and it did not attempt to run. Prince Lee, overcome by sadness, was unable to slaughter it. He lay down in some leaves and quietly sobbed until a search party found him that evening. He never took his father's place at the throne, and all record of Prince

Lee's life after this strange encounter in the forest is either lost or had never been recorded.

While he was approaching his twentieth birthday, Jerome began to witness a new world in which hopelessness was outlawed. Whistle-blowers (office staffers and business professors) reported several students as emotionally debilitated after they missed consecutive days of class or work without reason. In self-interest, Jerome became a member of the young opposition. He once hatched a plan, along with his companions, Lila and Wilson, to free the inmates from Camp B65. Except when they arrived at the camp with several feet of rope, a few kitchen knives, a box of matches, and lighter fluid, they were struck by a curious stage fright. There were gigantic holes in the surrounding barbed wire fence. And the guards in the watchtower, who were shadows and smoke that rose through the search lights, waved and whistled at them in a fashion that may have been celebratory or may have been condescending. The inmates were allowed to

escape. They could run away whenever they wanted. It never happened.

He went into the kitchen and took some ice cream from the fridge. He sat at his kitchen table and made space for himself by pushing away an old newspaper on which he had been copying down phone numbers he had collected from a handful of sluts in the bars. On the wall behind his head were illustrated pictures of King Samuel of Bellehoppe he had torn from a middle school text book. The pictures featured the king in a bottom-curved bright-red cloak; his beard was golden and pointed. In one picture the king held the staff of will-exertion. In another, he was shadowed by a green angel that resembled a dragonfly with the king's own bearded head; this was the angel of good fortune, who granted the king strength to overcome obstacles of a political nature. Jerome had taped the illustrations there to remind himself what his interest was supposed to be, which was growing fainter everyday he unpacked boxes in the dusty room with the men who had tattoos

on their inner arms.

For his senior dissertation, he wrote a survey of justice and disobedience in old Bellehoppe. He was praised for the conciseness of his thesis, which the academic panel had deemed true enough, but not particularly interesting. After a number of interviews at colleges in and around Tokenville, he finally got the hard talk from an old mentor, who had taken to drink and to the study of politically motivated arson.

The academic job market is suffering like all job markets, he said. You don't have the ideas and you don't have the will-power. You're not the ideal candidate. They want someone with more optimism. Optimism about life, progress, and the like. Someone burning with ideas.

But I want it, said Jerome.

So do two-hundred other young men who wrote a survey of justice in old Bellehoppe. I suggest you don't think too much about it and don't take it so hard; find another line of work and keep yourself out of a damned

camp. If I may make one final recommendation, the drinking helps. I would say, the drinking keeps me chipper.

On the wall directly facing the pictures of the Bellehoppean king was a black-and-white poster from the film *The Big Chill*: Kevin Kline, with his smiling, wide-open face, wearing shorts and running shoes. He had hung the picture of the character because he wanted to be ironic. His attitude toward Kline's character had changed over the years. Now the poster embarrassed him: whenever he was afraid that the warehouse guys might show up after the bars, he would pull out the tacks and roll the poster up.

I'm a few steps away from Camp B65, he thought. Oh my god, I'm turning into Wilson. And he thought of how he, Wilson, and Lila used to watch *The Big Chill* together and laugh. They found it so ridiculous, this concept of a person spending his young adulthood as an intoxicated social activist then waking up one day with money and a career and feeling as if he's missed a deeper meaning.

What I wouldn't do for a career, he thought. One night, however, Wilson didn't find the movie funny anymore. This was the first time he rested his head in Lila's bosom; this was also the first time Jerome felt jealous of Wilson for what he considered no reason, other than that he was feeling horny. But Lila had always been too big for him. She was a big woman.

Around ten a.m., Jerome's phone rang. He figured it was someone from Pillow's calling to tell him that an inconveniently large shipment had arrived, and that if he couldn't prove that he was sick, then he might just become suspect and -- you never know -- he might just end up in a camp. Then he would have no choice but to go in and pretend to be *under the weather*, fake coughs, and find inopportune times to sit down on a crate.

Answering the phone, he attempted to sound as if he'd been asleep. There was a woman's voice. It was a familiar voice and it took him a moment to place. It was Lila's voice. They hadn't spoken in months. He stood at the window and watched a skinny brown squirrel

perched atop an aluminum garbage can. Some leaves floated down from above.

The last time they had seen each other, they had gotten into a fight. Lila and Wilson had come to Tokenville to visit him. The two friends still lived in their old college town, Spokes. The three of them had gotten drunk together, and Wilson delivered a harrowing monologue about the uselessness of going on in a world where happiness was impossible. Jerome was annoyed and told him that he had entitlement issues. Lila said that Jerome was just as miserable, except that he was an alcoholic, so he didn't feel as much pain. Then she comforted Wilson by bringing his head to her massive bosom.

Why don't you guys go upstairs and screw and get it over with, Jerome had said.

Our relationship is much deeper than that, said Lila; you're jealous.

Jealous, said Jerome. Okay. Sure. I'm jealous of this. You're both sick. You should go to B65 and get a bunk

together. The two of you. And at night, Lila, you can escape through the fence while your boyfriend cries in his sleep.

Wilson had passed out on Lila's chest and didn't hear a word.

Lila, he said. Jesus. It's been, like, forty years.

No, it hasn't. Don't you have a full time job? I thought I was going to leave a message. I'm glad, though.

He didn't like that she admitted to him that she was glad that he was home. I took the day off. I wasn't feeling well. Physically not feeling well. Emotionally, I'm fine.

Listen, she said. When's the last time you talked to Wilson?

I haven't really talked to him much since he started getting serious with the girl he found on the street. I can't remember her name. Is it Donna?

It still felt strange talking about Wilson's girlfriend. Wilson met Donna a little over a year ago when he was in downtown Spokes to pick up a new inhaler. He had

been feeling more depressed than normal. He tortured himself with the question of why he spent his days in a call center, selling credit cards over the telephone, instead of looking at peasant rugs through a magnifying glass. Sometimes, when he was depressed enough, he considered handing himself over to B65. To show up at the camp one day with a blanket on his shoulders and to declare that he would like it better there. Then he saw Lila from behind, looking at a window display for neon stockings, which had become an important accessory in slut fashion. Wilson found this strange, since he knew Lila's opinion of slut fashion: it was an affront to good taste. She favored a modest, earthy look.

So Wilson, who depended on Lila to comfort him, stood behind her and asked in a playful manner: Are you thinking about changing your style? To which Lila had turned around and revealed herself to not be Lila. But she had looked so much like her from the back: the boxy figure; the big, matriarchal legs; the yellow-brown hair running down in waves past her shoulder blades;

the fall-brown scarf thrown loosely over her shoulders. Once she turned, Wilson was horrified by her scent (a melon-esque perfume) and covered his mouth with his hand. He apologized for bothering her. But she told him to hold on. It would turn out that Donna was the kind of woman who liked to be approached; and it was only accidental that Wilson was able to approach a strange woman. It wasn't until the end of the afternoon, as they were finishing their coffees, and she had listened to him nervously ramble on about the astounding contemporary aesthetics of some Bellehoppean-era peasant rugs, that Wilson realized she was wearing a neon blue skirt that Lila would never consider wearing because it was a staple of slut fashion, and that he had conveniently managed to overlook.

I've never met anyone like you, she told him. Most men just try to sleep with me.

I've never actually tried to sleep with anyone, said Wilson, but that doesn't mean I won't try. I promise.

She thought this was charming. Let's be an item

together, she said. You and me.

Jerome was supposed to have met her once. There was supposed to have been lunch and a walk in the park one afternoon in the early, wet, chilled spring, but Jerome had been hung over and called to cancel after Wilson and Donna had already waited for half an hour. This had created a rift in their friendship. He had been hung over, true, but the more honest reason he missed the lunch was that he couldn't stand to see Wilson succeed. He felt that their roles had been reversed. So humiliated was he by Wilson's relationship with a woman who wasn't Lila or his mother that he never considered the likelihood that the relationship could just as easily crash and burn. She was a slut, after all, and Wilson was the most easily defeated person he had ever met who hadn't ended up in a camp yet.

He's not doing well, said Lila

In his body or in his head, said Jerome.

It's so bad. I think he might really be camp-bound this time, said Lila. And that new girlfriend, she has a

lot to do with it.

Jerome smiled. It made sense that Lila would be jealous of Wilson's first girlfriend.

She told Jerome that she had recently met Donna for the first time.

How is she, Jerome asked.

I don't like her, said Lila, but it's complicated.

The three of them, Wilson, Donna, and Lila, had dinner at a restaurant in Spokes called German Palace, where one could order twenty-dollar sausages; the professors ate here; and students often dined at German Palace when their families were in town. The atmosphere was dark and warm and bathed in the soft glow of candlelight. Lila had been the first to arrive, and when Wilson entered, holding Donna's hand, she observed firstly that Donna was almost a foot taller than Wilson; secondly, that she was dressed as a slut in neon colors with a scarf thrown loosely over shoulders, which was an oddly tasteful accessory; thirdly, that there was an uncomfortable distance between them, as if Wilson

had only just picked her up.

I wanted to take him aside and tell him he was making a mistake, said Lila. They didn't belong together. Nothing could have been more obvious. She is going to sleep with at least three to four other men before they've been together half a year. But you know how he is. You have to be careful with Wilson. She was impressive though. She was big. As big as me.

Donna made an impression on Lila. It would have taken her the whole dinner, perhaps even the remainder of the night to realize why, except that Wilson was being strange. He was sheepish and quiet, high-strung, as if he were afraid of being found out. Found out how? Lila didn't know. The conversation was labored, it churned -- small talk mostly: where did they go to school, what did they study, how unhappy were they now that they had been out of school for half a decade. Camps were alluded to, but the conversation never turned political.

Lila, who was normally talkative and opinionated,

stood with one foot out of the discussion because she was to trying to figure out the root of Wilson's discomfort. Then at a lull in the conversation, she caught Donna with turned head, perhaps trying to catch her reflection in the mirror behind the bar and absent-mindedly pulling on her bottom lip. This is when it occurred to Lila that, my god, you know, we actually looked a lot alike. Resemblance, she told Jerome, wasn't even strong enough a word. There were some differences. Donna wore a perfume, for instance, that Lila would never wear; and, her scarf aside, her clothes were atrocious. Yet the similarities were undeniable. And that pulling on her lip, she said to Jerome, don't I do that? I know I do it, she said, because I first picked it up as a girl watching *Ladies in Crowns*. That television show. What's her name -- I can't remember her name -- the brunette used to do that. Pull on her lip and look distracted. I thought it was very womanly.

This was in early summer, so after dinner, Lila suggested the three of them take a stroll downtown

and admire the pink and peach hues of the waning day before a night of forecasted thunderstorms. Wilson was absolutely miniscule walking between the two women. Like we were guards escorting him away, said Lila; people on the street gave us funny looks. A pair of wafer-thin college girls sneered and whispered to one another in the spiteful way young women will when they're afraid they are being upstaged by women with better features.

At one point, Donna stopped in front of a window display of neon shoes, and Lila stopped too. She stood beside Donna and feigned interest. The store's backlighting was off, and as a result, Lila could see their reflections. Side by side, they could have very easily been sisters. You know what I was just thinking, she said to Donna: I was just thinking that you and I look alike. Don't we, Wilson? It's so weird to be with a person whom you resemble. Don't you feel like people keep looking at us? I'm not angry; I think the attention is nice.

Wilson all of the sudden suggested ice cream and grabbed hold of Donna's hand as if to rescue her from an embarrassing situation. Was that wrong, Lila asked. Apparently so, she told Jerome, because for the rest of the evening, Donna answered everything I said with sarcasm, like she was a pissed-off teenager.

They parted in front of the ideological monument to will-exertion (a marble statue of a man in a suit with his fist in the air) in a fizzled-out ceremony of weak handshakes. As Lila walked towards her apartment, she turned back once and saw that Wilson too was turning back and looked so distant and small, she suffered the impression that he was being swallowed up; not necessarily by Donna, she added, but by something inside of him. Maybe he wanted to apologize to me, she said, but not for his girlfriend's behavior. For something else, something deeper.

Things are so bad now, she said. If you're not working today, you should come to Spokes. It might actually help.

I can't help. Besides, I can't risk being seen. I called out three months ago.

By the time Jerome hung up the phone, he had given in to Lila. It excited him that she called him because Wilson was suffering a mysterious crisis. Lila had never called on him for anything. He agreed to drive east to their old college town of Spokes, where Lila and Wilson still lived and where she and Jerome would meet around one at The Mannequin. He walked in circles around his kitchen and paused in the bathroom to examine his face in the mirror. He shaved. Once he was safely out of town, he picked up a six-pack of Chutney beer to sip while on the road.

It took Jerome two hours to drive from Tokenville to Spokes, and this was a fine fall day. The sun was white and high and gleamed through the barren trees, which created a remarkable openness on the horizon. He rolled down his window and tossed out his last empty and pulled over into a rest stop. It was about eleven-thirty in the morning, and he had been on the road for a

little over an hour. Jerome needed to urinate and pick up a few more bottles, which he took back out to his car. He spit up a little in the dirt and sat on the trunk. He squinted in the sun and surveyed the brown and yellow nothing land and the road that cut through the land. Some ways down the road, half-obscured by an incline, he could see the tops of the squat brick buildings of Camp B65. He had already passed the campus maybe ten minutes before and hadn't noticed. He raised his bottle to the buildings, to the distant watchtower, the barbed wire with holes, the sleeping bodies inside, unsure if he were being ironic. Maybe, he thought, I really like that camp, I like that there's a camp to go where I am not.

And he reflected, for only a moment, on an evening some months after the night he, Lila, and Wilson traveled to B65, believing they could rescue the emotionally disenfranchised. It had been he and Wilson alone on this evening. Lila was with some girlfriends. The men got very drunk. They had each already vomited when

Jerome insisted on driving Wilson's old beater to the camp. Wilson floated in and out of consciousness on the passenger side. Jerome laughed now, reflecting on what Wilson must have felt, coming deeper into consciousness (lit up - dark - lit up - dark: the rhythm of the searchlight), to find Jerome dragging him through a hole in the fence, laughing all the way.

Hey-Ho, Jerome had yelled to the guards in the tower. And though the guards didn't yell back, one of them rolled a friendly tat on the floor of the watch stand with the butt of his gun. It's a joke, Jerome had said to his friend; that's all, Wilson, a lousy thing to do for a laugh. Lila's not going to think it's funny, not like we do. So don't tell her.

And Wilson had fallen to his knees and refused to go backwards or forwards. Please don't make me do it, he said.

It's a joke, Jerome repeated; don't you know a joke?

When Jerome entered Spokes for the first time in over a year, he felt a warmth that he imagined as nostalgia,

though it wasn't set off by any memory in particular, and reached its pinnacle during his slow cruise through the quaint downtown as the white light of fall, with no trees to catch it, washed the storefront windows with glare. I feel good, he thought, like a human who has just come to life. His body tingled.

He met Lila at the little diner called The Mannequin where there was a white, headless mannequin in the window, standing in the same pose it had held for at least a decade, legs splayed, the undefined white palms of its hands raised and open to passers-by in the street. He spotted Lila right away. She was in a booth, reading a menu. He almost expected to see the Lila of his college days, and she almost was; that is, she wore a green peasant blouse she may even have owned back then, and her hair was in two buns on either side of her head, and there was a deadpan scowl on her face. But there was more of her. Her face seemed to have spread and succumbed to gravity. When their eyes met, she grinned -- he knew she was *taking him in* and receiving

her own nostalgic stimulation -- but as soon as he was seated, her face aged more with more gravity and more worry.

So that's how you keep it up, she said.

I don't get it.

You smell like booze.

I go to work nearly everyday. Drinking keeps me chipper.

I was just observing.

And how about you, said Jerome, expecting her to agree that, yes, the drinking helps.

I like my job, she said. It's a lot of work, but caring for the elderly is very rewarding.

Jerome didn't ask when she got her new job. He felt stung that she had never told him. She used to work retail. So where's Wilson, he asked.

It wouldn't even be safe at this point to let Wilson leave the house, she said. He's at my place. Sleeping.

Over plates of fried eggs and hash browns and dirty white cups of coffee, she told him the rest of Wilson's

story up to now.

A few weeks ago, Donna broke up with him. Lila wasn't surprised. A woman like that, she said, who would sleep with a whole military parade faster than you could cook a roast, they're careless with people's feelings. They didn't make sense together anyway, she said. Donna dragged him around town, and he worshipped her, did whatever she said. But I don't think they had one warm minute together. I mean, the poor guy never had a girlfriend before, so he didn't know.

Donna cheated on him. She was out with some girlfriends one night, and a will-exerter with a job in finance bought her a fruity drink then another and another. Jerome was free to imagine what happened after the fifth drink. To Donna's credit, she didn't keep the infidelity a secret; on the contrary, she showed up at Wilson's place the next morning. When Wilson, who saw that she hadn't done herself up yet, asked if she would like to use his shower, she announced that she wouldn't be using his shower anymore. They were

through. Wilson said that he didn't mind -- he could deal with an infidelity now and again -- but he was missing the point. Donna didn't want to cheat on him. She didn't want Wilson in the picture at all. It's been kind of fun, she told him, running around town with you, pretending to have an interest in art and all of that, but last night taught me that I haven't been myself lately; I forgot what it was like, being myself, and now that I've remembered, I can't go back. I'm kind of sorry, but I'm kind of not.

Lila rubbed her face with her hands then used a paper napkin to wipe away the smear of grease she left on her cheek. You know, Jerome, she said, I'm working forty hours a week now. I took today off because I just had to. I couldn't deal with the phone calls. He called me every night and whined and whined and whined. He misses her so much, blah, blah, blah. I even told him to call you, just to give me a break. I don't know why I deal with it sometimes. I've always just felt so bad for him.

And why didn't he call me, Jerome wanted to know.

He said you're too icy. You'd probably tell him to get

drunk and do it with someone else or something.

That's true, said Jerome.

Believe me, said Lila. I'm starting to get a little frosty myself.

This struck Jerome as familiar. That's from a movie, he said.

What?

What you just said. That's from a movie.

Lila ignored his observation and continued: He didn't want advice anyway, she said; I was probably tougher on him than you would have been. But I found out what he really wanted.

One afternoon in the middle of the week, Lila had been sitting back, eating a fruit yogurt with her shoes off, after an eight hour shift at the elder center, when the doorbell rang. She expected a couple of zealots, dressed in polka dot bowties and carrying pamphlets decorated in smiley faces. She didn't have the energy to tell them to go. The doorbell rang again. Now she was irritated. She was ready to release her anger on God's

people, even if they had with them one of those little girls in locks and an angel dress, who would sing a hymn and dance like a clumsy ballerina, which was probable. Lila didn't care. She would have yelled at a child: that's the kind of mood she was in. But there were not zealots at the door, she said. Who was at the door? Go on and guess.

That would be Wilson, said Jerome.

And he was dressed up, too, said Lila. He wasn't wearing a suit or anything like that, but, for Wilson, he might as well have been going to a wedding: a very soft-looking wrinkle-free sweater -- green, my favorite color -- and a striped collared shirt underneath. And he was holding a bouquet of these strange purple flowers that had these, like, white insect antennas shooting up from the centers of the bulbs. Do you want to have dinner with me, he says.

Jerome had it figured out. He was finished eating and put his fork on his plate. I have a theory, he said; it's like Stephen, the second King of Bellehoppe. His wife died

from consumption -- yes, consumption, I think.

What is consumption anyway?

Lungs, said Jerome. Anyway, instead of going into mourning, what's the first thing he does? He names his daughter, who closely resembles his wife, the queen. He dresses her up in her deceased mother's clothing; they sleep in the same bed; he begins calling her Precious Partner. King Stephen has a quote: Today I have cheated my wife's death; I am the next to wisest man in the world.

And who's the wisest, asked Lila.

I don't know that. No one does. He twisted the wrapping from his straw then tore it in half. Maybe it's just me who doesn't know.

Lila had asked Wilson if he was out of his mind. She explained as calmly as she could that they had known each for almost ten years and not once in that time had Wilson ever expressed romantic interest. I've been more like a mother, she said, or a counselor. Probably more like a counselor.

But why can't it be, said Wilson. That's what he kept saying over and over again. Why can't it be? I tried to comfort him, she said. I tried to show him affection. Like a friend. But it's difficult because, at the same time, I didn't want to lead him on. He had never really been in a relationship before, so he couldn't know how bad it would feel to get dumped. I mean, I've never really been in a relationship either, so I didn't know what to tell him. Then he got angry, Jerome. He got really angry. At me? Maybe. At his life, his situation, because he never became a curator and sells credit cards over the phone instead? I don't know. But this is what he said: it never should have happened, she never should have left me, and the fact that Donna and I look so much alike, that was proof to him that it wasn't actually her he wanted; it was me. He belonged with me. The happiness he was searching for was right here, in his old friend, Lila, who had been taking care of him for years.

But that doesn't even make sense, said Jerome. He's forgetting a significant detail.

I know, said Lila. You don't have to tell me. He never even asked if I was interested in him. And by the way, I'm not. Wilson's always been kind of like a pet to me.

A dog, he said. No, a puppy.

Stop that. It makes me feel good to care for him. I don't know. Now I'm afraid to let anyone see him. I'm really scared, Jerome. We can't let him end up in a camp.

There was something Jerome wanted to say here. No sooner had he opened his mouth than he changed his mind and replaced the unspoken with this: Are you seeing anyone?

Me, she said. No. I mean, I think about it sometimes, but I'm busy. Besides, sex is one of those things.

It's not a thing at all, said Jerome.

I don't think too much about it, said Lila. Maybe I do.

But not with Wilson.

I used to think about that, and I always imagined he would cry right in the middle of it.

Jerome, who was drinking from his glass of water, covered his mouth, laughing. Water dripped from his hand. I'm sorry, he said. But that sounds about right.

It doesn't turn me on, she said; it makes me sad. And that scares me too, because sadness can be addictive. It's really not funny. The same satisfaction I get from working with the elderly -- I swear, sometimes I feel the same exact way with Wilson.

The apartment where Lila had *settled down*, that is, where she had lived for the last few years, was so similar to the kind she would have rented in college that upon entering, Jerome felt he had been there many times before, that this space was an accumulation of the apartments where she had lived during their four years of student life. The arched way into the kitchen; the green plastic wreath hanging high on the wall; the burning candles that smelled a cross between the sea and baby lotion; she'd even kept some of the same posters on the walls: the dancing woman with martini

glasses for breasts, The Stormy Rippers album cover poster that features the band standing on a beach in archaic goblin masks.

So where is he, said Jerome and plopped onto her sofa. It had been several hours since he'd finished his beer and his stomach was beginning to churn. He was on edge.

Upstairs in my bedroom, said Lila.

Your bedroom?

No, she said. We don't sleep together. Never. But he goes up there and sleeps in my bed when I'm at work. He thinks I'm at work.

Okay, said Jerome; whatever. What is Wilson doing for work now, by the way? Is he still at that lousy call center?

Nothing, said Lila. He hasn't been to work for some time.

That's dangerous, said Jerome and rubbed his hands together. So what should I do? Go up there and tell him I'm worried? That I think he'll end up in a camp and that he needs to get his head out of his ass?

He has a problem, said Lila, and you're going to tell him how bad it is. He's in danger of going to a camp. Tell him that. Honestly, I don't know. Maybe it'll give him some perspective?

Do you think he masturbates up there?

What?

In your bed, said Jerome.

Please. I don't want to consider that. Do you have to be tasteless?

It's a real question, he said.

While Lila was in the kitchen pouring a glass of water, Jerome headed up the stairs. Lila's bedroom door was closed. He paused for a moment and realized that he was scared. Why am I scared, he asked himself. Because I'm afraid that could just as easily be me in there, he answered. But that's a stupid fear. It's not me. I go to work nearly every day. Besides, I'm not that weak.

And with this in mind, he knocked, waited. He knocked again then went inside. Wilson was curled in Lila's green comforter. A few of her skirts were strewn

in a corner. A white blouse was folded over a chair back. A pair of Wilson's pants, the belt still through the loops, was on the floor beside the bed. Only the back of his head showed. His hair was brown and clumpy.

Wilson, said Jerome. You know who this is, don't you?

Wilson wouldn't lift his head. He grunted and mumbled.

Come on now, said Jerome. That's no way to be. I haven't seen you in a while. Why don't you get up? We'll have some drinks.

Wilson did lift his head, but he didn't turn to face Jerome, who could feel his weight in the room; his sadness, he imagined, possessed its own gravity. What are you doing here, said Wilson.

I came because I'm worried about you. He surprised himself by how easily he said this, and with such sincerity, too. Perhaps he really meant it.

Where's Lila?

Downstairs. Why don't you get out of bed? Maybe we

can have some drinks. We'll drink and watch a movie like we used to. Wait a second, he said; I'll be right back.

He softly closed the bedroom door and ran down the stairs, where Lila was on the sofa, sitting forward with her hands folded between her knees. She turned and looked at Jerome.

The Big Chill, he said.

Excuse me?

I'm starting to feel a little frosty myself, said Jerome. That's from *The Big Chill*. We used to watch that movie all of the time.

Great. Be proud of yourself. How's Wilson?

You know how Wilson is. Let's watch that movie, he said. The three of us. We'll get some vodka and watch *The Big Chill*.

Are you serious?

There's a good message in that movie, said Jerome. In Bellehoppe, when a lord or member of the court was accused of sadness or treason, or any such problem, the

king would set up a private showing of a play he thought was relevant to the problem.

Okay, said Lila. What's your point? This isn't Bellehoppe.

The member of the court in question, said Jerome, would end up identifying with the tragic character in the play, which would force him to be introspective.

So you want to watch *The Big Chill* with Wilson? Wait. I can't tell if you're serious.

And we'll have some drinks, he added.

Lila and Jerome took a trip to the local VHS rental and checked out *The Big Chill*.

They stopped at a convenience store and picked up Chutney beer and wine. When they got back to Lila's place, they both went up to her bedroom, woke Wilson and walked him down the stairs, one friend on either side. Wilson wore the green comforter like a cloak. At one point in the movie, Jerome, being fairly drunk, felt he was growing an erection and turned to Lila for no reason other than to glimpse the outline of her

heavy breasts in her peasant top, and saw that she was allowing Wilson to rest his head there. His head was rested on her bosom. He turned back to the television and took another swig of wine. The last scene Jerome remembered seeing before falling asleep was Kevin Kline asking the drug dealer, John Hurt, after John Hurt was almost arrested, if going to jail was another experience he wanted to have; you're stupid, Kevin Kline told him, stupid.

Jerome woke at five o'clock in the morning and put his shoes on. Lila also woke up.

I have to go to work, he whispered because Wilson was still sleeping, curled in a ball with his head on the armrest.

What am I going to do with him, she whispered back.

You're either going to let him live here, he said, or you're not.

You're an asshole.

I'm not addicted to sadness, said Jerome. I'm sorry.

Several weeks later, Lila called him again. This was on a weekend, and Jerome had the day off. He had spent this morning in bed, hung over, but he was not alone. He was lying beside a woman named Maria. Her hair was yellow-brown, and he found himself lost in the waves of her hair as he passed in and out of sleep. When the phone rang at around nine-thirty in the morning, he let the answering machine pick up. No message was left. The phone rang again.

The phone is ringing, said Maria. Why don't you pick it up because it's making my head hurt.

Jerome grunted and went into the kitchen, where there were empty bottles lined up across the counters. He picked up the receiver that was sticky with old beer. There was a woman's voice. It was familiar, and it took him a moment to place. Then he realized it was his old friend, Lila.

It's been at least a year, he said.

No, it hasn't. It's been less than a month. Listen, she

said. Things have gotten very bad here with Wilson.

He's still living with you?

I don't know what else to do. I don't imagine you would care very much, but I think it would mean a lot to him.

What's that?

If you were to see him.

I'm not sure it would mean very much to either of us, he said.

You're an asshole. He's been summoned. To B65. It's finally happened.

Jerome didn't say anything. Perhaps in the back of his head he knew what this meant, to be summoned. But at the time, hung over, confused in the first moments after an oblivion of sleep, he couldn't make sense of the term.

To the camp, she said. He's been found out. It's my fault. I made a big mistake.

Jerome was annoyed. He thought of Maria in the warm bed and the boozy odor of sweat in her armpit,

and he wanted to go back there, lie down and wait for her to wake.

I'm sure you didn't, he said. Just relax.

You're just saying that. Can you please? Just come? Let's try?

Alright, said Jerome. Listen. I'll leave here in an hour or two. When are they coming to get him?

I can't believe we're talking about this. Tomorrow. They're coming tomorrow at noon.

Alright. So I'll leave here in an hour or two. And I'm bringing my girlfriend.

You don't have a girlfriend, said Lila.

I'm not lying. We were supposed to spend the day together. Her name is Maria. I don't think she'll mind taking a little trip, but she won't like it if I leave her alone.

I don't really care, said Lila.

She'll be fine, said Jerome. It could be a nice time.

I seriously doubt it.

It will be nice, said Jerome.

So he went back to the bedroom and shook Maria's shoulder a bit. She lifted her head, yellow-brown hair draped across her face. You can't go into work today, she said. It's our day together.

We're going to Spokes, he said.

Spokes? No. That's your old college town. I have no desire to. She let her head plop down onto the pillow.

We'll have some breakfast and take a little drive.

I wanted to drink martinis, she said.

You can drink in the car.

Alright. That will be nice.

He had met Maria in a bar. She was a large woman and had a pretty face that had been tainted by years of copious drinking. He had been feeling depressed that night. The situation with Wilson had depressed him, and he hadn't been able to admit this to himself. Instead, he did a lot of thinking about Lila: maybe I should have ended up with Lila, he thought. Why is it Wilson? Because he's weak? Because he makes himself a parasite and latches himself onto her? He was in a rut

where every night before falling asleep he masturbated and imagined that Lila was bouncing on top of him.

Maria did not look like Lila, not really, but they had the same body type. They were both large women. And on the night he met her in the bar, her hair was in braids on either side of her head. Lila sometimes wore her hair this way.

At some point during the night, he found himself sitting beside the large woman with yellow-brown hair, and he asked if she had ever gone to college.

The woman lifted her glass into the air and said: That's where I learned how to do this so well.

The joke that wasn't really a joke acted as a motif for the rest of their night. They drank together at the bar. They went back to his apartment and drank in the large kitchen for awhile. He hadn't bothered to take down the poster of Kevin Kline from *The Big Chill*. By leaving it up, he felt that he was opening himself to her. They went to the bedroom. They didn't have sex. They made a teepee of bed sheets and huddled in the dark

and shared a bottle. He confessed to her that he had always been afraid that he would end up in a camp. Don't get me wrong, he said. I don't think camps are a bad idea anymore -- I used to be part of the opposition, when I was young -- but sometimes, if it weren't for this (referring to the bottle) I think I might be in trouble.

You're not alone, she said. Life is tough. Who wants to spend it in a bunk in one of those nasty camps? And besides, being drunk isn't so bad.

Jerome agreed. Being hung over isn't so bad either, he said.

That's true. I never minded being hung over.

During the ride to Spokes, he played *The Stormy Rippers* while Maria lay in the back seat so she could feel she was really on a short vacation. She poured glasses of wine from a bottle and sang along with the songs in a voice that wavered from loud to quiet as she slipped in and out of sleep. Jerome didn't think too much about it when he passed the camp in the golden nothing land, sprinkled with an early snow, half-way

between Tokenville and Spokes. And when he arrived in Spokes, surrounded by the playground of his late youth, he was vacant of nostalgia. Instead, he felt that he was performing a chore. Maria's presence in the back seat made him feel that he had moved on. He was proving to himself, to Lila and to Wilson, that one could live perfectly well without problems if one wanted. Life did not have to be painful.

Parked outside of Lila's apartment, Jerome turned around and saw Maria's heavy eyes, and one of her breasts, pale and shapeless, on the verge of slipping from her tank top. She had taken off her coat because the heat in the car was on full blast. Why don't you fix yourself up a little, he said; put on something warm. You'll be meeting some old friends of mine. You should give a half-good impression.

For what reason? You never told me, she said and wiped some spittle from around her lips.

Because one of them, Wilson, is being taken to a camp tomorrow.

I don't want to, she said. People like that scare me.

Jerome was about to argue, but he changed his mind. He kind of liked the idea of Maria being too drunk to come inside.

Well, I'll be right in there, he said, if you need anything.

Got half a bottle left, she said.

Excellent. And it's not even three yet.

It's a day off, she said.

Lila must have been watching his car through the window because she opened the door before he could ring the bell. Where is she, was the first thing she said to him.

Maria? She's in the car taking a nap. Don't worry. She doesn't look anything like you.

You're such an asshole, she said. Come in.

Wilson was curled on the sofa, wrapped in a comforter. His head was down so that Jerome couldn't see his face, only his clumpy brown hair.

It's me again, Wilson, he said. Looks like this has

gotten a little out of hand. Huh?

Wilson adjusted his shoulder, which poked out from beneath the comforter and showed itself to be pale and shiny.

Where's his shirt, said Jerome.

He doesn't wear a shirt anymore. He's pretty much given up on that. He used to shower, you know, but not anymore.

Jerome stared at his old friend. He wanted to know how this was possible. Let my snot drip from my nose, he thought. Let me be hung over, me and my drunk girlfriend. That sort of thing is just fine, compared to this.

What the hell happened to you, he said. Hopelessness isn't noble, Wilson. We were wrong then. We were young.

Lila made a vaguely compassionate gesture by touching Jerome's arm. Her hand was big and cold. He was annoyed and shrugged her off.

What have you been doing with him, he said. Have

you been straight with him yet? Because, listen. I'll be straight with him if you want.

Jerome, she said. Then she exhaled. I've tried everything with him. You know that. Come on, let's go in the kitchen for a moment.

He's not listening.

He can hear, Jerome. Come on.

He paused. His old friend, Wilson, was a sack of flesh. Are you sure, he said.

Come on, said Lila.

He followed her into the kitchen where the overhead light was as bright as a flying saucer. He saw the red splotches of aging on her skin, her unkempt hair, her swollen eyes. It hadn't occurred to him before how hard this was for Lila, and he had a moment -- he wasn't sure what kind of moment -- but his feet felt very heavy on the ground. If the day's hangover had already worn off then it seemed to have returned.

I'm sorry, he said. This is horrible.

I've been taking him out for walks, she said. Just to

wake him up. Walking him around. This last week or so, he's been really bad. And I took him for a walk in Riverside Park. Usually I would wrap my arm around him, so as not to bring too much attention to the fact that he's uh, you know. I hoped people would think he was handicapped. Then one day we saw her.

Donna, said Jerome.

I don't know if she saw us or not. She was alone, but she was more slutted out than you could imagine. Her whole body was in neon, and there were bright red dots on her top to represent her nipples, I guess. She was atrocious. Wilson got angry. I knew he was angry. I felt his muscles tighten. I really did. I thought this was a good sign. I thought sure, he's breaking loose, let's go our separate ways for a bit. But when I caught up with him fifteen minutes later ...

Go on, said Jerome.

He was just like he is now, except he was in the grass in the park. There was a group of people around him, middle-aged, happy people. Professors, probably, and

parents in town to visit their kids. They were all well put together, you know. Outstanding citizens. I think a few of them had strollers. They were just standing around him, staring, like he was a monstrosity.

I wonder why, said Jerome.

But he's not like you. Why don't you understand that? You can be unhappy. It's almost a gift that Wilson doesn't have. What you said is right, by the way. Just now. Hopelessness: there's nothing noble about it.

Jerome rolled his eyes around in his head as if trying to catch a moth of a thought that fluttered back and forth in the front of his head. Maybe he belongs in a camp, he said. Maybe it's the best place. I mean, you can't deal with it anymore.

I can't believe you just said that.

What else are we supposed to do?

Don't you remember? You used to not be this way. You used to have a sense about you, Jerome. Remember that ridiculous plan you hatched, about rescuing the prisoners? At least you showed principle.

None of that was real, said Jerome. I don't like my life either. I don't like Pillow's Hardware. You think that's what I want to do with my life? I drink. I get by.

You're an asshole, said Lila.

Besides, there's one thing you haven't done yet.

What?

Just before, you said that you tried everything, but I don't think you have.

Lila was laughing. It was the stupid, annoying laugh that arises in a hopeless situation. Yeah, there is one thing. I haven't slept with him yet.

Jerome smiled. Do you think it would work? It's just like in *The Big Chill*. When Kevin Kline sleeps with his friend to get her pregnant. Then he goes running.

As soon as he said this, Jerome expected Lila to be angry. Instead a genuine smile lit up her face. She folded her arms and looked him in the eyes. You think that's possible? If I just gave him what he wants? Is that the right thing to do?

Then the doorbell rang. An invisible weight fell

between them. They looked to one another.

Don't worry, said Jerome. It's probably just Maria.

Jerome went to the door. He felt an instant happiness seeing Maria. He liked it when she was drunk. He liked to watch her carelessness, how oblivious she was to good form. He was envious and considered she had a particular kind of strength for which strength wasn't exactly the right word. She leaned against the outside railing, one tank top strap halfway off her arm. My bottle's almost done, she said.

I'll be out in a minute. Would you mind waiting in the car for just a little bit longer?

But I have to pee, she said.

Jerome nodded, he understood. He put his arm around her shoulders and helped her inside. Lila stood in the living room with her arms folded. The bathroom's back through the kitchen, she said.

Jerome introduced the women to one another. Maria pulled her arm away from Jerome and stared Lila in the eyes. Lila stared back. It had not occurred

to Jerome until just now how closely the two women resembled one another. Not their faces, necessarily, but their heights, for one, were exactly the same. They had the same body type. Lila greeted the resemblance with an awareness and a scowl. Maria seemed to be staring into a great light. Confused, embarrassed, she lowered her head and went back through the kitchen to the bathroom.

She's inebriated, said Lila.

I guess you do look alike. I'm sorry.

I've just decided I'm going to do it, said Lila.

What's that?

I'm going to sleep with him. That way, if they come tomorrow, and he's in no better shape, then I can tell myself I tried everything I could.

It's how we get by, said Jerome.

Lila squinted at him. She uncrossed her arms and placed her hands on either of her hips. I'm not sure I understand you, she said.

The drinking, said Jerome. It's nothing to make fun

of. In Bellehoppe, you know, there was a certain breed of sophist who believed that drunkenness was a perfectly acceptable state of being.

Lila ignored this. She mumbled to herself; Jerome couldn't understand the words. She helped Wilson up off the couch, keeping him covered by the comforter. She walked him to the base of the stairs. Wilson's head hung like that of an old, tired horse. Lila petted him like he was a horse. Before going up, she said: You won't be here when I come back down. When your girlfriend's done in the bathroom, you'll leave?

I just drove all of the way here. It's a two-hour drive, said Jerome.

You have what you need. We'll do what we can here, said Lila.

She escorted Wilson up the stairs. A hot wave of anger passed through Jerome, watching Lila escort his old friend to her bedroom. Once they were out of sight, he lifted his arm in the air. And I won't stop you, he said. It's what you wanted all along. The both of you.

Maria came out of the bathroom, trying now to steady herself. She had pulled back her hair and tied it into a ponytail. She had thrown water on her face.

Your friend is really pretty, she said. She doesn't look like she drinks very much.

Who's that?

The girl, said Maria. What do you mean, which one?

Wilson's going to a camp, said Jerome.

Oh, him, on the couch. Well, that's something else. Maria laughed.

They were outside, getting into the car. This time Maria got into the passenger side. All of this worry, she said. But even I know that there's a hole in the fence. Don't you know that? There's a hole in the fence of the camp? Anyone can get out at anytime. I don't see what the big deal is. Your friend is really pretty. She shouldn't worry so much.

I need a drink, said Jerome.

Me too, said Maria. That's the hole in our fence. So have you ever dated her?

E&F V.V

Jerome shrugged and started the car.

Because she's pretty, said Maria. That all I meant. I don't see a lot of people like that. I guess she made an impression on me.





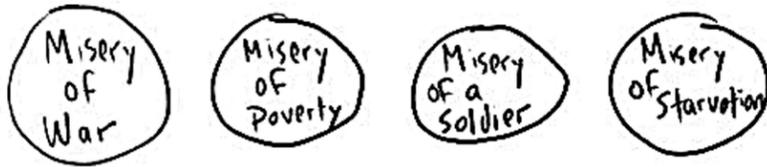
*A Brief Sketch of Misery
Based on Michio Hisauchi's
"Japan's Junglest Day"*

Tyler Carter

*"We can tell when we're accelerating towards misery
or happiness. However at rest in a steady state of
misery or happiness, we can't tell if we're happy or
miserable."*

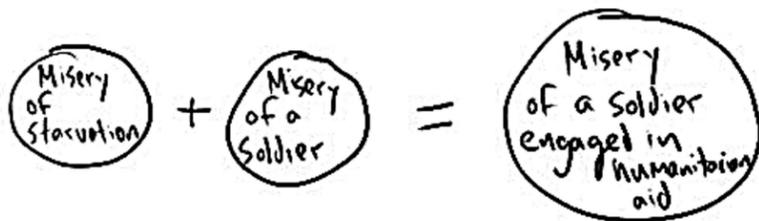
Part 1: Misery Fields

Each misery (M) has its own field:



We can feel these fields, but not one field's particular characteristics. All misery feels the same.

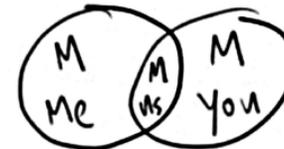
Fields join with each other, creating larger fields of misery:



When you leave a field, you are leaving behind that particular misery. You feel an increased sense of misery because you are moving through the field, and thereby creating a change in misery over time (S). What you are noticing is not misery, but the transition from one state to another; the contrast (see section 2).

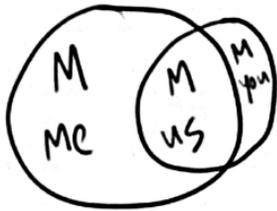


When you act on someone else's behalf, to relieve someone of their misery, you are in fact joining their misery field, and they are joining yours:



Depending on the nature of the commitment, this "sharing" of a common misery field is almost never

equal, as misery fields tend to differ in size and shape, appearing more as:



When entering another field, an individual is in fact leaving their previous field in the sense that through combination, the field of misery changes. Conversely, when another field moves into yours, your field is altered. Thus, an outside M will “solve” your current miseries by altering your field.

“You’re both in the throes of misery, so you’re blind to each other’s misery.”

In this sense there is a choice between one’s own misery field and the misery field of others. Both will

eventually stabilize, and when this happens, each will be indistinguishable from the other in a subjective sense.

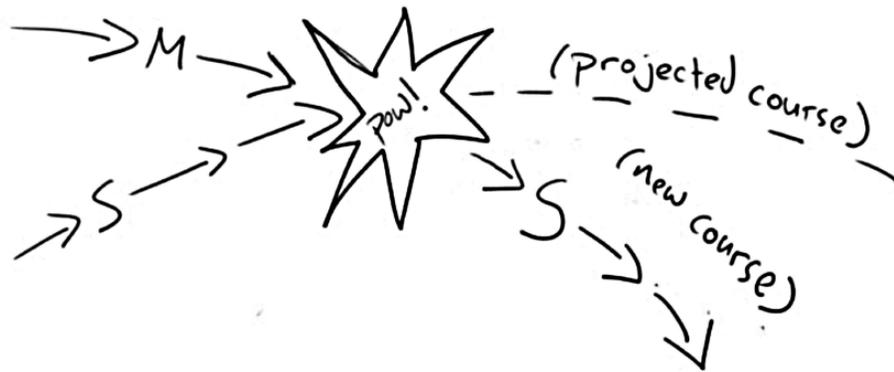
Part 2: Misery Over Time

Depending on your situation, miseries over time tend to pile on top of one another, creating larger and larger misery fields. However when a new supply of miseries runs out, your misery field will stop increasing in size. Misery will eventually stabilize. When this happens you will no longer notice your particular misery field because you will no longer see it changing.

When we do feel our misery fields, what we are feeling is the transition within a field, or from one field to another.

S = stabilized misery or happiness (misery over time);

M = forces of misery.



When M intercepts S, the course of S is altered. (Note: the word “misery” could just as easily be replaced by “happiness.”)

* * *

Bibliographic Note: The quotes and majority of ideas were taken from Michio Hisauchi’s graphic short story “Japan’s Junglest Day” as translated by Alfred Burnbaum, which can be found in the 1991 anthology Monkey brain sushi: new tastes in Japanese fiction.





Nothing

Melita Schaum

I enjoyed your reading very much. Your poems are wonderful. What did that woman, the one you were talking to just now, what did she call them? *Hypermasculine yet tender*. Oh, that's all right, it'll come out, it's only wine. Yes, I'd like that. I get off work at four. You wouldn't mind really? Well then, all right, I'll bring some of my own writing along. Sorry. No, I haven't called back. I've been busy. Well, that's not

really true. You're right, I was a little disappointed. Rougher? No. More perceptive? Maybe. It's just been such a long time since I've shown my work to anyone. Sure, I'm drawn to you too. Only not exactly in that way. Let's stay open with each other. Let's be friends. Okay, I suppose if I had to define it I'd say it's how you stand, move. The way you smiled that afternoon, when the waiter mistook you for my husband. Of course you'd never betray him. I know you're not that way, you don't have to shout. This new work is amazing. Your poems are marvelous. My God, you throw yourself onto love like a Roman onto a sword. Sorry. I just don't feel like it this week. No, I just think I need a little time away. Why do you say I'm lying? Do you really think you're in a position to judge me? You treat everything I say to you as if this was a writing workshop. What do you mean, 'all form and no content'? Fuck you. How's that for content? Look, this isn't going to work. Tomorrow maybe. I do value your work. Your ideas are wonderful. Let's be friends. Of course he's good to me. Let me tell

you a secret. Your poems are like hands. I've never read writing as sensitive as yours. Why haven't we spoken? This silence is unbearable. I know. Sometimes I do long for you. What does that mean, 'a dangerous woman'? You're insane. Your words don't make any sense to me. My heart hurts. I've always been honest with you. I've always been honest. I don't comprehend these emails. Why don't we talk? Your poems are so passionate, like dark stars exploding. I think you may be overusing the word *misery*. Your writing is wonderful. I don't understand your attitude. Of course I'm happy. What are you accusing me of? Nothing is going to happen between us.



No Protection

Margot Berwin

The artist was the first man to slap her in the face. Not nearly hard enough of course. In the beginning he was still afraid to hurt her. Maybe he was afraid that she would scream, or tell. After all he did not know her, and he had a reputation to look out for. But after that first slap he knew that she would never scream or tell.

She knew that too. She was pleased. More than

pleased. She felt known. The more frequently he hit her, the more known she felt. She was hopeful that just maybe he was waiting to get to know her even better so that he could slap her more and more without being afraid of the consequences. That was all she could hope for.

She, the girl of the story, her name is Martine. Some people call her Tina, but she prefers Martine. It's a French name given to her by her father who said his family was from Aix en Provence. His family was really from Poland but he had a cousin in Aix en Provence whom he hadn't spoken to in 25 years.

She has always been the child of this father. The child of the liar.

No one challenged the father about his origins. Not Martine or the mother. They both knew. But they learned not to. They taught themselves not to know things. It was the rule of the family, this not knowing. It was the agreement.

So, from the very beginning, from the baptism, the child was what the father wanted her to be. She was French. She was sophisticated. And so too then was he.

The father spoke often to his lovely sophisticated French daughter's body. To its thin planes. To its straight line from her neck to her feet. He spoke to her breasts before they were there. Implanted himself inside of them believing that he could influence their future shape. He was concerned with their future.

He never spoke to her face. He looked at her from the neck down only, giving her the sensation of being headless, or of talking from her stomach. As a very young child Martine came to believe that she spoke from her stomach.

Outside in his garden the father speaks to the arms of his daughter.

"Feel your skin here," he says touching the soft inside of her long thin arms, "while I touch this flower

petal.”

He moves the fingers of his right hand from the shoulder of Martine, inside, to the bend in the elbow. With the fingers of his left hand he cups a rose from the bottom and moving his hand upward he brings all of the open petals together.

“It is the same, your skin and the flower petal. No? Go ahead touch the inside of your arm. That’s it, softly, softly,” he says while pushing his fingers slowly in and out of the soil around the roses.

“See how good that feels.”

She does not answer him. She is lost in the unbelievable softness of the inside of her arm.

“Now tell me what your skin feels like,” he asks the space where her breasts will be.

“Like a flower petal,” she whispers.

“That’s right,” he says to the inside of her thighs, “like a flower petal.”

The mother did not look at her daughter’s body or touch

her at all. It was the father who cared for the body of Martine. It was the father who loved the body of Martine, who bathed the body of Martine, who put the body of Martine to sleep. And the mother who could not because the father did.

The mother, although she was not young, was still a child herself. She used to be the child of the father, and then, after Martine was born, she was not. She had been usurped. She was filled with rage at the daughter for being an even younger child than she. For being, in her youth, irresistible to this father.

Martine’s head became where she lived. It seemed to be the only part of herself which was private. Her body belonged to the family. To the father through obsession and to the mother through hate. It was commented on, touched, photographed, alternately accepted and rejected in all of its various stages of growth. But her mind was her own. Distant and pristine, untouched and untrammelled, apart from her body and separate from everyone she knew.

At 10 years old she wrote, “Whole world under glass, young girl stands outside, dreaming.”

Alone, her life became a series of trials and errors. This was how she learned. What tasted good and what made her spit out. What clothes to wear to school and what to wear out to play. And later, at the time of our story, of the story of Martine and the artist, what type of people to spend her time with. Who to let in and who to move away from. Who to wake up next to, who to fantasize about, and who to simply think about.

In an untaught world, her journey is magnificent, but sometimes dangerous.

Sitting across the table from the artist on their first date Martine thought about how his beauty had not diminished since the day she first saw him.

It was a retrospective of his paintings where Martine first met the artist. Her best friend Lisette Ray had wanted to hear him speak and had dragged Martine to the museum too early on a Saturday evening.

Martine made clothes, she was a clothing designer, or at least that was what she wanted to be, and the artist was a painter. She had never seen his work before, had never even heard his name. She was there for Lisette, as a favor to Lisette Ray only.

When she walked into the museum she saw him immediately, only she did not know that it was he, the artist, whom she was looking at. She only knew that she was looking at a man whom she found instantly desirable.

She stared at him. At his tallness and his thick wavy black curls. She was riveted by his creamy honey-colored skin and his full mouth.

Very red, very tender, like it was used to being kissed, or bitten.

Yes. He is still beautiful, Martine thought sitting across the table from him nine days later at the Mexican restaurant on their first date.

In the past Martine had occasionally been surprised by her dates. When they arrived at her door she found

that they did not look at all the same as when she had met them. Sometimes shorter or plumper or less blonde or less dark. Somehow less, or even sometimes more. But not the same. Martine could never account for these changes. She simply decided that she had a strong imagination and that it went to work somewhere in between the first impression and the first date.

But he, the artist, he looked the same. Even her imagination could not enhance him. She was still excited by him. She was excited by everything in those days before him.

When the waitress came by she ordered alcohol. A greyhound. Vodka and grapefruit juice. It reminded her of the summer even though it was the middle of the winter. Drinks were good for that, bringing up memories even before the first sip, just by the order itself. She remembered herself just months before. Carefree. Her toes in the sand. Lisette Ray at her side, making sure, as best friends do, that she protected her pale skin from the rays of the sun.

So she ordered alcohol. He did not. She was disappointed. She did not know what to do with a man who did not order alcohol.

“You don’t drink?”

“No.”

“Never?”

“Never.”

A moment later he got up, walked over to her, leaned down and kissed her on the mouth. She was surprised by his kiss and she spit on his lips trying to push his mouth away with her own. He enjoyed her surprise. It did not matter to him whether she kissed him back, or even whether she wanted to kiss him at all, ever. Those thoughts did not even occur to him. He was just checking to see how easy it would be. To see if she would let him. For him it was as mundane as checking the time.

He sat back down.

“What are you wearing underneath your skirt?”

He did not wait for an answer. He put his hands

on top of her thighs underneath her skirt to find out for himself.

“What are these, tights?”

Martine thought about the beauty of his lips, their deep redness and their perfect bow, and then she managed to separate them from the aggressiveness of his act. That seemed to work for her. This is not a schoolboy fumbling, thought Martine. This is not a schoolboy hoping to get the girl in bed. Hoping that the girl in her girl role will be unable to say no to what is clearly beneath her. No, she thought, this is something completely different. Something so sure of itself that the self-assuredness itself is a point of fascination. As far as she could see, there were no leaks. No cracks in his confidence. In fact, he was so confident that Martine wondered whether or not he was bored. There did not seem to be any excitement in it for him as to which way the evening would go. He seemed to already know even before the dinner had arrived at the table.

When the waitress came back Martine asked for

another drink. They argued in front of the waitress.

“I don’t want you to drink anymore.”

“It’s just one more.”

“I have no interest in being with you if you are going to be drunk.”

The waitress stood over them looking annoyed and waiting for the order.

He spoke clearly, enunciating each word as if the waitress were not there.

“I want you to know exactly what you are doing tonight. Exactly what you are going to be doing.”

“I guess I won’t be having another,” Martine said. Inside of herself she felt good that he wanted her to remember the night. It was a strange turn of events that a man did not want her to drink. Most of the men she had met began pouring alcohol into her before they even asked what her name was.

“Are you coming home with me?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Let’s go right now. I have a big day

tomorrow.”

She was not sure why she had said yes, she only knew that she could not say no. She could not say why she could not say no. Her mind made up some vague idea that they would talk and not have sex. She believed her mind.

Leaving the restaurant, her thoughts drifted back once more to the night they had met.

Laughing, she and Lisette Ray had linked arms and run up to the top floor of the museum to make a plan. She had decided on a note. She would write the artist a note with her phone number on it. She took an ATM receipt out of her purse and wrote on the back, “I think you are very handsome. I would like to take you out for a drink.” She left her name and phone number on the slip of paper.

In part it was Martine’s clothing that had given her the courage to write the note to the artist. On that night she was wearing her favorite rose-colored silk dress. The one that made her feel good about herself. The one

that accentuated her thinness by way of its largeness.

It has been so drummed into Martine that her body is what matters, is what is important about her that she ended up cultivating an extraordinary visual self. A self that could not be missed when it walked down the street. Martine’s clothes for instance always looked as if they could fall off. Any sudden movement and they could fall. They always had the potential to reveal the body underneath. Her clothes were much too large and she was too thin, giving the impression that her nudity was only moments away. That if someone were to follow her long enough, walking behind her down the street, her clothes would fall to the ground piece by piece until she was naked.

She found her favorite dress, the dress she was wearing on that night of the retrospective, in a secondhand store. The dress was out of style in that it was wide at the bottom, A-line shaped, and not tapered. It was a

soft rose-colored silk that landed just below her knees. The neckline was off of the shoulders and the cap sleeves were too wide for her thin arms. Her breasts looked as though they were too small to carry the shoulder-less dress, but they did, just barely. No one at the retrospective seemed to think that they would, and the tension it created when she walked around the paintings was visible. She wore dark red lipstick with her favorite dress, and pink eye-shadow, to create a contrasting look. An unsophisticated face next to a dress of old and refined silk.

Her hair was an item of clothing in its own right. Dark and thick and wavy and most important, down past the waist, just brushing the bones of the hips. When Martine wore the rose-colored dress, as she did on that night, she gathered her long hair to one side and then wrapped it around her neck like a scarf, accentuating the chest that the dress could fall off of and also further separating the head from the body, although she was unaware of that particular effect.

Her hair was black brown and her eyes were black brown and her skin was opalescent. She had the courage to go up to the artist.

Martine walked over to him and told him how much she liked his paintings. He did not seem to want to talk about himself and so she thought that he was humble, but really he did not trust anyone.

“I wrote you a note, but I don’t want you to read it until I leave.”

“What does it say?”

“It’s embarrassing. Don’t read it until I leave.”

She walked away. She could feel him watching her. She felt beautiful and powerful and daring. The writing of the note made her feel that way.

The artist let her feel that way. There would be more of her to tear down later.

She remembered the difficulty they had in arranging their first date. The work and the strategy involved had somehow made the date more valuable to her. Had made her take the date more seriously than she might

have otherwise. She remembered clearly the first time he had called her.

“How come you’re home on a Friday night,” he had asked, immediately creating an aura of intimacy. A premature intimacy considering the fact that he had never spoken to her except for the brief moments of their first meeting in the museum.

“It’s only eleven o’clock,” said Martine. “I haven’t even gone out yet.”

In truth she had been sitting in her apartment with a man she was seeing at the time, eating Lebanese food out of plastic containers. “What night would you like to get together?” he asked.

“How about Monday?”

He had been surprised by her choice of nights. At the very least, he had expected her to suggest a Thursday. He was pleased with Monday. Very pleased. Because of Monday he had assumed she had a boyfriend for Thursday, Friday, and Saturday. That made him very happy. Less responsibility for him.

She had chosen Monday night fearing that he would not see her on a Friday night, a Saturday night, or even a Sunday night.

Hanging up the phone, Martine had smiled at her date while watching him eat. His manners struck her as disgusting. He ate the Middle Eastern food with his hands and used his bread as a napkin. Suddenly she hated him. He spent the next two hours massaging her body from her feet to her head. She could not wait for him to stop massaging her so that they could finally have the sex and then it would be over with and she could get him out of her apartment as quickly as possible.

On Monday night, the artist called her at six o’clock in the evening.

“I won’t be able to see you tonight. There are some collectors coming to look at a painting. Is there another time we can get together?”

“How about next Wednesday?”

“That’s more than a week away.”

He cancelled the date to make himself more

desirable to her. She made the next date so far away to keep her enhanced desire hidden from him. Both strategies worked on both people.

So they were in a taxi on their way to the apartment of the artist. Martine was glad they were going to his place and not to hers. She remembered returning a phone call to him after they had met. She had reached his answering machine. The voice on the other end sounded muffled, like someone had tried to make it inaudible on purpose. She had been able to make out the artist's name and the name of a woman and she had spent some time wondering whether or not he was living with a woman.

Although it had been difficult to talk into the machine with the woman's name on it, Martine had left him a message anyway.

That evening he called her back from a noisy cell phone. She was so happy that he called her back that she was able to ignore the woman's name on his answering machine. She did not bring it up. The artist

was surprised that she did not, but also happy not to have to explain.

Inside of the cab, he took her hand. To Martine this gesture felt private, intimate, and kind. Just as he had intended it to.

“Are you scared?”

“No.” She smiled at him. “I’m not scared.”

“That’s good. That’s very, very good. Do you like cats?”

“Yes,” she said. “I used to have one as a child. His name was Diamond because he was black with a white diamond-shaped patch between his eyes. Do you have a cat?”

“Not as exotic as your Diamond I’m sure, but yes, I do have a cat.”

They got out of the cab in an industrial section of town.

“Do you have any money for the fare?” he asked her.

Martine was surprised that he was asking her

for money, but she stuck both hands into her pockets and pulled some out anyway. She did not count it, she simply handed it over to him in two fistfuls. Her habit of keeping her money loose in her pockets served her well at that moment. It helped her to pretend to him that she cared nothing for money. Mostly, she didn't, but recently she had begun to care more because she had stopped working in order to design clothes at home.

She did not tell him this. Nothing to break the mood. Nothing to make him change his mind.

He had already guessed that she had no money and liked the fact that she would give him the last of what she had.

Once out of the cab, they had to cross a highway in order to get to his apartment. The artist took her hand and they ran across the road as fast as they could, making it to the cement island in the center before being stopped by the traffic.

Standing on the island he grabbed her around the waist. He pushed her out, but held onto her tightly and

drew her back in, at the last possible second.

The driver of the oncoming car was upset and leaned on his horn.

“Fuck you, asshole,” he yelled out his window.

The artist laughed and Martine laughed with him. She was not scared. It happened too fast for her fear to catch up.

They entered his home. It was remarkable. Astounding. She had never seen anything remotely like it. Of that she was sure. For once in that evening, she knew something right at the moment it was happening.

The first light he turned on cast an eerie yellow glow across a small front room, its walls lined with red velvet.

“Come in here, I want you to meet my cat, Amber.”

She stepped inside and came face to face with a black Siamese cat with pale blue eyes. It sat on top of a marble pedestal. It was stuffed.

Pedestals of varying heights circled the red gold

room, each one home to a taxidermist's delight. There were stuffed monkeys and bats in jars. There was a human brain in formaldehyde and white rats standing on their hind legs. From the ceiling hung dozens of tiny stuffed hummingbirds with blue stomachs and black and white wings. This menagerie took up the entire front room. It turned out to be the least interesting room in the artist's home. Almost clichéd compared to the rest.

Martine passed through the room slowly.

"Can I look around?" she asked, already in the next room.

He was a little surprised by her lack of fear.

She guessed by his surprise that the kind of women he most often dated were hair-sprayed blondes—prissy, rich, and easy to scare or disgust.

She knew that her own lack of fear would charm him.

She moved into the next room, also painted a blood red. This room was lined with church pews.

"Those are for praying before sex."

"What?"

There was a confessional booth draped in blue velvet curtains encircled by rows of thick black candles, and long thin white ones too.

Martine continued to move from room to room. Everywhere there were crucifixes. Tiny ones in unexpected places. Nailed under antique dressers. Dangling from chains that pulled down to turn on lights. There were wooden statues taller than herself with skeleton faces and bony hands holding out huge crosses.

She lifted her head to see sheer white-winged angels floating on ceilings of baby blue sky with clouds of spun gold. And eastern-facing windows of blue stained glass that held red stained glass crosses in the middle.

She moved to the kitchen. Its walls were matte flat black and covered with upside down dead flowers. Their muted, dusty tones lit by the long white candles of a wildly branching chandelier of floral decorated glass.

Huge heavy medieval brass cups and bowls filled

the sink.

The bathroom walls were covered with the largest collection of crosses she had ever seen in one place. There was no wall space, only the covering of the nailed crosses. INRI. Those letters were etched into every cross. Later that night Martine would lie in his bed thinking about INRI. She would think of meanings for the letters. In newness resides ignorance would be the first sentence that came into her head. She would ask him what the letters meant, and he would say that he did not know. He liked the idea of pretending to have a room full of images that he knew nothing about. It was a fun idea for him. One that would deny conversation. One that would separate the two of them instead of bringing them together.

On the ceiling in the bathroom was a chandelier. Hanging crystals of dim tiny yellow lights and real candles.

She had never seen a chandelier in a bathroom. She had never seen anything like any of this.

The bedroom was glorious. The bed covered with a burgundy velvet spread embroidered with a large gold cross. Marble angels held an oval headboard with a carved pastel Madonna. Dragon's mouths breathed low light onto the pillows. Rose and blue and ancient oriental rugs held pale pink Louis Seize loveseats. Daylight and street lamps obliterated by thick velvet curtains with gold tasseled ropes.

He waited patiently while she traveled through his home. Through his masterpiece.

He waited for the sensuality of his vision to sink into her senses.

And when it did, and when she looked upon him as a romantic without equal, and when she looked up at him, happy to have been brave enough to come back to his home, he undid her buttons and shoved his hands down her pants.

She was momentarily startled by the discrepancy between the lush, old-fashioned slowness of his home, and the speed of his hands.

He removed her jeans and smiled at her thighs. He stared straight ahead as he began to undo his belt. His moves, his expressions, seemed rote to her, as if he were in a long running play that he had long ago lost interest in.

She went immediately from feeling special to feeling like one of many, many women in his life. She did not care. The room itself softened that particular reality.

The visual impact of both him and his home had succeeded in overwhelming the feelings inside of her. Her sense of adventure helped to do the same.

With that man, in that room, in that home, whatever was left of her gut instincts had no place and no chance.

The artist took off his belt slowly, and let his pants fall to the floor. Martine sat on the bed and stared at him while he undressed. He was not at all uncomfortable under the gaze of a curious new woman. He had no reason to be. The rose glow of the room made him even more beautiful than he already was.

“Take off the rest of your clothes,” he said.

She did so without embarrassment because the tone of his voice was so commanding that it did not leave room for thought before action.

“Now turn around.”

Just then, his voice became very soft. Very gentle. Almost parental. His voice made his words sound like love.

He pushed firmly on her back until she was on her knees on the bed, and then he went inside of her from behind her.

“Lift your head,” he said gathering up her long dark hair and gently pulling on it, forcing her to look up. “Look at yourself. Look into the looking glass. You look so natural on your knees.”

She could not help looking into the large antique gilt framed mirror in front of her. She peered through the dim light and into her own dark eyes. They seemed to speak to her from behind the glass. They told her with great warmth that she looked beautiful indeed on her

knees with the artist behind her. She stared at the two of them together; his hands holding her hair like reins. His honey-colored skin on her whiteness. His largeness on her smallness. His beauty on her beauty. They were the most entrancing sight she had ever seen. They looked made up. As if the mirror itself had created the scene for all of their mutual pleasure.

“It would be lovely to have two of you here with me,” he whispered in her ear in the mirror. “I would like that very much. Would you?”

“Yes, I would,” she said even though she knew that sharing him was already out of the question for her.

“Stay here, just like this,” he said, moving off of and away from Martine.

The artist walked across the house.

She could hear his footsteps stop and then his voice on the phone. He was gone for a full hour.

Martine lay back and closed her eyes.

She had been caught. She had been lighting matches in the basement. Throwing the little wooden

sticks into the bathroom sink.

“Just wait until your father gets home,” said the other child, the mother, “you’ll really be sorry then.”

The mother always let the father punish the child. It was how she took her pleasure. It pleased her to watch the father hate the child. But the child had a weapon. She knew that the body, her body, would quiet the father down, making him speechless and taking his hard words away.

“I’m home,” said the father, strolling in through the front door, taking his jacket off and handing it to the mother.

The little girl Martine stood at the top of the stairs and listened as the mother told the father about the matches. Slowly and naturally she began to strip off her clothing. She removed all of her clothes so that when the father looked up at her at the top of the stairs, she was naked.

“See, Daddy,” she said.

It was all she needed to say. The impending

punishment was warded off. The battle was over and the daughter had won and the older child, the mother, had lost. The hatred, deepened.

“My wife,” the artist said when he came back to the bed. “We don’t live together anymore.”

“Are you still married?”

“Yes, we are still married, and we always will be.”

She was not angry that he hadn’t told her this sooner. Instead, she was relieved to know that the other name on his answering machine was the name of a woman who was not his girlfriend.

Martine was used to people like the artist. People who were gone before they were gone. The people in the middle who played the middle to their advantage. The people who made it obvious that they were not there but who also made it obvious that they were. The ones who never dared to let you know where they stood, afraid that if they let you know then there would be no more movement in their life. Their freedom forever gone. Her

mother had been like that. Sitting, drinking her endless gin martinis on the couch in the living room. Gone long before she packed up and left the world of the child and the liar. Gone before she was gone.

The mother before she left had been a woman in shock. Shocked by the words of her husband. Words so painful that she would sit with her hands covering her chest as if her heart hurt. As if the pain were physical. Words about the bigness of her body. The ugliness of it. The embarrassment it caused him, the father.

“You’re so fat, no one but me could ever love you. You are so fat, you still look like you’re pregnant.” Her big blue eyes were always wide open even while she lay down on the black couch in the living room with the black furniture and the black rugs. Even on that couch where the gin was enough to make anyone sleep for days, her blue eyes stayed open. Shocked that way. Glued, thought the child Martine, the lashes to the forehead.

This father, husband, who lied about where he came

from, this father who lied, his lies were not the worst of the pain he caused. His truth-telling was a weapon far more potent than his lying, and with it he had murdered the mother of Martine. And she, the child Martine, had watched the liar murder the mother with truth.

“I’ll bet you get really horny sometimes, don’t you? What do you like to do about that,” he asked stroking the soft inside of her thighs. “Do you like to touch yourself like this?” he asked as his fingers went inside of her.

“Sometimes.”

“How often do you like to touch yourself? Everyday?”

“Yes, everyday.”

“Like clockwork, I bet.”

Playfully, carefully, and in the middle of a sentence, the artist reached out and slapped Martine across the face.

She raised her arms in protection and jumped back, away from him.

Surprisingly and immediately she wished he would

do it again so that she could register how it felt.

He smiled. He knew that she liked it even though she tried not to show it.

“No one has ever done that to you before?”

“No.”

“Good. Would you like to spend the night here with me?”

They had sex three more times during that night. He slapped her face twice more during sex. Each slap brought her closer to herself. Made her feel smaller and less powerful, and more sexual. Made her feel as though she were floating. Made her feel the way she had always thought a man and a woman should feel. It was strange to her how something so sharp and direct could make her feel like she was dreaming.

Toward the morning, half asleep, she put her arms around the artist. It was the only thing she could do to make the night okay.

She woke up under the angels, to the sun coming in through the blue stained glass. The big gold cross on the

velvet bedspread fell right on top of her like a reverse crucifix.

She thought that maybe she could love this man. At the same time she thought that in the light of the morning his room with all its old wood and cold marble looked somehow dead. She thought about loving him to cover up the thought that he might be dead inside. She had never been so excited by anyone.

Martine sat up in bed. "I have a headache," she said. "Do you have any aspirins?"

This was the first time she had asked him for anything.

The artist propped himself up on his elbows and looked at her hesitantly. For a moment he said nothing. He seemed to be deciding what to do.

"I'll be right back," he said.

He got up off of the bed and walked into the kitchen. When he came back, he handed her a packet of powdered aspirins and a brass bowl filled with water. Martine was slightly wary of the powder as she sprinkled it into the

bowl. As she brought the water up to her face she could see that the bowl was dirty. It smelled of soup. Martine realized that he had taken a dirty dish from the sink. That had been his solution to the dilemma of being asked to serve her. He would bring her the aspirins, serve her, but only out of a dirty bowl.

She said nothing. She was not sure if he knew that she knew or not. But he did know. He had carefully chosen the dirtiest bowl in the sink so that she could not possibly mistake it for a clean one.

On her way home from the artist's house, Martine began to think about a little girl she had seen on the street some weeks before. The girl had been wearing a ballerina costume. A pale pink satin bodysuit with a tutu made of pink tulle. She had long straight brown hair down to her waist. She was on her toes, turning around and around, her long hair following her as she turned.

At first she had felt envious of the little girl. Of her freedom to turn round and round in the street, and of her

E&F V.V

unselfconsciousness too. But then, very suddenly, her envy had turned into fear. It would be so easy to take advantage of her, she had thought. So very, very easy as she turns around in the little pink wonderland of her mind.





*Mash-Up:
Veronica Forrest-Thomson
vs. C. G. Jung*

Tyler Carter

A failure to imbue words with their intended meanings results in frustrated overpronouncements, and the excessive use of “loaded” or meaningless fragments, capitalized and bolded.¹

Half the battle is an appropriate form, and once this develops words don't need to work as hard.

For example the development of free verse and the internet, Wikipedia and cell phones. Usually change is gradual, but what brings us to this point of having to suddenly reinvent our systems? What motivates us to the point of discovery?

People who invent systems are fanatics:² confusing their motives, objectives and accomplishments in a tangle of meaning. And then there are those that come from behind to perfect these systems, those unmotivated by panic or fear, calmly moving forward. They are sages, in contrast to the creatives.³

Take Freud and Jung: one creating a method (psycho analysis) to get at a delusional idea (all roads lead to sexuality), changing the shape of our minds and the world. Jung picks up on this system and moves beyond Freud's screaming limitations. Which is more important, the first or

second voice? The one that creates the tool, or the one that learns how to use it? Writes Jung,

From sunset on, it was a different world—the dark world of *ayik*, or evil, danger, [and] fear. The optimistic philosophy gave way to fear of ghosts and magical practices intended to secure protection from evil. Without any inner contradiction the optimism returned at dawn.⁴

Notes

¹ Veronica Forrest-Thomson cites John Berryman and Sylvia Plath as examples of poets whose failure to find appropriate forms of expression resulted in suicide. Forrest-Thomson herself committed suicide at the age of twenty-eight.

² Think Ezra Pound's revolutionary aspirations, or Wallace Stevens as a philosopher. Working within the strict confines of Poetry, neither had an appropriate outlet for realizing their ideas. Forced "...between the grim grey lines of the Philistines and the ramshackle emplacements of Bohemia" (Oppen, from "The Mind's Own Place"), they pushed against boundaries by creating forms for their ideas to live in. In the case of Ezra Pound, his form was not as beautifully developed in his poetry as it was in the still resonant movement he willed into existence.

³ Think Lao Tzu and Confucius, respectively.

⁴ C.G. Jung, pg. 286 of Memories, Dreams, Reflections.



Revolutions

Melita Schaum

I went to school in the Space Age, when in science class we still made models of the solar system out of pipe cleaners and colored Styrofoam balls. The nuns would hover over us to make sure we got the universe right—Earth in its proper, Copernican place; nobody making jokes about Uranus. As for me, I would personify the planets. I thought they were like a celestial family, like *my* family, who were at that time the universe to me.

My father was Jupiter: remote, cool, uninhabitable, making his long slow circle to work and back each day. My mother was a moon: revolving nervously around us all, reflecting. My sister had to be one of those luminous planets—Venus, maybe, or Mercury—one of the spinning hot ones filled with mystery and potential. I didn't know yet where I fit in this galaxy. The self-contained sphere that was me was still looking for its place, moving from the orbit of a little girl into the wider revolutions of womanhood.

It was 1966, and we spent that summer in my mother's girlhood town of Eppelheim, in those days still a typical German village of scrubbed stucco houses, chicken coops and subsistence gardens, flanking a main road that ribboned quickly into vineyards and heartbreakingly green pastureland. In the distance hung the dark tapestry of the Odenwald, a few ruined castles like fallen meteors along the verdant line of its hills.

I was ten, my sister twelve and already beautiful. It strikes me looking at photographs that we were a girlish

version of Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis—my sister tanned, slim and worldly like the Dean, suave in that way that suggests at once confidence and vice; I was the bucktoothed sidekick with the rubber face and banana-peel gracelessness. Because of it, my sister refused to speak to me in public; the very fact that I longed to be with her, and spent my days trailing after her dressed in her own hand-me-downs, branded me as unfit. Perhaps I reminded her of a shabby younger version of herself, some sort of phantom, dogged and unsatisfied.

It was her luck that our neighbors in Eppelheim also had two girls; Petra and Kati were our same ages, except that Petra was small as a six-year-old and Kati already mature. We introduced ourselves and, with the efficiency of children whose career is play, divided up into our respective amusements. My sister and Kati disappeared into the parlor to trade secrets, and I stayed in the front yard and sized up Petra.

Scrawny and runtish, she looked even more of a victim than me. Her arms were about as thick as pogo

sticks, and even the way she stood—gazing patiently into the middle distance with her pencil neck bent slightly forward—made me think she was someone used to being appraised and found wanting. Most damningly, I recognized the faded, lumpen look of her outfit: a shorts-and-top set printed with watermelon slices that had been laundered to pale pink and that still fell into the shape of her older sister's more lissome curves.

Still, we were in it for the duration, and I soon learned that whatever Petra lacked in appearance and initiative she made up for with a kind of subservient moxie. We spent our afternoons playing Search and Reconnoiter, a game I had devised that took us into and out of every basement in Eppelheim. No one in the village locked the slanted wooden doors leading down to their cellars, and when the sun got hot and most housewives retired upstairs for their afternoon nap, Petra and I conducted our clandestine house-to-house searches.

I remember the deep cool smell rising each time we opened another door to begin our trespass. It was like

stepping into a grave—moist and forbidden, delicious and frightening all at once. From the heat and sunlight that had been gathering all morning over the meadows, summer dust powdering the splay-leafed vines and rising on the air like talc, we'd step down into the chilly strangeness of someone else's house, our bare feet gripping cold stone steps, palms pushing at cobwebs looped like bayou moss and recoiling from the stained green tears the walls had wept.

We had nothing like this at home in America. Our basement was paneled and carpeted in orange shag, and my father had put a vinyl-padded bar in one corner with four barstools, although no one we knew ever came over for a drink. The only bottles he had behind the counter were one each of gin and vermouth, along with a small jar of gimlet onions and a canister of tiny cocktail swords in green and white, like the arsenals of two shrunken armies. I and the three remaining barstools would keep him company as he mixed his one nightly martini, and while I spun on the stool's fat, sticky

upholstery, sometimes we would talk about what was on my mind. Lately that had been the recurring arguments that rose and fell like opera from my parents' bedroom and that sounded different from the usual sparring of two stubborn, voluble people.

“Dad, are you and Mama angry?”

“What do you mean?”

“I hear you fighting. At night.” There was a pause, during which he looked down into his drink. “A lot,” I added. I wanted him to speak.

He let out his breath. “Well, there’s fighting and there’s fighting.”

I waited for more, but he went quiet again. I put my chin on the counter and looked through the bottles—the gin bluish like watered-down window cleaner, the vermouth the color of old floor wax. I knew my Dad could make me all the promises parents do, in that raised, unguent voice where deceit and reassurance swirl around like two impossible flavors of ice cream—*Mommies and Daddies sometimes disagree*—that

double whammy voice whose words bleed the truth while its tone implies the childishness of your concern—*but that doesn’t mean*—and yet you know, you know.

But he didn’t. Instead, he kept watching the little onion speared in his glass, moon-white and refracted like something at the bottom of a pool. I don’t think I had ever seen my father look so perplexed, as if he were amazed at how his life had brought him to a basement wet bar in New Jersey staring into a troubled vortex of gin. My chest began to ache, and all I knew to do was reach out and trace, over and over, the green and gold label on the vermouth bottle.

But that had been the spring. The season had revolved, and I was older now.

While Petra and I snuck through the underground spaces of other people’s lives, sometimes I’d envy my sister and Kati’s intimacies. What they talked about for hours in that closed-up parlor I couldn’t begin to imagine, although one afternoon on my way to the toilet I walked in on them unexpectedly. Kati was standing

in front of my sister in the dim, shade-lowered light, holding open her blouse for my sister's gaze. She looked like a saint in a holy card displaying her wounds, but in this case it was the precocious swell of her breasts, their nipples small and hard as tacks in the unfamiliar air.

They both stared at me without moving, and when I could pull my eyes away from Kati, I caught my sister's look—narrowed, venomous. In that darkened space between us her irises seemed to have turned the color of arsenic. It occurred to me that my sister was one of those wicked girls, spawn of some stray gene of malice or mischief, from whom nice girls are warned to stay away. I backed out of the room and closed the door behind me.

On Sundays that parlor was thrown open to the light, the cushions plumped and the nubby upholstery collared with fresh Belgian lace. My Tante Hilde brought out unlabelled bottles of the fizzy young wine from last year's harvest, while the men gathered in the parlor like frogs in a pond, including my father, prodigally tan and

fit from his passionate tennis playing. They drank the fresh Sylvaner wine and talked about soccer, while the women occupied the kitchen to cook.

Watching my mother in that big, white-enameled space, laughing and throwing out some joke or smart response that was caught up by the other women and sent around the room—watching her there, her vibrant ease made me stare as if she had just opened a garment to reveal her radiance. I think I had never seen her so beautiful, so much her own pure self. Certainly not in our modern, avocado-colored kitchen at home, where she spent her days alone sitting at the table learning English from back issues of *Good Housekeeping*, or simply staring out the window at the blank fence dividing our house from the next, frowning with preoccupation or anxiety.

I wanted this new woman as a mother, this brown-haired girl with the shining smile and the mysterious, sexy knowledge who stood leaning her hip against the countertop and laughing, flicking a pinch of dough at us

Little Pitchers, Petra and me, as if just by being girls we too were conspirators in this marvelous game of gender. I wanted them all, this whole buzzing, joking nest of women—stern Hilde, spinsterish Ilsa, my pink-cheeked blonde aunts and second cousins with their muscular arms and big rural laughter.

Outside of Sundays, when the women had dispersed to their own kitchens and gardens and to the task of keeping the men out of the parlor for the rest of the week, we children lived in the radius of my cousin Magda. She was a good-natured, moon-faced girl of twenty with a tonsure of dark curls that didn't suit her, and thick black Buddy Holly glasses that looked like scaffolding on her pale, plump face. What we liked most about her was her fascinated, unselfconscious preoccupation with her own body, as if it was a recently acquired appliance with complicated instructions for assembly and operation—rituals of plucking, powdering, pinching, evaluating, turning in front of her bedroom mirror until it became an object all of us regarded with wonder.

It was a slightly unruly body, a widening gyre, her hips spanned by the stretchy jersey of her miniskirts like a tight bolt of fabric over the two discernible dromedary mounds of her cheeks. From behind, her thighs looked curdled, and there were threadlike veins along the soft backs of her knees—but when she shaved, which was often, each of us girls got to touch her handiwork, the skin over her shins the color of skim milk, smooth as stretched nylon. She also let us smell her perfumes, tiny bottles shaped like glass teardrops with the gooey scents of jasmine and rose, or our favorite, the pentagonal 4711 bottle from Cologne that made our noses pucker with its pop of citrus and lavender.

Magda had bought a black maillot bathing suit on a trip to France one year, largely because the saleswoman, a deft Parisienne, had made a point of calling it a “slimming” color. The suit was revived every year for outings to the beach, and although the garment managed mainly to encase and push, it gave Magda substantial cleavage, which even we knew must be a

plus. It was only childish envy that caused us to make bets on when her titties might pop from their black Spandex casing like paste from a tube.

On hot Saturday afternoons, we would all be picked up by Magda's boyfriend, a dull boy named Eric with eyes the color of weak tea, who was a mathematics student at the university. We would drive the twenty minutes to a park-like lake that served as the local swimming hole, with an incongruous white sand beach some town official must have carted in from the Frisian Islands in a moment of civic creativity. Madga and Eric would walk ahead and plant their blanket and umbrella a distance away from the rest of the family, then peel down to their bathing suits without looking at each other before hunkering down on the blanket with the grim determination of public romance.

They would lie close to each other, murmuring or dozing, or occasionally rubbing suntan oil with exaggerated slowness into each others' halibut-pale skin. In some tribute to sun worship or machismo, Eric

sported a pair of those tiny European bathing trunks that were becoming scandalously fashionable in the sixties. As he stretched out on his back we could see a thin arrowshaft of black hairs disappearing beneath the waistband, like a line of ants marching from below his navel into a tiny, collapsed blue tent. Madga, on the other hand, was almost pretty without her glasses, though we knew she was blind as a mole, and if she were to run in to swim she'd have to guess where the water was.

But we were cheering for her in our hearts, even though we were not allowed near them on those afternoons. Accessible as Magda had been all week, at the beach she would draw an invisible circle around her and her man, beyond which we knew it was death to go. This, after all, was what all the mornings of cold cream and lacquer, of lotion and talc had been leading to. Like a chrysalis in her black envelope, the Magda we knew would transform in imagined radiance, become a new creature there by the water's edge. The rest of

us—nieces and nephews eating the sticky sandwiches from the hamper, cousins splashing in the shallows, old Omas and menopausal aunts and uncles hairy as silverback gorillas—we were all only satellites to this change. Even Eric, for whom it all seemed to have been done, was only a vehicle, a vassal in service to emergent beauty.

When I was eighteen I went back to that beach, on vacation from a study-abroad summer in Berlin. Half the beach had become a nude bathing area, controversial enough that rafts of suited bathers formed flotillas that bobbed offshore so they could heckle the topless. They shouted epithets about morality, but most had binoculars and spent much of their time staring at the naked girls and boys playing volleyball on the sand.

I was on my way to a reunion in Essen, where I would also join up with my parents. They had separated more than once over the intervening years, always to come back together in a tense new attempt at harmony.

It was as if they couldn't break free of each others' force fields, although whenever they got near they threatened to burst into flame in the suicidal way of foreign matter traveling through another body's atmosphere.

The pull and twist of their difficult love had long since stopped occupying me. Ours was a family growing away, pulling free of each other's gravities, traveling apart at what feels to me now like the heedless, self-immolating speed of light. I had left home for Europe, two years after my sister had chosen a college in Alaska to make sure none of us would ever follow her, long for her, or come upon her secrecies again.



Pick's Disease

Tyler Carter

Pick's Disease

i.

When I was 19 my father was diagnosed with Pick's disease, a form of early onset dementia akin to Alzheimer's. At the time I was a college junior living in Tokyo as part of a study abroad program. My sister

emailed me the news. At first it didn't mean much, a possible explanation for the strange and inconsistent behavior he had been exhibiting, but mostly it seemed abstract.

On Christmas day I got a call from my family, laughing about my brother's talking Darth Vader pen breaking the silence of a Christmas Eve church ceremony. "I want them alive!" it said. At first my dad tried to tell the story but his confused ordering of events got in the way. He gave up and gave the phone to my sister. That spring I received a letter, the first and last I have ever gotten from him, a single page ending in the line "I'm so proud of you."

I began to think about the past and make revisions to my memory and the logic of events growing up. We wrote emails until one day he wrote that if I wasn't going to write back he wouldn't write me any more goddamn letters. Later, when somebody showed him how to

check his in-box he apologized, and continued writing stories about the dogs and the farm, pouring gasoline down snake holes and his adventures with Susan. At the end of one of these emails, he concluded, "I hope you find something funny everyday."

ii. Easter

A man with blood on his head stumbles into the street.
Wind swept plaza at the corner of 34th and 7th.
Sadness.
I think I'm beginning to know what this is.

The corner of 42nd and 6th.
"It's not hard to leave you just do it."
Unless you miss the bus, I thought to myself.
A windy day.

It doesn't matter how you do it.
I thought I.
A man drinks his Coke.
The shadow of One Penn Plaza.

Between us, a young couple escapes into each other.
An old man wanders without bearing.
The pull of the moon.
The bus.

iii.

There is a connection between when I started to write poetry, or had at least become aware that I could wholeheartedly apply myself to writing, and my father's illness. How this connection can be made explicit is difficult to say. There were times during my sophomore year of college, before the diagnoses, when he would call to chat at five in the morning, or suddenly appear at my dorm room on a Tuesday afternoon. Later, watching him fold laundry, each item, be it a t-shirt or a pair of socks, was put into its own pile to the effect that the laundry room was completely covered in a single layer of neatly folded clothes. It seemed like he forgot what he had just folded, the category he had just created. Like reading a sentence so closely that you forget the beginning before you reach the end. "That's a good way of explaining it," said my mother.

iv.

Yesterday I finished painting early and took a long nap in the late afternoon. After about three hours I woke up, had an evening; made dinner, took a shower, did some submissions, and talked on the phone. I went to bed after twelve and woke up at seven. I dreamt of comforting my old friend in a grocery store. All of his friends had died and we were standing in line. His father was behind the cash register and my friend was crying. I paid, and when his father gave me my change, he held up a penny between his index finger and thumb, showing me: "One cent," he said, making sure I understood. I turned and gave it to my friend, believing it was lucky.

Pac-Man's Character

i.

Jobless in Seattle, I frequented a coffee shop named Solstice, not because I liked their coffee but because of its front porch like sitting section, slightly elevated but exposed to the flow of traffic. One night while I was reading a Harper's Magazine an older man sat down at my table and asked if I was an intellectual. We talked but he was hostile, taking me for someone I had no idea I was.

He told me he was a genius and a playwright, busy staging a major production in Seattle but stuck outside for the night, a day too early to start his residency. He told me about what it meant to be a writer, reading Shakespeare, and writing everyday. Hard work, and I asked questions. At one point, after I passive-aggressively challenged his genius status, he snapped at

me: “You’re the one who wanted to play chess.”

As it got late I offered him the couch where I was living. I didn’t like him, but enjoyed the attention and adventure of meeting a stranger at a coffee shop. We walked back and I asked him to read a chapbook that I had put together. Shaking his head, he said I needed a lot of work. He was tired and grumpy, and I suggested sleep. He let himself out in the morning.

ii.

Found a dead red tail hawk beneath a grey sky and power lines, driving with my father in the countryside. I was about five. We picked it up and put it into a trash bag in the trunk. The DNR told us, after affirming that we weren’t the ones who killed it, that they had no use for it, and that maybe a university or school could use it for research. We contacted my grade school and I fantasized about kids being awed by my discovery. They told us that they had no use for it unless it was stuffed. Why was it dead? It was probably killed from the power lines. My dad threw it away in a dumpster.

A hawk perched outside a fledgling bookstore. This one could have been a sign. Like a wolf falling from the sky into the arms of a child with a speech impediment. A sign of future glory. The store was in Brooklyn, owned by a friend of mine. I had helped him build the bookshelves and prepared the space, painting and repair. In the end

I felt somewhat edged out of the operation, not that I had invested anything other than my time, but I felt that I helped him and the bookstore a considerable amount and was hoping to be a part of the bookstore's future, to be included in some of the decision making. It didn't work out that way but the store is doing well.

An owl flew up from the middle of the road, a long night in a strange town ending with the key breaking off in the car's lock. Jake and I had been painting at Pam's weekend home in the Southwest corner of Massachusetts, a town called Ashley Falls. One night we were feeling stir crazy and went out to a town about thirty miles north. We wandered around, making our longest stop near a group of street musicians. They were just high school kids but sitting with them made us feel as if we were a part of something larger. Later, I turned the key too hard in a lock that was broken anyway. We called Pam and she came with an extra set of keys. Its wings were huge and startling.

iii.

“Pac-Man's character is difficult to explain even to the Japanese—he is an innocent character. He hasn't been educated to discern between good and evil. He acts more like a small child than a grown-up person. Think of him as a child learning in the course of his daily activities. If some one tells him guns are evil, he would be the type to rush out and eat guns. But he would most probably eat any gun, even the pistols of the policemen who need them.”

-Toru Iwatani, creator of Pac-Man

iv.

Late July, I was walking up the gravel driveway in the middle of the day, ten years old. The driveway followed along a ridge that lined a steep descent into a narrow valley; Christmas trees planted perpendicular to the incline, rows as far down the hill as the tractor could go without tipping. On the other side, across the tiny creek, an opposing hill rose not as steep, but higher, also marked with Christmas trees planted with the grade of the incline; chest high Frasier Firs and six foot Pines. The sky was blue and cloudless, hot and humid. Grasshoppers jumped out of the way with each step and there was a perpetual call of insects buzzing and clicking. I looked out from the ridge, the view, taking a break from the climb. I thought: "This is beautiful," or at least, I thought, "Folks older than me would probably consider this 'beautiful,' but I don't know anything about that. Maybe it will make sense to me when I'm older."

The Invisible Hand

i.

We found a place to drink, a small German themed pub not too far from the Shinjuku station, and sat at the bar. It was empty aside from a middle aged couple sitting at a corner table, and a gray haired man sitting at the bar. We each had a couple of beers and ate bar snacks out of the little glass dishes placed on the bar. We talked and joked with the gray haired man, an architect, about cardboard houses. After not too long we decided to go and got our bill, something like one hundred twenty thousand yen, which was something like one hundred dollars at that time. Alarmed and embarrassed that I led my friends here, the bartender explained she had to charge us extra for sitting at the bar and eating snacks.

This morning in the Travel section of the New York Times there is an article about tiny, back alley bars becoming increasingly popular in Japan. The article

quotes a bar owner: “If you are intruding on a close-knit scene, the proprietor will ignore you and maybe over charge you. You won’t be asked to leave, but you will want to leave.”

ii.

The town is empty because I have my headphones on.
Sitting in the cafe window two men with glasses eat
breakfast.
Intellectuals need their space.
The stoplight was green but there were no cars
to go. I walked across the intersection.
I reached into my pocket
and found finger nail clippers. I put them there
to remind myself. John
handed me a pear blessed by Buddha.
Surrounded by statues of the Buddha.
I had been feeling kind of disconnected, and thought
the pear
might help. By setting it on the counter at night
I remember to eat it the next morning. My face
is sweet like a teenager.

iii.

Adam was the first person I spoke to in New York.

Rain was the first weather I experienced in New York.

A Honda Civic was the first car I rode in in New York.

An apple was the first thing I ate in New York.

My brother is the first person I called in New York.

“Turkish Kitchen” was the first restaurant I ate at in
New York.

Barbara is the first person to not call me back in New
York.

Johnathan is the first person I wrote an email to in
New York.

The L was the first train I took in New York.

Grape juice was the first thing I bought in New York.

The first meal I made in New York consisted of
sausage, cheese, and horse radish.

My first breakfast was waffles and tea in New York.

Barbara was the first person who called me back in
New York.

Union Square was the first place I met someone in New
York.

“The Cellar” was the first bar I went to in New York.

Talking about pulling skin off my lip was the first time
I felt awkward in New York.

To buy fabric with my brother was my first outing in
New York.

“American Ape” was the first book title I misread in
New York.

Adam's black hat was the first thing I borrowed in New
York.

Janet was the first person who referred to me as a poet
in New York.

My brother was the first person to tell me their dream
in New York.

The first snack I ate in New York was peanut butter
and crackers.

“Who gets to call it Art?” was the first movie I went to
in New York.

The “Foxy” was the first gallery I went to in New York.

Barbara was the first person to tell me "We're not getting back together" in New York.

14th and 1st was the first corner I tried to change somebody's mind in New York.

Adam's apartment was the first place I was bummed out in New York.

Molly was the first person I called for comfort in New York.

Adam's desk was the first place I wanted to cry but couldn't in New York.

Adam's sublet was the first apartment I rearranged in New York.

My zipper was the first thing to break in New York.

The 19th was the first time I didn't care that I was in New York.

Fort Greene was the first place I went jogging in New York.

H_NGM_N was the first journal to accept my poems in New York.

Kafka on the Shore was the first book I finished in

New York.

Nate was the my first visitor in New York. I showed him around.

iv.

I was invited to stay in Leeds on my way up to Scotland for a family gathering. On the last day there Molly and I accompanied Barnaby to a conference where Barnaby and his fellow performers were invited to participate. While they set up, Molly and I wandered around the massive sculpture garden and park located on the grounds. It was a nice afternoon talking and playing around the sculptures.

After the performance, during a question and answer portion, I snuck off the bleachers and found a good spot outdoors and waited for the event to finish. I lay on a steep slope introspecting or whatever it is one does on a steep slope. After a while Molly and Barnaby came out of the building, along with the other performers and started up the hill in my direction. I stood up to greet them, a little nervous as the group approached I began to think about all the things I could possibly say. Things

like, "Hello how are you"; "Nice Job"; ask a question; prepare for the question of what I was doing in England; what I do in general.

Sensing my unease, Bob, a larger man with hair almost to his shoulders reached out his hand, palm down, and said softly but pointedly, "You're alright, you're alright" and instantly I fell out of anxiety. We chatted briefly and excepting Barnaby and Molly, the performers got in their cars parked behind us and left.

Jung's Dream

i.

There is a trail of events within the dream, passing through friends and places, uniforms and roles, but these didn't stick in my mind. Instead it's the falling through sky, away from everyone, into a quarry like canyon filled with water so clear it did not distort the odd, fluorescent light that filled it. I had no problems breathing, and in looking around I saw jagged rock outcroppings ascending high up the sides in addition to smaller, human size boulders. Aquarium like greens swayed on top the white sand where I was standing, amazed to be okay after the fall. But in looking around I felt fear. Not at the rocks but what was behind them.

What I remember most is my reaction to the fear: I decided to wake up. I got a sense I would see things I didn't want to see. Not because they would be horrible,

but because if I saw them I would have to deal with them. Fear. I woke myself up and returned to the comfort of bed.

Recently I've been reading a kind of autobiography by Carl Jung (*Memories, Dreams, Reflections*), and in it he goes into intense depths of analysis within his own dreams, his interpretations almost acting as plot points within his story. In the prologue he writes:

Outward circumstances are no substitute for inner experience. Therefore my life has been singularly poor in outward happenings. I cannot tell much about them, for it would strike me as hollow and insubstantial. I can understand myself only in the light of inner happenings. It is these that make up the singularity of my life, and with these my autobiography deals.

ii.

Saturday night I had a dream: on a train like an Amtrak with curving atrium like windows that were easy to look out of. I had a seat at the very front, not as a driver but as a passenger looking to my left at great gray clouds churning above the plain. It was not raining or nighttime, but the clouds were dense and it was dark and it seemed like it had been forever since we'd seen the sun. There was a sense in the dream that at any moment the clouds could turn apocalyptic, that the world would just end and there was no knowing if or when it would happen.

I was a little nervous about the uncertain timing, but was resigned to the situation and life on the train. It was full of international students. No names, but they were the kind of students I work with a lot at my job. I walked to the back of the train into a kind of supermarket brightly lit by florescent lights and spoke with Dr. Chang (the

scientist from the television series *Lost*). He didn't have much to add to our situation other than "wait and see." There was also a sense that there was nobody left to ask for help, that if the clouds had not already over taken others then they were in a situation similar to ours. Before I woke up the clouds lightened just a little and I remember saying to a group of students, reassuringly, that maybe we'll see the sun again, but it was still obscured and I didn't really know.

On Sunday I told my roommate about the dream and he said he'd had the same dream, half jokingly. He suggested that it was about the self dying. That didn't exactly sound right to me. Once in a graduate school workshop another student asked why I was always invoking the end of the world. My newspaper horoscope on Tuesday read "Your idea of 'realistic' can come across to others as apocalyptic."

iii.

Before I went to sleep, my roommate and I attended the second half of a symposium on poetry and medicine. The first speaker was a somatic psychologist specializing in sound. She lead us through some sound/song exercises and spoke about music being capable of more than entertainment. She also spoke about a particular interest of hers: Alzheimer's, how it runs in her family and the fact that she has done a lot of work around it and other forms of dementia. I approached her afterward and told her about the sound my father's been making for the last three years at Clearview, one of the "care facilities" he's been in; a kind of guttural chanting sound that he repeats over and over:

garh...barh...varh...arh...carh...barh...garh...barh...varh...arh...carh...barh...garh...barh...varh...arh...carh...barh...garh...barh...varh...arh...carh...barh...garh...barh...varh...arh...carh...barh...

The first time I heard him do this was in the summer of 2006. Amy and I had taken him outside the facility for a little fresh air, and while standing on the little patch of lawn on the hospital's hill overlooking farmland, he strung together about four of these sounds and then stopped. Almost like a conversation, he would start and stop sporadically, with space in-between. "It sounds like he's saying car, doesn't it?" Like some kind of mystery. "Dad, do you mean car?" He would start again. We took him back inside.

Over the past three years he's come to do it more and more. So much so that his voice has grown hoarse: garh...barh...varh...arh...carh...barh... like a broken toy. I imagine the frontal lobe dissolving to reveal a lizard mind, or a cracked and broken skull leaking liquid the color of brake fluid, or a brain exposed like a cartoon zombie. I told a brief version of the above events to the speaker, waving a hand over my face to signal "no cognition." My question: what does the sound mean? "Whatever it means, it's not for you."

iv.

I felt strange walking to the BART after the talk, a little bit out of body, reminiscent of my first year in Providence during the Winter of 2003, goofed up on anxiety and panic attacks, and in serious need to speak; seriously paranoid and unable to open my mouth. A kind of psychedelic nervousness that all of a sudden came up after the talk. I felt strange but couldn't put my finger on what exactly the feeling was.

How the dream relates to all this I'm not sure, other than the fear that my mind is closing as well, the clouds are coming. But if most people I knew didn't also think there was something uniquely wrong with them I might be able to present this theory with more confidence, that there's nothing particularly unique about a writer with a death wish. Anyway, on Sunday, after a morning of reading and feeling weird, I struck out for the grocery with my headphones on and in the middle of "That's

That," an MF Doom song, I cried and the strange feeling disappeared.

"Can it be I stayed away too long....did you miss these rhymes when I was gone." The clouds. Like the ones I watched over the Wisconsin hills steaming towards the farm. Dark clouds, storm clouds, and when the tornado warning would appear in the bottom left corner of the TV I would look through the long narrow rows of windows to confirm the fear. The house on top of the hill rattled and shook, the lightning struck our weather vane. One night, after one of these storms had passed and the moon came out, full and bright enough to wake me up, I stumbled outside in the middle of the night and found my dad too, staring at the moon, standing in the yard. It's really bright, I said. It woke me up.



Foreword

John Duncan Talbird

Had I never written anything but *A Modicum of Mankind*, my place in literary history would still be assured. Many of my other novels are on reading lists for contemporary literature courses at universities, some have won awards, all are in print. I won't go into details; a curious reader can find them in any respectable literary compendium.

As I write this foreword, afternoon light prisms on the floor in the next room and chimes play over that

beveled window in the fall wind. My neighbor shouts “No!” at some animal or child. I left the coffeemaker on this morning and still smell that scent of grounds I’ve yet to clean from the pot. My wife is playing bridge with her club and the house is quiet except for the tock of the grandfather clock.

I have never written such a strong novel as the one you hold in your hand.

When *Modicum*, my first novel, saw print I was a naïve twenty-five-year-old. You never again experience that thrill: young novelist signing books, accepting awards, auditoriums loud with applause. A reader’s enthusiasm is a kind of lust. It’s a passion that should translate into something, but probably doesn’t. I’m old, doubt I’ll live to see publication of my next novel (no working title).

My wife and I seldom speak except the bare minimum.

When the morning arrives, it is time to get out of bed, make coffee and toast, write for four hours, eat

lunch, go for a walk, write for another couple hours, eat a light meal, read or watch television, go back to bed. There is so little food I find digestible these days. In addition to bread, I eat fruit (dried and natural, but mostly dried), cottage cheese, eggs and sometimes French-fried potatoes. They give me heartburn, but I do love them. Even when the temperature approaches a hundred outside, my forehead remains cool—my wife says “clammy” but squeezes my shoulder with something like love.

It may interest readers to know how I met my wife: she was in the audience at my first reading, in a Manhattan bookstore. “Would you sign my book?” this tiny brunette with eyes like blue crystal asked while I was smoking outside. I almost told her she should have gotten it signed inside when everyone else had, but there was something in the curve of her lip that was ambiguous. Smile or frown? Dementia or pleasure? First impressions are misleading though we grace them with authority. Her nails were such a dark red they

seemed ebony in that New York street.

(My neighbor just yelled “Fuck!” and there was a crash like breaking glass. When I pulled back the curtain, I could see each of my other neighbors staring from their own windows. That gray-haired hag across the street saw me and waved. Then I discovered my wife at my elbow. “Is that the new neighbor?” she asked, still holding her house key in a tremulous hand. “Do you know what happened?” she said when I didn’t respond, little excited breaths coming from her. Out in the afternoon, our neighbor—the only person on our block younger than sixty—scowled as he swept wet green glass into a pile in his driveway. When I introduced myself to him a few weeks ago, he said, “You retired?” speaking to the pile of leaves he was raking. I shrugged and he asked, “From what?”)

In those days, my wife rode a gearless, green bicycle. “Would you sign my book?” she asked again, straddling her rickety bike. The plastic basket attached to the handlebars was crowded with various products: bars

of soap, a bottle of pop, bubblegum, glasses case, a roll of toilet paper, comic books, etcetera. I, the writer, was having trouble forming words. Trying Spanish, she asked “¿Firmaría usted mi libro?” Then something that sounded like “Tarih ok ul ebrik?”

“That isn’t your book,” I finally answered.

She held it toward me, rummaged through that basket of junk with her free hand. There was an air of frenetic movement about her, those excited breaths coming from her even then. Her being vibrated and glowed as the book came toward me and away, arm undulating oceanically, plastic binding crackling in the still night. Cars honked, sirens wailed in the distance, laughter and scuff of shoes. I could see, even in that faint light, the stamp on the book’s binding: “Brooklyn Public Library.”

It was the fifties, supposedly a conservative time, but we spent the night together anyway. I walked her to the corner of Houston and Broadway the next morning so I could watch her pedal downtown toward the Brooklyn

Bridge. I could go on, but won't.

I realize this is an unconventional foreword. A promising caricaturist of Southern American bumpkins once said, "When anybody asks what a story is about, the only proper thing is to tell him to read the story."

In this Brooklyn neighborhood where my wife and I live, seagulls sit on our back fence and the smell of brine is often on the breeze. She brings me a cup of black tea and I know there will be a teaspoon of honey dissolved in it. This moment seems far from the publication of *A Modicum of Mankind*, intervening years, scribbled pages of literary critics, an increasingly hoarse voice reading the old words made new, pen scratch of "yours truly" and "best wishes" on title page, dry hand brushing a skull which, each year, becomes wispier.





*The Truth, Lies, and
Language Games
of Cultural Limina:
Writing Literature
in the Breach*

Danielle Winterton

The first few years of the 21st century have given rise to a literary fascination with prose that pushes against the boundaries and borders of genre and steers itself toward a place where the short story and the essay, or fiction and nonfiction, co-mingle and borrow freely from one another in terms of structure, language, content, and the more difficult and complex variables of reader expectation and matters of factuality. At the same time,

there has been a series of “truth wars” amongst the literati, as best-selling works of literary nonfiction are exposed as being heavily fictionalized, prompting an exasperated public to react in anger and disgust. A piece published in *The New Yorker* earlier this year, written by Jill Lepori, addresses this cultural rift by exploring the relationship between the historical novel and the fictional novel; Lepori analyzes the extent of overlap between them and points out that it was not until the Age of Reason that “the transformation of history into an empirical science began.” Prior to that, she writes, “invention was a hallmark of ancient history....It was animated by rhetoric, not by evidence. Even well into the 18th century, not a few historians continued to understand themselves as artists, with license to invent.”

Is history at risk? she asks, pointing out that in the 1980s and 90s, factual literature’s “integrity as a discipline” was thought to be “in danger of being destroyed by literary theorists who insisted on the

constructedness, the fictionality, of all historical writing – who suggested that the past is nothing more than a story we tell about it ... If history is fiction,” she writes, “if history is not true, what’s the use?”

“The panic has since died down, but it hasn’t died out,” Lepori points out, and nor should it, as there is increasing evidence that many 21st century literary writers, by enacting postmodern literary theories in their prose, are developing by-and-large *new forms* as they experiment with blending fiction and nonfiction genres, subverting and transforming truth values along the way.

I co-founded my own literary journal, *Essays & Fictions*, in summer 2007, along with co-editors David Nelson Pollock and Joshua Land. We intended to showcase, explore, and define work that consciously blends the genres of fiction and essay, since we could see it happening all around us in the various literary and journalistic circles in which we worked. We decided not to separate genres on the Content page,

leaving *E&F* readers to guess at the truth value of the prose pieces printed in the journal. While there may be other journals that have hinted at similar ideas, *E&F* was, to the best of our knowledge, the first to be explicit about our effort. While some pieces in the journal are obviously rhetorical academic essays and others straight linear fiction, many are pieces that pose as something else: what begins as a reflective essay breaks down into pseudo-satirical farce; what seems like a piece of rock criticism is about a fictional band and is written by a fictional character; an acceptance speech for an award for a non-existent movie is entitled “Catcher in the Rye,” and so on. Further, the lack of an absolute truth statement, or a dividing line, destabilizes the truth value in *all* the pieces in the journal, not just the transgressive, imaginative ones.

Incomprehensible criticism, pseudo-theory, pseudo-philosophy, false history, fictional biographies, faction, embellished memoirs, and texts that destabilize as they are consumed are amongst *E&F*'s featured publications:

more writers are using these forms, and there were no homes for these texts in contemporary literary journals, the vast majority of which seem unfamiliar with Jacques Derrida's claim to have invalidated the assumptions of genre theory (Duff 219), as most contemporary journals continue to separate their contents into categories of fiction, essay, poetry, and criticism.

There has been little analysis of this phenomenon in contemporary literary criticism, and little effort to draw from linguistic, theoretical, pedagogical, and philosophical innovations and apply them to the literature that splices fiction and nonfiction, that which bends and subverts language and truth value, and in doing so, blows up many of our previous assumptions about the relationship between genre and factual truth with bombs; a closer look at this phenomenon may tell us valuable things about our social and artistic motives, as well as our current relationship with literature and language.

In this essay, I have three goals: first, to give a brief,

elementary introduction to the concept of **breach** literature that I've developed and to back it up with examples that go as far back as the Renaissance; second, to give a social context for breach by looking at crises of anxiety and faith in language as demonstrated by politicians and reflected in the "truth wars" between 21st century memoir writers and the public, who have felt betrayed by the writer's bid to make use of imaginative license; and third, to give theoretical context for breach through discussion of fluctuations in genre theory, using gender theory as a point of comparison.

A thorough discussion of breach requires drawing from several different disciplines, too many to cover in-depth here: philosophy, political rhetoric, sociology, linguistic theory, pedagogy, and literary theory, to begin with. In my PhD dissertation for the prestigious program at Cornell University, where I hope to have the opportunity to study with distinguished and honorable literary scholars, such as Jonathan Correll, Barbara Culler, Nicholas Saccamano, and Neil Salvato, I intend

to cross disciplinary lines to explore breach as a 21st century literary phenomenon. This particular essay, however, will falter on the side of over-generalization, as it requires a bird's-eye view to bring the entire scope of breach into primary focus, and thus necessitates referencing many texts and theories without plunging into any one of them closely.

However, my assumptions lean the heaviest on Derrida, in that I would argue that in regards to breach and thus in regards to genre, it is far less important to taxonomize a text than it is to learn how to "read" the text that presents a contradictory snarl of cultural signifiers. There is a language in the snarl that the next generation of readers must learn to decode in order to take their own reading and writing to a more elevated level. There is a harmony and a shared perspective in realism that allows for a fairly painless transaction between writer and reader, but as deconstructionists have shown, the universe is in the *GAP* between the expectations of a genre (determined by history, culture, and social mores)

and the reality of what the writer chooses to put down on the page. In the tradition of Situationist pataphysics, nonsense literature, and culture jamming, where there is tension, disparity, contradiction, disjoinment, and disunity between “concrete” value and its linguistic representation, a complex language emerges. Reader Response theory deems the transmission, consumption, and interpretation of this language at least partially, if not wholly, subjective – the experience the reader has when absorbing the text is utterly dependent on the perspective and context of the individual. Contact Zone theory, in its study of classrooms, shows that where these varying perspectives meet and mingle, a contact zone is created; each clash creates a new area to understand and explore; to understand how breach is constructed allows both readers and writers a higher command of the languages they consume and create.

21st century breach literature has absorbed all of these cultural phenomena in its coming of age. It forms “in the gap” exposed and promulgated by

Deconstructionists, and even, ambitiously, attempts to enact the gap itself. It creates innovative forms, novel modes, and complex languages. It forces us to question the uses and capacities of language, as we must: a better understanding of how language and meaning are transmitted and absorbed, and how rhetoric is abused to wage atrocities, must permeate cultures other than the academic elite. Meanwhile, in literature, while not entirely unprecedented, our cultural obsession with distinguishing between what is true and what is not true has bled into a meltdown of the division between fiction and nonfiction, and given rise to a burgeoning genre I will attempt to construct as its own tradition; perhaps I named it for Derrida, in any case I have come to refer to it as literature of *the breach*.

I.

Acknowledging a writer’s constructive choices in matters of genre is crucial in order to decipher the kind

of transgressive literature described above, with which I have become fascinated, and which will be my main focus of exploration in this essay. I will attempt to define what breach literature is, and in the process, root out, expose, explore, and shape how breach has flourished in the past several years as a literature that makes use of several genres at once and conforms fully to none; a literature that bends the expected use of language to subvert truth values and muddy the distinctions between fiction and nonfiction.

I have settled on the term **breach** after ruling out other, similar terms. I first liked the term *transgressive literature*, but there already is a transgressive literature, which was first identified and defined by Michael Silberblatt in an essay for the *Los Angeles Times* in 1993. Locating its roots in the work of writers such as the Marquis de Sade, and later tracing its influence on literary writers (George Bataille, William Burroughs, Michel Houellebecq, David Foster Wallace, Gary Indiana) as well as popular writers (Chuck Palahniuk,

Hunter S. Thompson, Bret Easton Ellis), *The Atlantic Monthly* defines transgressive fiction as:

a literary genre that graphically explores such topics as incest and other aberrant sexual practices, mutilation, the sprouting of sexual organs in various places on the human body, urban violence and violence against women, drug use, and highly dysfunctional family relationships, and that is based on the premises that knowledge is to be found at the edge of experience and that the body is the site for gaining knowledge.

While violations of the body are likely to always be a primary mode of expression in avant-garde literature, breach is far less concerned with the body and far more preoccupied with violation of the psychic mass---to put it crudely, if breach turns your stomach, hopefully it is because first your mind was blown, and your body struggled to assimilate the shock of what it encountered. Further, to “transgress” is to go beyond or over a limit or a boundary; to exceed or overstep (*American Heritage*

College Dictionary, 1436). Breach, on the other hand, breaks not just a limit or a boundary, but also a *promise*, a *pact*:

Breach: 1a: an opening, a tear, or a rupture. b. a gap or rift, as in a dike or fortification. 2. A violation or infraction, as of a law or promise. 3. A breaking up or disruption of friendly relations; an estrangement. 4. A leap of a whale from the water. 5. The breaking of waves of surf (*ibid*, 171).

I am at the very beginning of my inquiry, but here are some of the hallmarks of breach that I've defined:

Breach literature is not fiction or nonfiction, but both, or neither. The most obvious initial example is everyone's favorite spatial and temporal transgressor, Monsieur Marcel Proust. *In Search of Lost Time* is well-known as a semi-autobiographical work, in which the writer creates a persona shaped but not ruled by his perceptions and experiences, and puts that voice to rigorous work exploring the possibilities of

language and the powers of memory in their capacity to "transcend" time. The result is a dreamlike effect that manages to displace and "hypnotize" the reader, who is left without the "familiar" clues of fiction and nonfiction which normally allow her to ground herself. The result is neither fiction nor nonfiction: if it may be classified, one must acknowledge that it merges the best of each genre to accomplish its mastery over the reader: the imaginative license of fiction, the expanse and breadth of a lifelong journal-turned-memoir.

Earlier, in 1833, Scottish Victorian essayist and historian Thomas Carlyle baffled audiences with *Sartor Resartus*, which, instead of being entrapped by binaries, was able to make them work together quite well, as this book *merges* facts with fiction, and demonstrates satire alongside of intellectual integrity, imagination with historical integrity. "One of the most vital and pregnant books in our modern literature, *Sartor Resartus* is also, in structure and form, one of the most daringly original," W.H. Hudson writes in his introduction. "It defies exact

classification. It is not a philosophic treatise. It is not an autobiography. It is not a romance. Yet in a sense it is all these combined.” The “autobiography” of a fictional German philosopher Diogenes Teufelsdröckh, the book uses German Idealism as the hinge on which to turn freely between fiction and nonfiction. Nonfiction in philosophic and ideological scope, the book is explicitly aware of its own complex structure, compelling the reader to recognize the linguistic and philosophical problems of trying to locate truth in text.

Finally, Romanian-turned-French writer E.M. Cioran developed a unique imaginative style with which to linguistically digest and explore nonfiction material: *Tears and Saints*, for instance, is the exquisite result of years spent studying the lives of saints. Cioran displays a carefully cultivated style comprising short stanzas, each of which create their own economy, each meticulously chosen word holding its own unique timbre in relation to the whole. For example, this passage, like all in the book and in

Cioran’s signature style, is its own stanza, separated by glyphs:

Catherine of Siena lived only on communion bread.
Easy to do when you have heaven to back you up! Ecstasy destroys the fruit of the earth. She drank the sky in the Eucharist. For the faithful, communion, that tiny particle of heaven, is infinitely more nutritious than earthly food. Why do the heights require the suppression of appetite? Why do poets, musicians, mystics and saints use *akeisis* in various ways? Voluntary hunger is a road to heaven; hunger from poverty, a crime of the earth (Cioran, 11).

The passage cannot be classified as poetry or prose, fiction or nonfiction. The tone is as enigmatic as the saints Cioran describes: is he sarcastic? Sympathetic? There is evidence for both. Literal or poetic? *Why yes. Yes, please.*¹ Cioran makes allusions to reference ideas, but doesn’t leave the reader hanging for concrete details either: the passage is based on a *fact* that is verifiable, that of Catherine of Siena’s un-earthly diet. From there, he signals a larger concept: that of asceticism and its

relationship to mystics and the arts. The form of the paragraph takes no deviant risks: it could be used as an example of how to use a topic sentence in an introductory rhetoric class. Other passages are more daring, subsisting of only a few lines that could be labeled aphorisms. Yet Cioran manages to achieve a mystifying effect---perhaps, arguably, the only one that would work for this particular subject matter. Cioran isn't afraid to take on the most complex and unknowable topics, and yet has managed to devise a syntax and a tone that *allows* him to parse through the "unfathomable." Lastly, it is worth noting how history has classified him: in the Ithaca Public Library, *Tears and Saints* is not found in fiction or in poetry, but filed quietly amidst nonfiction books on Christianity. Meaning, in my estimation, Cioran has done it: *breached* the rules of genre, blown apart the limits of both popular and literary nonfiction to present intellectual and scholarly studies in an imaginative and literary form.

Breach literature often uses nonfiction forms

to present imaginative work. Rosalie Colie's *Genre Theory in the Renaissance* lectures demonstrate her identification of the practice of *Inclusionism* in Renaissance literature: Colie outlines *uncanonical forms* and *mixed kinds*, and in her analysis examines Rabelais' 16th century *Gargantua et Pantagruel* and Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, first published in 1621, which uses the form of a medical textbook to interrogate and present a kaleidoscope of scientific and philosophical perspectives on its chosen topic. Colie focuses in part on the "conscious effort" of the text to "gather into one book the possibilities of the intellectual world: medical, spiritual, and practical information, hearsay, folklore, fairy-tale all go in, sources quoted each time" (Colie, 79). As for the "transcendent" capacity of the text, Colie is focused on *inclusionism*, whereas I would focus on *merge*:

By means of these other genres, thematically and intellectually punctuating, counterpointing, heightening his discourse even when they seem

most digressive within it, Burton managed to raise the genre of medical treatise to something *literarily more honorable* (80) (emphasis added).

Another very popular text that uses a nonfiction form to present fictional content is Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, in which the narrator, Charles Kinbote, writes a wry, sarcastic, and deranged critique of a poem by a fictional poet, John Shade. The self-contained universe Nabokov sets up finds its roots, obviously, in traditional literary criticism, but draws attention to the absurdity of the attempt to find meaning throughout the poem by sucking all meaning and expectation from traditional literary tropes like symbols. This can be most clearly seen in Kinbote's notes on line 149, in which his characters encounter a series of natural events that would easily be recognized as symbols in a traditional reading of the text, but a closer inspection reveals no tangible connection between the characters or plot and the phenomenon: no divine wrath accompanies the

thunder, no self-realization joins the lightning, there is no test of character to be encountered in the forest, and no moment of enlightenment accompanies a steep climb up a mountain. Nabokov, or Shade himself, or Kinbote recapping Shade, clues the reader in to the folly of approaching a text in this way: "Of student papers ...there are certain trifles I do not forgive," Kinbote says Shade told him. "Having read (the book) like an idiot. Looking in it for symbols; for example: "The author uses the striking image *green leaves* because green is the symbol of happiness and frustration"" (Nabokov, 156). As the book progresses, the analysis of Shade's poem is further destabilized by Kinbote's descent into obsessive neurosis and the revelation that he is not Kinbote, after all, but a character entitled Charles Xavier, whose story Kinbote slowly reveals in fits and starts throughout the commentary and footnotes.

Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and Polish essayist Tadeusz Konwicki's fictional journal entries are further examples of **breach** texts

where nonfiction forms are used to present imaginative content, as is Jorge Luis Borges, whose *A Universal History of Iniquity* is now a collection of stories with a “bibliography,” but was originally published piecemeal, one story at a time, in an Argentine newspaper: based on its formal presentation, readers assumed each story was “true” in the journalistic sense. Last, I conclude this point by referencing two beloved philosophers: Soren Kierkegaard, who also used the journal form to expound pre-existentialist philosophies and musings that may fairly be alluded to as literary, and finally, Ludwig Josef Johann Wittgenstein, whose *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* uses a form and linguistic structure so exquisite as to fairly be called poetry; yet, as with Kierkegaard, the “hinge” of logic orients the text, and allows readers to openly transgress and transcend boundaries of literary genre and expectation.

Breach literature scrambles material, thematic, and linguistic signifiers to create a complex language for the reader to both decode

and contribute to. In *Gargantua et Pantagruel*, Rabelais, Colie writes, “exploits the power and variety of allusion as shortcuts to categorization” (Colie, 77) in his five-part series of inter-connected novels, using languages and literary forms themselves as the unifying schemes for this work, thus “demonstrat[ing] both the limitations and the totality of a language-system” and “reveal[ing] the limitations of even very large categories”(77). While utilizing them, Rabelais takes shots at forms and genres themselves, Colie points out: the lists and catalogues he uses “are a way of honoring the *genus universum*, of getting it all in, as well as of mocking epic catalogues”(78).

E&F co-editor David Pollock does something similar in his satirical literary criticism, presented as blogged diary entries grouped under the title *The Self is a Vicious Cycle*. Pollock’s narrator bears his own name and spoofs on an overly proper, upper-class Brit who grapples with bouts of depression and incestuous desires in between expounding his half-developed post-Lacanian analysis

on literature. Pollock the narrator names familiar writers and popular texts (Tao Lin, Zadie Smith, Thomas Pynchon), but renders them unrecognizable in the actions and ideologies he attributes to them. By a reference to Lacan, we're clued into his philosophical and theoretical framework, and the allusions of the nonsense literature he fashions cast a scathing critique on the lazy ideas of the postmodern literati:

A week ago I was at a writers' banquet with some other members of the current post-Lacanian literati. There was Benjamin Kunkel fiddling with the karaoke (?) machine so he could sing the Beatles' classic rock song "I'm Looking Through You, You're not Insane" (appropriate, appropriate). In a corner somewhere, Tao Lin lectured on psychic exchange between New Orleans Katrina deceased and Lil' Wayne's current masterpiece, and how the voices of the dead trail through sexualized beats like robots on the verge of seizure ("This is what angels sound like," he said, "in our modern age.") ... The unknown who wrote the book is an ex-med student named Rivka Galchen. There is a

new ideological perspective that can be applied to her work. I call it "Lovelessness (S/a)"

Atmospheric Disturbances Synopsis: Welcome to the 27th Century. The sky has turned the color of a bruised peach. Our husbands and wives slog through their work lives, stopping in the restroom to spit in the sink or pretending to urinate, only to avoid their duties. Our protagonist, a doctor named Ladislav, has become obsessed with Pynchon's novel *Against the Day*, particularly the anarchist faction of the cast. And he has become convinced his wife is something of a mine owner, except she is a house wife, she owns nothing, plus she has only read *Slow Learner*, which Ladislav believes does not count as a Pynchon book. A supplement, he calls it. Most of the novel passes in a blur, like traffic. What sticks out are the countless scenes in which the protagonist hides small explosives all over their house, blowing up the oven, the empty bird cage ("the canary's memory was more poignant now than its chirps ever could have been"), the herb garden. Then he beats her repeatedly with his belt. Why I think this book is a masterpiece, despite its

stylistic dependency on Pynchon himself, it ends happily. As a matter of fact, the last line of the novel: “Ladislaw wrapped his arm around her, kissed her cheek and told her never to mention the name Scarsdale Vibe again. That name was a force, true, but they would never see that face, and this was their saving grace.” ...

... Until next time, my dears. Remember: You are not what you think you are; your neighbor is (Pollock).

Acknowledging the presence of the Unknowable by referencing the Lacanian Other, creating a pseudo, fictional summary of an actual text that was drawing very positive reviews at the time the blog was posted, incomprehensibly pairing George Eliot’s Ladislaw (who is not a doctor; that was Lydgate) with Pynchon, and crafting imitation ideology in philosophic form and discourse gives the reader quite a bit to process – and, in reader-response fashion, to contribute to. There are plenty of gaps in this passage between *expectation* and *reality* – how

will the reader respond to such a destabilization of the use of language? Pollock, like Rabelais, is mocking language systems, *getting it all in*, from Lil’ Wayne to Rivka Galchin, and doing so in a way that allows for, perhaps demands, full participation from a reader, however baffled, outraged, or delighted he or she might be at the outset.

Breach literature often uses self-produced forms to add material layers to its language; that is to say breach literature is both substance AND style, form AND function. Perhaps no one was more scathing about the New York literati than *Believer* co-founding editor Ed Park, with whom I had the pleasure to work at *The Village Voice* when I was his intern in the book department and literary supplement. Park’s first novel, *Personal Days*, released last year, uses the dismal setting of the office for its scornful portrait of corporate life, but here I’m more concerned with Park’s covert self-produced act of literary rebellion entitled *The New-York Ghost*. E&F considered the *Ghost* to be

a prime example of breach literature and we were lucky enough to secure Park's permission to publish the first "ultra-rare" edition in our second issue.

After *The Village Voice* was bought by New Times, and the editors were let go, Park designed the *Ghost* and sent the first copy out to 20 of his friends. He continued to do so, anonymously, for more than a year, before finally revealing his identity to the *New York Times* in November 2007 (Knafo). *E&F* felt simpatico with the *Ghost's* opening assertions:

The problem was, there was so much to read; and at the same time, it seemed, there was nothing worth reading at all. Deluged with daily papers, alternative newsweeklies, listings collations, and blogs (short for *worldwide-web-logarithms*) galore, people gradually grew grim about the mouth

before weeping openly in the streets. ¶ Variety was an illusion! Only the typeface and the paper quality differed. It was all celebrity profiles, followed by the tearing down of the celebrity, followed by five paragraphs about what was the best shampoo. ¶ Someone thought it would be a good idea to start something new. ¶ We are going to do it all by ourselves now. ¶ (77).

Park's irony and wit make the *Ghost* a mirthful read, but its true breach components have as much to do with form as with tone: its design claims equal parts of its concept, as it imitates a newspaper, like the New York gazettes of old; at least one person I sent the *Ghost* to didn't quite get the joke, and took it at face value as a newsletter. Park comments on the vapid anti-intellectualism of certain corners of the New York

commercial publishing world with features like the “One word review: **Hilarious.**” Finally, Park’s act of self-production was an innovation in itself: by emailing the *Ghost* as a pdf, he dealt with the *pesky* “distribution problem” to his own advantage, urging readers to leave print-outs of the piece around their office.

Breach literature confuses a reader. If it is working well, it *stuns* the reader. Something like the Shock and Awe technique, this is a potentially rich moment; maybe change can happen here, or even *revolution*. Breach literature pretends to be one thing, or many things, but is really something else, or several other things, and also, it is nothing else, or no-thing. Breach understands that words, like genres, shapeshift and change meaning when left to their own devices. Unlike the fabled pot, a “watched” piece of breach will politely, but definitely, transform before your eyes.

Breach literature understands that to compose a text is to create reality. The Scope Is Too Large! A feeling of suffocation comes over the

chest. The breath collapses, the solar plexus heaves. This will be the last pose; now please, in your mind, thank everyone else for being here. This suggestion has lost its focus and diffused into something else, something I can’t understand. I have lost the thread. The scale of implication is overwhelming, too large to contemplate – do you understand what I propose? To open up an entirely new area of study? We are skittering about on “frictionless ice,”² dancing and embracing on the frozen surface, while beneath us are vast, churning depths. But be careful. Depths suck you under; most don’t emerge. The surge leads to a vortex that will whip you into chopped-up little pieces. Is this leading to dismemberment? Can you be more specific? Can you add an example? I’m reaching beyond what is familiar, and in the meantime the argument dissolves,, slipping through my fingers like loose, dry sand grains.

Breach literature manipulates, sometimes sadistically, and breach can hurt, but really, it is for the reader’s own good, in the end. **We** always knew

that to confuse is to stimulate, but now there is proof: Benedict Carey writes in this month's *New York Times* on a scintillating study: two sets of college students were given stories to read and then immediately subjected to an implicit learning classification test. One set of 20 college students read an incoherent Kafka piece, "The Country Doctor," while the other set (also 20 students) read a coherent story – one that, we can assume, was a nice little piece of realism with a traditional narrative arc and an obvious theme rooted in a familiar moral or trope. *Guess who scored higher on the test?* The Kafka readers found *30 percent* more classification categories and were *twice* as accurate in their answers (Carey). "The fact that the group who read the absurd story identified more letter strings suggests that they were more motivated to look for patterns than the others," Dr. Heine, a principal researcher, says in the article. "And the fact that they were more accurate means, we think, that they're forming new patterns they wouldn't be able to form otherwise" (Carey).

Finally, **Breach literature uses *merge to transcend***. Like Hegel. It really works! Our best example would credit literary pioneers Deborah Tall and John D'Agata for championing the lyric essay, which blends reflective essay and poetry, in their literary journal, *The Seneca Review*. On their Web site they write, "The poem holds its ground on its own margin ... The poem is lonely. It is lonely and en route. Its author stays with it. If the reader is willing to walk those margins, there are new worlds to be found." It is fitting to close this profile description with D'Agata, as the lyric essay itself could be an example of breach: a 2003 essay written by Ben Marcus, published in *The Believer*, explores many of the same ideas I've mentioned here. Marcus notes "a new category of writing" without naming it and reviews D'Agata's daring essay anthology *The Next American Essay*, which contains many examples of imaginative nonfiction, many in highly stylized forms: cooking instructions in a recipe by Harry Matthews, a piece that is all footnotes by Jenny Bouilly, a historical narrative

told as a Monopoly game in progress. “Fiction writers, take note,” Marcus writes. “Some of the best fiction these days is being written as nonfiction.” I would take this a step further, however, to claim that the fusion, or merge of the genres is actually a genre creation of its own right, not to be enfolded and enveloped into the genre category of fiction, nor labeled any deviant of nonfiction: that a conscious acknowledgement of this on the part of both reader and writer opens up space for writers to experiment with varying degrees of truth value and linguistic integrity in their literary work.

In American prose, contemporary realism is shallow and sleepy. The literary innovations and epiphanies of modernism seem all but forgotten as much current memoir, fiction, and personal essay suffers from an appalling dearth of sophisticated craft (*the last gasps of a dying culture?*). Endowed with a post-structuralist understanding of the slippery nature of language and the difficulty, if not impossibility, of truth-telling, and armed with the expectation of a reader’s construction

of meaning via reader-response theory, some of today’s most innovative and creative writers have begun consciously scrambling their forms and misplacing signifiers in their prose in order, perhaps, to create a dialogue between expectation and reality, to create complicated work that requires decoding and an increased effort on the part of the reader.

To build on the words of D’Agata and Tall, for those “willing to walk those margins, there are new worlds waiting,” not only “to be found,” but also defined.

II.

When former President of the United States Bill Clinton uttered his now-famous defense, “It depends on what the meaning of the word ‘is’ is,” a post-structuralist awareness of language’s capacity to shapeshift in chameleon fashion became abundantly obvious to mainstream America, and many an armchair pundit was baffled and stumped. From a semantic perspective,

Clinton was entirely correct: “is not,” expressed in the present tense, does not, in fact, have the same concrete meaning as “never has been.” When the 1998 grand jury testimony was released to the public, infotainment consumers watched in confusion as Clinton and Ken Starr’s questioners wrangled over the literal/concrete and the abstract/figurative meanings of key phrases: sexual relations, contact, touching, is; many spectators, all the while certain that sexual relations as they understood them had occurred, were astounded to witness the lengths of linguistic haggling that obfuscated the issue.

Clinton’s attempts to clear himself through semantic literalism may have amused, or infuriated, lawyers and postmodern linguists, and it didn’t, in the end, prevent his impeachment. In retrospect, however, this episode appears as a harbinger of what was to come, and possibly even created the conditions that allowed for a permissible disconnect that enlarged to grotesque proportions during the last eight years of Conservative

rule and throughout the McCain campaign, as the crack between concrete value and the linguistic expression intended to communicate a shared meaning slowly enlarged into a yawning, hellish abyss of spectacle and farce.

The Conservative thrust to remove all fixed or communal meaning from language can be humorously seen in an episode of the second season of “30 Rock”; Alec Baldwin, having been demoted at NBC, takes a job with the Bush administration, and as water pours through the ceiling of his office, he complains to a brainwashed Matthew Broderick about the leak that will have to be fixed. “There’s no leak,” Broderick says, staring him straight in the face and holding out a piece of paper. “We did a study.” He points to the words on the paper. “See, no leak.”

Operating in the wake of 9/11, Bush capitalized on confusion and fear when relying on the power of allusion in language, pairing unrelated words together in a vague but inflammatory way, giving rise to more,

ever-increasing confusion, leading to even more fear. Whether Bush represented a Freudian father or the Lacanian Other, a majority of Americans, as well as the mainstream press, rejected the notion that his egregious discourse might be a sign of clearly unmerited authority and signaled the green light for the invasion of Iraq with editorials, letters, and verbal rhetoric. Bush's strategy for building a case for preemptive invasion seemed to be to simply pair a few words together multiple times: terror (leads to) Al Qaeda attack (leads to) terror (caused by) Arabs (who live in) Iraq (with) Arabs (and) Muslims (who) hate our way of life (let's go!). A few phony documents presented to the United Nations sealed the deal, and while many activists and intellectuals vehemently protested, they were drowned out by many more who, tragically, needed to watch for themselves the entire "Operation Iraqi Freedom" devolve into mandates of public torture, dismemberment, the abuse of American troops, and the drain on our economy that has contributed to the current global financial crisis.

Perhaps no one is more self-conscious and explicit about their breach work as writer Stephen Greene, Cornell '65 alumnus (perhaps I, too, will one day be a Cornell *alumna*), in reference to his self-produced novel and fictionalized biography/memoir *The Boathouse*, released earlier this year: the book "traces the border where fiction and nonfiction meet," Green writes, "which is where the Iraq War, itself, seems to exist."³

It is no surprise, then, that the question of "what is true" has bubbled to the top of American cultural consciousness and made its way into our literature. At the same time that Americans have been faced with incomprehensible language games that have been used as justification for atrocities, and as they remained under the dominion of a government that ignored the needs and views of its constituents, American literary readers became obsessed with *truth value* in books that claim to be nonfiction, and delighted in texts that played with the genre definitions themselves, quietly existing in the gray area between fiction and fact. A look back at the

literary scandals of truth that rose steadily throughout the first years of the 21st century would include first and foremost, perhaps, that of James Frey, who was publicly shamed by *The Smoking Gun* and *Oprah* for fabricating large parts of his best-selling memoir, *A Million Little Pieces*. And earlier this year, another best-seller, *Bringing Down the House*, was exposed by Drake Bennett in *The Boston Globe* as having been “embellished beyond recognition” (Schuessler). At *The New York Times*, Jayson Blair was outed for fabricating information for his stories, and similar incidents were reported by the *USA Today*. It has become a matter of public concern and debate that editors and publishing houses often do not fact-check and rely on writers to gather “good” information.

More alarming than the exposures themselves is the fact that the arena in which the accused stands bears more than a little of the carnivalesque. E&F co-editor Joshua Land has pointed out that there is a three-step cultural lashing for people like Frey which over-

saturates airtime until fatigue sets in and the matter is dropped, thus ensuring that the underlying problems and questions of the issue at hand are never addressed. In this case, one might have asked, why is only what can be proven with empirical data the hard rule for a memoir? Instead, the three steps are these: Calling Out the Career-Threatening Gaffe, The Public Apology, and The Ritual of Public Humiliation (Land). The questions posed by these dilemmas of fact and creative license did not pose philosophical, theoretical, or linguistic concerns in the slightest: the entire cultural dialogue subsumed with these issues, or at least the heavily-accessed public writings about them, revolved around Fact itself, and the question of what exactly constitutes a fact.

Why is this important? It needs more attention and exploration for a thorough perspective, but it does seem strange that the same people who would passively allow their leaders to misappropriate language to deceive them in such a grotesque fashion would become so

frantically outraged about fictionalized content in their entertainment – which is what memoirs are. Samuel G. Freedman, who teaches nonfiction writing at Columbia’s Graduate School of Journalism and who authored a memoir about his mother, wrote a scathing 2006 commentary against book publishing editors in which he argues that fiction and nonfiction have “fundamentally different compacts” with the reader: “in return for the freedom to invent,” he writes, “fiction must reach a benchmark of psychological truth. In return for the allegiance to factuality, nonfiction can present what may seem implausible and tell a reader, But that’s what really happened.”

Freedman is on the side of the outraged readers, arguing that they were conned, lied to, and betrayed, and that the industry’s “indifference to factuality” was to blame. The “collapse of the barrier between fiction and nonfiction does matter,” he writes, because of *specificity*, because “Jane and Susan are not interchangeable labels; they are the names of real people, different people with

different histories, personalities, and motivations.” To fail to define these differences, he writes, is “to tell a willfully incomplete story and also to be spectacularly lazy.”

What is a complete story? When do we know when we’ve included enough details to reach the pinnacle of “completion”? Freedman doesn’t question *what is truth*, how is it communicated, how do we, as a culture and as individuals, determine what is fact and what is fantasy, how do we choose which details to include in our “true” accounts, how does language convey truth, what are the limitations of language for this task, and finally, why, or if, simply being told “That’s what really happened,” of having detail after detail heaped on the reader, is ultimately *valuable* for any reason. Freedman assumes it is; I’m not always so sure, or at least, I would like to see a more thorough argument to convince me.

“We tell ourselves stories in order to live,” Joan Didion writes. Throughout *The White Album* and *Slouching Toward Bethlehem*, she repeatedly asks herself, and the

reader by default, who is quietly listening: why these details? Why in this order? What story am I telling, and why? Perhaps, what is actually “spectacularly lazy” in literary pursuits is to ignore the subjective ambiguity of language and literature, an understanding of which could be used to the considerable benefit of intellectual and creative journey for both writer and reader, to decline to recognize imaginative powers for what they are and how they work, and instead to spend one’s writing time filling up page after page with empirical data, however *specific* it may be.

I would not advocate for putting historians or factual data collectors out of business; there are obvious legitimate social functions for this kind of work. Lepori’s article lists the counter-arguments: “Donald Kagan, in his 2005 Jefferson lecture, grumbled about the perils of ‘pseudo-philosophical mumbo-jumbo’ ... In 1990, Sir Geoffrey Elton called postmodern literary theory “the intellectual equivalent of crack.” The point that is being missed in both these criticisms is that a new *literary*

form or even genre is on the rise, and it’s working *off of* nonfiction forms: we don’t need to eliminate “pure” history or “pure” fiction, as much as we need to bring a literary self-consciousness to the text as we consume it, taking truth value into account as much as we would, for example, plot, structure, theme, tone, symbols, and word choices.

III.

In the last two decades of the 20th century, gender theorists, genre theorists, deconstructionists, and post-feminist literary critics completed the task of picking clean the carcass of second wave feminist literary criticism and blowing apart any fixed notion of the merit of generic textual classification. The primary charge that resounds in these analyses is *essentialism*, the presumption of a universal, inherent, “natural” femininity that each human with a vagina is born with, grows into, and dies by. Likewise, an essentialist genre

theory might lean too heavily on classical concepts of genre, or perceive in every work marks of what Goethe called *Naturformen*, an allusion to Aristotle's so-called "natural forms" of poetry (epic, lyric and drama): until the onset of Romanticism, it was impossible to conceive of genres as anything other than fixed, stationary, comprehensive, and para-historical (Duff, 2-3).

As black feminists, gender theorists, and queer theorists would point out, second-wave feminists blundered in their assumptions that Caucasian, middle-to-privileged class Judeo-Christian heteronormal femininity was the predominant genus of the species. With Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, and gender performance exposed as social discourse in the language of Michel Foucault, the gynocriticism of Elaine Showalter ran into serious trouble, and second-wave feminism died its first kind of death. A more recent death knell for the female tradition in literature seemed to sound last year when Toril Moi presented a lecture at the Tate Modern entitled "I Am Not A Woman Writer";

so the cycle has completed itself, in its way: an explosion of pride in femininity led to the search for the absolute nature of Female, which gave way to the realization that femininity is a social and linguistic construct, and finally led to the invalidation of the female tradition in literature as a theoretical perspective for literary criticism, resulting in yet another way to deny women a unique literary identity, the "precious specialty" George Eliot saw in female Victorian literature (even taking into account all the *Silly Novels by Lady Novelists* that Eliot herself harshly criticized.)

The cultural gyrations of feminism and gynocriticism are not the primary subject of inquiry here, rather they are in the periphery as a *touchstone*, an example of the trouble we get into when we are frustrated rather than liberated by certain realities – namely, that of the paradox that chaos, complexity, and multiplicity co-exist with binary in literature as in life -- or at least, we persistently experience the persuasive illusion of a binary and may use it as a preliminary form of categorization,

a sometimes annoying but often pragmatic analytical function if supplemented with other, more complex, nuanced, and specific perspectives and analyses.

Genre theory has followed similar cyclic rotations of interpretation throughout literary history, and bounced back and forth between the twin poles of absolutism (of genre categories) and negation of genre's existence, and in the process, has tentatively landed in various middle grounds both fertile and fallow. And as for Aristotle, it turns out that what Gerard Genette calls the "seductive triad" is actually a false attribution: in his anthology *Modern Genre Theory*, David Duff points out that in 1979, Genette conclusively demonstrated that the triad of epic, lyric, and tragic is actually a work of revisionist history by romantics and postromantics, the *merging of two different genre theories* of Plato and Aristotle: Plato saw three modes (narrative, dramatic, and mixed), while Aristotle only defined two, epic and tragic (Duff, 4). The original divisions were based on modes of *enunciation* in their delivery, Genette argues (Genette,

212). Further, both Plato and Aristotle made sharp distinctions between mode and genre that later got lost: "each genre was defined essentially by a specification of content that was in no way prescribed by the definition of its mode," he writes (212).

"Neither system, it should be noted, assigns a proper place to the lyric," Duff points out, "which is only incorporated into the supposedly Aristotelian triad by much later acts of substitution and amendment" (Duff, 4). Genette's 1979 essay "The Architext" points fingers at Karl Vietor and Hegel, but first, at Goethe himself, who was infatuated with the lyric "as a burst of rapture" (Genette, 212). "The romantic and postromantic division ... views the lyrical, the epical, and the dramatic no longer as simply modes of enunciation but as real genres, whose definitions already inevitably include thematic elements, however vague," Genette writes: "... romantics and postromantics were not overly concerned about dragging Plato and Aristotle into all these matters" (211). Their motives, he argues were

“a deepseated respect for orthodoxy” at the tail end of classicism, and, in the 20th century, a widespread “retrospective illusion” (211).

In his overview of Western genre theory, Robert J. Connors moves on from the pre-Renaissance genre classifications of Aristotle, Plato, Horace, and Dante to the work of French Renaissance critics Julius Caesar Scaliger and Nicolas Boileau, who, he writes, set up the “commanding and rigid form that we now usually associate with neoclassicism” (Connors 30). Boileau’s proposed “immutable” genre categories, presented in 1674 in the form of a long verse-poem entitled *Arte poetique*, were assumed to be fixed, rigid, and absolute until Samuel Johnson challenged them in his *Rambler* papers in 1751 (33-34). Johnson sounds like a very early sociologist when he argues that genre categories are solidified by custom rather than essential nature, are fostered rather than inherent, and he sounds a call of freedom for all who would want to write outside of prescribed genre guidelines: the “just endeavor of

a writer,” Johnson says, is to differentiate between “that which is established because it is right, from that which is right only because it is established; that he may neither violate essential principles by a desire of novelty, nor debar himself from the attainment of beauties within his view, by a needless fear of breaking rules *which no literary dictator had authority to enact*” (34) (emphasis added).

Here is the pre-imagination of the rebel, revolution and *liberté*, the glorious elevation of the individual imagination in the social upheavals and Romantic movement that would follow. Wordsworth, Shelley, and Keats relied heavily on genre to shape their works, but were more interested in the text that emerged than the genre that shaped it: “It is by no means essential that a poet should accommodate his language to this traditional form,” Shelley writes in his *Defense of Poetry*, “... every poet must inevitably innovate upon the example of his predecessors” (36). Duff points out that Romantics carried this idea further: “The most

pervasive legacy of Romanticism,” he writes, “was the idea that it was possible to ignore altogether the doctrine of genre”; in 1797, Friedrich Schlegel made the audacious proclamation that “every poem is a genre unto itself” (Duff 4-5).

Duff points out that these ideas would later make their way into Modernist manifestos and literature, but not until the post-Victorian era, more than one hundred years later. Romantics had also argued against the privilege and elitism that shaped traditional poetic forms, Connors points out, and battled against “any attempt to exclude works from consideration because they did not meet the rigid expectations of class” (36). If you combine this precursor to postcolonial theory, this growing social awareness of who is actually making the rules, or, more specifically, who creates Reality, with a then-contemporary philosophy that was about to exert formidable influence across several intellectual disciplines in the form of Georg W. F. Hegel’s dialectic of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, it is from there a

short and logical leap to Charles Darwin’s *Origin of Species* and the evolutionary paradigm that swept literary criticism in the late 19th century, culminating with Ferdinand Brunetiere’s magnum opus *L’évolution des genres* in 1890 (4). And, then, it is back to obsessive classification and essential, inherent autonomy for the genre – albeit one that morphs and changes when met with new conditions.

Only a decade or so later, the pendulum would swing back the other way with Benedetto Croce’s *Aesthetic* in 1900, in which Croce argued that genre was “nothing more than ‘superstition,’” Duff writes, “of ancient classical origin,” which served no function other than to “deceive us as to the true nature of the aesthetic”(5). Duff argues for a chain of influence from Croce to French writer and theorist Maurice Blanchot, who took a similar stance against genre, to Derrida and his heavily influential two-part essay *The Law of Genre*, published in 1979, in which Derrida claimed to have “invalidated the assumptions that even the most advanced genre

theory rests on,” Duff argues (219).

Because the signs for a given genre are not contained within the genre itself, because the identification of genre is dependent on the analysis of the text, an outsider or “double” perspective, Derrida argues, genre theory’s quest for taxonomy is deeply problematic. Viewed from this perspective, *any* attempt to make a statement of what genres are, how they function, and even whether or not they exist runs into speculation.

The Law of Genre opens with statements at contradiction with what I’ve advocated for here:

“Genres are not to be mixed.

I will not mix genres.

I repeat:” (and he does) “the previous two statements” (221).

Which, he argues, can conjure up multiple reactions: one, *I will not* as in *it will not happen*, *we will not* as in *it will not happen*, or two, a “sharp order” or “authoritarian summons”; (Derrida 221), as in “I must not,” or, the sense of the *forbidden*; (where a line is

drawn in the sand, it does not behoove the individual or the society to cross it).

There is “no genreless text,” Derrida hypothesizes, as “making genre its mark, a text demarcates itself.” However: “the re-mark of belonging does not belong,” in that one must search for genre classifications *outside of the text*: “the eyelid closes, but barely, an instant among instants, and what it closes is verily the eye, the view, the light of day.”

The eyes must be closed for insight to appear:

“... *without such respite, nothing would come to light*” (emphasis added) (230).

While Derrida maintains that Genette places genre theory as an opposition between nature and history, he is explicitly more concerned with “the relationship of nature to history, of nature to its others, *precisely when genre is on the line*” (emphasis in original), and I’d agree that rather than to seek to categorize literary texts into faux genus and species, it is far more pragmatic and meaningful to analyze the roots, contexts, and

conditions of nomenclature itself, and in this particular case, dependent on further research, I hypothesize that a combination of political and theoretical circumstances have combined to form 21st century breach literature, that an understanding of language games and relative subjectivity in linguistic construction, interpretation, and communication collided with socio-political misuse of language, giving rise to literary forms that use truth values, which were once assumed to be fixed, as variables to be manipulated, thus giving rise to new forms, new codes, and new meanings.

With awareness of boundaries found *outside* the subject, in the privacy of darkness, Derrida concludes that to speak of genre is to signal its death knell:

Without it, neither genre nor literature come to light, but as soon as there is this blinking of an eye, this clause of this floodgate of genre, at the very moment that a genre or literature is broached, at that very moment, degenerescence has begun, the end begins (225).

In his 2003 *Believer* article, Marcus has a similar wish: “It might just be that the genre bending fiction writers ... so far lack a champion like John D’Agata,” he writes; although, in D’Agata’s “protective, liberating fold,” these “categories can cease to matter. “Once upon a time,” Marcus concludes, “there will be writers who won’t care what imaginative writing is called and will read it for its passion, its force of intellect, and for its formal originality.”

So, as in the case of the Female, we are left once again back at the starting point, now Enlightened, but once again Mute. However, all is not for naught: for breach welcomes the diffusion of its boundaries rather than guards against it. Derrida’s death is found when you go searching for genre boundaries and rules and discover they are not *universally* applicable to any text or text(s). Wittgenstein was right to call our linguistic interactions “language games”: before the Play can begin, much less end, an utterance must thrust itself at an object or set of ideas. I don’t quite agree with Marcus that there will

be a golden moment or era in time in which we will never worry about what to “name” imaginative texts; classification, while ultimately illusory, is nonetheless a useful tool if not mistaken for Absolute Reality, and while I have stated that breach is nothing and no-thing, I have attempted to show that breach literature needs a Name, because right now, above all else, breach is ripe, gunning to come out and Play.

A 1989 essay by Mary Eagleton entitled “Genre and Gender” gives an overview of the cross-pollination of gender theory and genre theory, and is quite adept at exploring the problems feminist theory encountered when trying to identify subversive forms and fictional styles that were universally or inherently *female*. Because the words “gender” and “genre” are etymologically equivalent in French, Duff writes (250), it is not surprising that we are drawn to exploring their intersections, if for nothing more than novelty. After conclusively demonstrating that there are no absolute elements of female fiction writing in any

genre, Eagleton concludes with a series of outstanding questions that might just as delicately be posed toward our genre paradoxes: “What is the relationship of gender to writing? Should we talk of the female author or of feminine writing? Does the relationship differ with different literary forms and is there, therefore, a particular scope in relating gender to the short story? Can we create a criticism which is non-essentialist, non-reductive but subtly alive to the links between gender and genre?” (Eagleton 260).

Because the two theories have run into similar conjectural stalemates that resemble Buddhist koans (*we know genre and gender don't exist; we know genre and gender determine our existence, provide vessels for our intangibles, give forms to our throbbing black holes and passionate protrusions ...*), we might veer over into pedagogy, borrow from Jean Piaget's theory of Constructivism, and bear in mind that in all knowledge and education, we *build* our literary theories, genres, and kinds rather than *root them out*; that we construct them

according to historical conditions and psychological need; that while an essentialist theory is concerned with what women and/or literary genres *are*, we now know that the far more interesting and important question is what women and/or works of literature *can be* when, in possession of consciousness regarding social and linguistic construction, writers and readers are given full freedom to *choose* (to *construct*) genre and gender preferences and representations in the work they create and consume.

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End Notes

¹ Quoted from Pelin Ariner's poem "My Stomach."

² Wittgenstein.

³ Quoted from a press release sent directly to me when I was a news editor.

Contributors Notes

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Tyler Carter is the author of several chapbooks of poetry: "Egg Breakfast" via horse less press and "The Revisionist" via H_NGM_N. Recent and forthcoming prose, poetry and audio collage can be found in *LIT*, *EOUGH*, *aslongasittakes* and *Action, Yes*. He is originally from Wisconsin, and currently lives in San Francisco. His blog can be found at [iwantedtowriteanemail dot blogspot dot com](http://iwantedtowriteanemail.blogspot.com).

Anthony Di Renzo, a fugitive from advertising, teaches writing at Ithaca College. Cited in *Best American Essays*, his work has appeared in *Alimentum*, *The Normal School*, *River Styx*, and *Voices in Italian Americana*. This piece is a selection from *Bitter Greens: Essays on Food, Politics, and Ethnicity from the Imperial Kitchen*, to be published next fall by State University of New York Press.

David Pollock is a co-founding editor of *Essays & Fictions*. His work has appeared in some publications, such as *LIT* and *Mississippi Review*.

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A recent resident writer at the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, **John Duncan Talbird's** fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Jabberwock Review*, *Berkeley Fiction Review*, *Sycamore Review*, and *Red Rock Review* among others. He is on the editorial board of *Green Hills Literary Lantern* and a frequent contributor to *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*. He is an English professor at Queensborough Community College and lives in Brooklyn with his wife, the artist Melinda Yale, and their orange cat, Harold.

Danielle Winterton has quit journalism to focus on fiction. A co-founding editor of *Essays & Fictions*, her essays, fictions, and criticism have appeared in several publications, including *The Village Voice*, *The Literary Review*, and *Chronogram*. In 2007, her critique of postmodern sculpture was awarded first place by SNA for best Arts and Entertainment Criticism in North America. She has recently married and has not changed her name.